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THE HAPPINESS OF BLOND PEOPLE

A PERSONAL MEDITATION ON THE DANGERS OF IDENTITY

ELIF SHAFAK

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Elif Shafak is the acclaimed author of the award-winning *The Gaze* and *The Bastard of Istanbul* and is the foremost female author in Turkey. She is a contributor to the *Telegraph*, the *Guardian* and *The New York Times* and her TED talk on the politics of fiction has received over 300,000 views since July 2010. She is married with two children and divides her time between the Istanbul and the UK.

The Happiness of Blond People

Three years ago, at The Hague Airport in Rotterdam, feeling slightly withdrawn and weary after giving the opening speech of an international literary festival whose main theme was ‘fear’ – fear of globalization, terrorism, refugees, climate change and so forth – I was in a queue waiting to check in my luggage with Turkish Airlines. In front of me was a family with three children: two girls with identical haircuts and dresses, and a boy wearing a brown suit and bow tie, looking like a miniature version of the famous fictional detective Hercule Poirot. The mother was feeding the little ones home-made *börek*, filled pastries, while the father, middle-aged and Turkish, was engaged in a lengthy conversation with another passenger. At some point, the second man raised his hands in exasperation and exclaimed, ‘Oh, it’s absolutely insane what she is doing to you!’ I don’t remember what piqued my curiosity, the word ‘insane’ or the dramatic gesture itself, but I began to eavesdrop on their exchange. The father was explaining how every time his children ran around the flat or made the slightest noise, the elderly Dutch lady downstairs instantly called the police. And, to his surprise, the police did indeed arrive each time, with their emergency lights on, their sirens blaring, as if there had been a threat to national security.

‘We would have moved out long ago, but it’s not easy,’ he continued. ‘Imagine, I come home dog-tired every evening and get so stressed out that I tense at every little sound. No peace of mind. In our own house we are whispering and tiptoeing like petty criminals!’

‘What is wrong with your neighbour?’ said the other passenger – a man with kind hazel eyes and a drooping moustache. ‘Does she expect you to raise your kids in an aquarium, or what?’

There was a pause, a mutual understanding, an unspoken camaraderie. Into that fleeting silence the second man murmured as though to himself: ‘You know,

I never understand. How is it that *their* children are so quiet and well disciplined?'

'Yeah,' said the distressed father, his voice suddenly softer. 'Blond children never cry, do they?'

The queue proceeded, I checked in my bags, and during the hustle and bustle of the day, and the ordinary chaos I encountered in Istanbul upon my arrival, the two immigrant men were pushed to the margins of my memory. That sentence, however, stuck with me. I started mulling over what they had meant. I started contemplating *the happiness of blond people.*

Heidegger believed that *Angst* was an integral part of our lives, intrinsic to the very nature of the human condition. Across the wide spectrum of feelings and emotions, it was anxiety that most reflected the essence of our existence, our fragility, our mortality. By *Angst* Heidegger meant something quite different from fear. The latter is almost always fear of someone or something – be it concrete or abstract, rational or irrational, plausible or preposterous. Yet the person suffering from anxiety, unlike the person in the grip of fear, cannot easily pinpoint a reason for his or her state of mind. As such, anxiety is at best elusive, at worst a sheer mystery. 'The clear courage for genuine anxiety guarantees the mysterious possibility of the experience of Being,' Heidegger said. 'For close by genuine anxiety [from] the terror of the abyss dwells awe. This clears and protects that realm of human being within which man dwells at home in the enduring.'[1] *Angst* transcends classes and cultures, and its vagueness lies at the core of *Dasein*, or being in this world.

Nonetheless, as fundamental and universal as anxiety tends to be, we may rightly assume that there are stages in one's life when the feeling is augmented, in other words, when *the terror of the abyss* is heightened. If such is the case, emigrating – abandoning one's hometown and loved ones, moving into a new place, being exposed to an alien culture where everything is, or seems, unfamiliar and starting life again from scratch – is likely to be one of those tempestuous stages. 'We have always emigrated from our land for the same reasons and with the same feelings of remorse,' says the Lebanese intellectual and author Amin Maalouf in his memoir, *Origins*. The one who leaves his or her homeland for good is often stalked by mixed emotions of guilt, longing,

confusion, anticipation and insecurity, some or all of which can spring up from out of nowhere, for no reason at all.

It has always amazed me to find first-generation immigrants – now old and frail but otherwise well off and successful, who have fully adapted to their new countries – still being stalked, even after thirty or forty years, by this odd disquietude. It is a condition that their children and grandchildren may not share and find rather hard to understand.

I remember vividly an elderly Armenian shopkeeper whom I had met by chance in San Francisco while writing my novel *The Bastard of Istanbul*. We had a long, genial chat about our common cuisine, proverbs, painful history and folk songs that had the same melody but slightly different lyrics in various tones of sadness – and about how both Armenian and Turkish stories tended to start with the same preamble: *Once there was, once there wasn't* … He had been born in Istanbul, moved to the States as a boy in the mid 1930s, got married there and in general led a prosperous life. Yet when he told me about his home in Istanbul there were tears in his eyes. 'You know why I have never gone back to visit the old city?' he said. 'Because if I go I won't come back to America. Ever! I'll stay there, die there and be buried there. I love it so much. My kids don't get it, they are too American, what do they know about unrequited love?'

Both daring and timid, both actor and audience in a theatre of dizzying change, the immigrant is a fragmented being who carries the ghosts of his past wherever he goes. The sharper the conflicts at work in the host society and the more negative the reception of outsiders, the greater the newcomer's inner divisions. 'The immigrant must be prepared to swallow his share of humiliations every day. He has to accept that life will treat him with disrespect and that he'll be smacked and jostled with undue familiarity.'[2] Displacement and expatriation are conducive to a more intense *Angst*.

One writer who was fascinated with *Angst* all throughout his life was Kafka. Born to German-speaking Jewish parents in Prague, a lone member of an exiled community, fluent in two languages yet never fully at home anywhere, he was afflicted with melancholy and malaise from early on. As a child he witnessed the destruction of the Jewish quarter in the city, and probably never felt sure of the ground beneath his feet. In a letter written years later to Milena Jesenská, he says, 'It follows perhaps that we are both married, you in Vienna, I to my fear in

Prague, and that not only you, but I, too, tug in vain at our marriage.'[3] Although Kafka's trajectory needs to be viewed within a particular historical context, a lack of continuity, stability and security, all three of which are germane to the immigrant experience everywhere around the world, must each have played its part in heightening his *Angst*.

Yet, paradoxically, a reduction of anxiety is surely one of the reasons why people relocate. They move to other lands not simply for the sake of money, jobs, education or freedom. Behind their willingness to pull up stakes may simply be the wish to be *happy*.

But what exactly is happiness? The concept is not easy to define, and almost impossible to measure objectively. In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud interprets happiness as a common goal for all human beings. 'What do they demand of life and wish to achieve in it? The answer to this can hardly be in doubt. They strive after happiness; they want to become happy and remain so.' Though the desire to be happy, and for our children to be happy, is a common characteristic of human beings, we do not all succeed in actually *feeling* happy, even under the same circumstances. Everyone's threshold for happiness is different. As Simone de Beauvoir eloquently stated in *The Second Sex*, 'It is not too clear just what the word *happy* means and still less what true values it may mask. There is no possibility of measuring the happiness of others, and it is always easy to describe as happy the situation in which one wishes to place them.'[4] What concerns me in this essay is not the criteria for happiness, but rather the *perception* of happiness, particularly cultural perceptions. More precisely, I am intrigued by the assumption that Westerners are overall happier than non-Westerners.

To this day, much has been said and written about the economic reasons behind the flurry of emigration in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The religious, social and political aspects, too, have been analysed in depth. Minorities running away from discrimination, individuals seeking political asylum, workers in need of jobs and housing … In addition to these factors, could *the happiness of blond people* be a basis for ongoing emigration and brain drain? Could the *perceived difference in levels of happiness* in different places be contributing to worldwide dislocations and relocations?

Throughout my travels East and West, I have often come across a widespread belief that the inhabitants of the Western world are, in general, if not happier and luckier, at least beset with fewer problems than those in the East. A common state of well-being, real or imaginary, is attributed to people in Europe, Canada and the USA. At first glance, they do not need to deal with civil wars, warlords or tribal quarrels, poverty, corruption, human-rights violations, despotism, droughts or massive earthquakes. If life – or fate – has a weight of its own, then it is not the same everywhere, so goes the assumption. In the West, life is thought to be simpler, and fate, *lighter*.

There is an equally deeply ingrained counter-assumption: that life in the East is more real and less degenerate than in the West; and that Western societies are so individualistic, so atomized, that they lack sufficient communal ties and family networks to support a person in his or her hour of need. This, too, happens to be an argument one finds widely today both in social media and daily parlance. A half-Circassian, half-Turkish housewife I met in Jordan in the mid 1990s told me how she pitied the women in the West for being reduced to nothing but sexual objects. 'That's why they are so afraid of getting old,' she said. 'When they lose their looks, they lose everything.' When I asked what she thought of families in the West, she replied: 'They kick their offspring out of the house as early as age fourteen; no wonder those kids then become drug addicts and whatnot. *We* are not like that. Family is everything to us. We die for our families. That's why, unlike them, we do not end up being depressed.'

A secondary-school student I met in Ankara during a literary event put this to me in a slightly different way. 'If you are young, it is better to live in the West than in the East,' he said. 'But if you are old, then it is better to be in the East than in the West, because we respect our elders, whereas they don't. In Europe I have seen old ladies in supermarkets buying one courgette, one carrot, one tomato, one bunch of parsley. Have you ever seen a Muslim woman doing that? No! We always buy at least a kilo, if not more, because we cook for the entire family.'

While writing my recent novel *Honour*, I have had the good fortune to meet immigrant families, both Turkish and Kurdish, in various European cities. I have spoken with members of first, second and third generations, digesting their stories, respecting that there were some tales they chose not to mention while

being equally amazed by how much they shared. Their family structures varied greatly, but they all had one thing in common: a desire to communicate, a need to explain and a general sense of being misunderstood, if not misplaced. While the future of immigrants in the West remains a highly politicized issue and the enthusiasm for multiculturalism is on the wane, it is striking to see how many immigrants believe their stories are yet to be told, yet to be heard.

It is estimated that Arabs, Turks, Kurds, Iranians, Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, Malaysians – Muslims, including newcomers and native born – constitute 5 per cent of Europe's population. In France, where there is the largest Muslim minority, they number more than 4.5 million. In the UK the figure is around 1.6 million. The relatively higher birth rate in Muslim communities, taken together with the ongoing influx of immigration, indicates that in forthcoming decades the number of European Muslims will significantly rise. In the not so distant future Muslim children may be in the majority at numerous schools throughout Europe. Of their parents and grandparents today, a considerable number identify themselves by religion before anything else – such as being British, or Norwegian, or, for that matter, European. There are also many non-practising individuals who are only nominally Muslim but who nonetheless feel a sense of solidarity with their community – especially when they see that it is being distanced or disparaged by the majority. Strikingly, even the word 'immigrant' carries religious, rather than cultural and economic, connotations more and more frequently on a daily basis. When politicians, scholars or journalists talk about 'immigrants in Europe', for the most part they are referring to 'Muslims in Europe'; and when they discuss Muslim diasporas in Europe, it is almost always in relation to heated topics. As Tariq Ramadan writes in the *Christian Science Monitor*, 'Over the last two decades Islam has become connected to so many controversial debates – violence, extremism, freedom of speech, gender discrimination, and forced marriage, to name a few – it is difficult for ordinary citizens to embrace this new Muslim presence as a positive factor.'

The 9/11 attacks, the 2004 Madrid train bombings, the 2005 London bombings, the 2006 Danish cartoons incident, the assassination of Theo van Gogh, the anti-Islamic campaign of the Dutch MP Geert Wilders, the debates on banning the veil in France and minarets in Switzerland, the wars in Afghanistan

and Iraq, and, most recently, the killing of eighty-five people by a far-right extremist in Norway who was openly against multiculturalism and saw Muslims as a threat to Europe's foundation … In the past few years only, one tragedy after another, one tension after another, one war after another, deepened the fault lines within the European public space, creating an atmosphere of perpetual *Angst*. On each side of these fault lines invisible ghettos were erected, social cocoons of the like-minded. They are powerful psychological barriers, these ghettos. Ostensibly to raise children in safer environments, or to avoid the chaos of the metropoles, or for purely ideological reasons, more and more people are shunning big cities, and, even when they can't, they simply choose to socialize with their own.

So the question is, how can Muslims and non-Muslims exist side by side in a well-functioning, well-balanced democracy? Can the symbols and rituals of Islam, as well as other religions, be given free rein, and, if so, to what extent? In the name of freedom of expression can everyone, including Islamic radicals, be allowed to organize marches and protests? How would Islamic principles and practices – the slaughtering of animals for *halal* meat, religious festivals, burial traditions, *hijab* and so on – be incorporated into liberal, pluralistic societies?

Inward-looking, all-of-a-piece ghettos may be offering a sense of security and stability to their members, but they are not necessarily contributing to the growth of a healthy political–public space. The latter will flourish where there is inclusivity, hybridity and diversity, in other words, where people of dissimilar upbringings can interact on multiple levels, generating common ideals, common interests – and a common future. If larger numbers of people with opposing views and conflicting priorities can be encouraged to participate in the formation of public discourse, if the overlapping areas between separate subcultures can be expanded, beneficial effects will result not only for those involved but also for society at large. Democracy, a true, robust democracy worthy of the name, does not depend solely on political parties, politicians and parliaments. Nor does it draw only upon institutional checks and balances. More fundamentally, it needs people who have faith in democracy, citizens who trust that their opinions matter and who, together with others, are willing to contribute to a better future. A harmonious political public space is a prerequisite to the survival of democracy, given the challenges of our times.

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Today European policymakers face a fundamental dilemma. On the one hand, there is a visible need for socioeconomic integration and a stronger emphasis on intercultural, interreligious exchange; however, no visible consensus as to how to achieve that end exists. On the other hand, there is suspicion, latent or manifest, of Islam's presence in European society – with unease whipped up from time to time by populist politicians and ultra-right ideologues. Bigotry, xenophobia, jingoism, and local and global terrorism all contribute to the deterioration of the ongoing crisis.

At present, we are witnessing the demise of the previous political models on immigration. Germany has abandoned *Multikulti*, an ideal society in which natives and migrants live side by side without necessarily mixing or abandoning their distinctive identities. In Holland, Finland, Denmark and, recently, Norway there have been fervent debates about how far to push integration. In the UK financial turbulence and budget cuts have triggered social concerns about unemployment, which in turn have shaped the debate on immigration. In France the headscarf is banned in state schools and public buildings – a decision that stirred much controversy. More and more, Europe looks like a boiling kettle, with water churning deep within. In the public eye and mainstream media, the view of 'inside' is that it is becoming less and less safe. No one has forgotten that the London bombings were carried out by British Muslims from 'here', rather than by Al Qaeda operatives from a faraway 'there'. There is a lot of talk about 'the enemies within' and very little trust – certainly not enough to dispel the fog that prevents us from seeing, really seeing each other in a new light. *Angst* has hijacked the discussion on 'Muslims in Europe'.

In the light of this stormy atmosphere, how plausible is a supranational European identity that encompasses all other identities, one that can be sustained in the long term? How can ethnic/religious/cultural/sexual minorities be encouraged to participate more openly in public discourse and how will various Muslim groups fit into the larger picture? What exactly is Europeanness? Where does it start, where does it end? Are the distinctions in the minds of politicians the same as those in the minds of artists and writers? Put differently, are the political frontiers of Europe the same as its cultural frontiers?

Today, the pace of globalization and the cross-cultural dependency that ensues make it impossible for any society or subculture to remain fully isolated. We are living in a universe in which the unhappiness of someone living in Pakistan

might have a direct impact on the happiness of someone living in Canada. We are all interconnected; perhaps we always were, but today more so than ever. The bright side of this is that any positive, progressive change in one area will have repercussions on a larger geographical scale. The downside, however, is that from now on, as Milan Kundera notes, 'nothing that occurs on the planet will be merely a local matter … all catastrophes concern the entire world.'

I was born in Strasbourg at a time when France was being rocked by wave after wave of student movements and Sartre was publicly breaking ties with the Castro regime. My parents were both leftist, idealist Turkish students furthering their education in the West. It was a precarious marriage from the start, and shortly after I was born they opted for something that was unthinkable to their parents and their parents' generation: divorce. When I was a year and a half I was brought to Ankara and raised thereafter by two women: a well-educated, modern, urban, secular, Westernized, feminist single mother and a traditional, spiritual, sagacious Eastern grandmother with boundless compassion and endless superstitions.

The world of my childhood was a fluid universe, ever changing. Unlike the other kids in the neighbourhood, I did not come from a family in which the father was the unquestionable centre of authority. Instead, surrounded by make-believe characters and magic spells, I would spend the entire day, while my mother was at work, reading storybooks or listening to the folk tales my grandmother narrated with relish. Hopping on a flying carpet, I would land in the Kaf Mountain beyond the seven seas – the abode of all things imaginary. My first sense of belonging, and to this day the most essential one, has been to Storyland.

The gates of Storyland were made of candy floss, milky and fluffy, of a material so gauzy that they opened at the slightest breeze, leaving no one outside. What nationality, ethnicity or religious sect you were from hardly ever mattered in the Land of Imagination. On one day you would be roaming the grimy backstreets of London with Oliver Twist and mingling with pickpockets; on another you would be in France next to the charismatic Jean Valjean, running from the police. A few days later you might be having tea with Anna Karenina while tiny flakes of snow swirled and spiralled in the courtyard. Novels helped me to discover other lives, other possibilities. They gave me a sense of

continuity, centre and coherence in life – the three big C's that I otherwise lacked.

I could not help but suspect that way too often fictional characters were more 'real' than the people I observed in daily life. The characters in storybooks were full of conflicts. They made silly mistakes and suffered and rejoiced, loved passionately and had their hearts broken to pieces, as they were catapulted from one adventure to the next. They were delicate and strong, timid and bold, so many things at once. They were creatures in process, mesmerizingly complex, continuously evolving, striving, *becoming*, incomplete and inchoate. I often likened them to slices of the mosaic cake that my grandmother baked, with slivers of different colours and shapes whirling beneath the surface.

People in daily life, however, were not really *becoming* anything, for they had already become something. They were fathers, teachers, grocers, bosses, workers, landlords or tenants … but not beings under construction. Or so they wanted to seem. If Oliver Twist or Jean Valjean or Anna Karenina were a sentence, it would be one ending with an ellipsis, three little dots, so open-ended. If the headmaster of my primary school or our elderly conservative landlord or the grumpy man who ran the corner shop were a sentence, it would have to be one that ended with a full stop.

Around the time I was ten years old my mother became a diplomat and was posted to Madrid. A few months later I joined her. I found moving to a country where I didn't know the language or the customs less intimidating than perplexing. The first time I was served shrimps at a dinner party, I hid the hideous pink creatures whose taste I knew nothing about under my napkin, where to my embarrassment they would be discovered by our kind Spanish host while changing plates.

From Grandma's spiritual universe I was zoomed away to an international school where there were kids from all nationalities and I happened to be the only Turk. We were like a mini United Nations, with each of us seen as the 'representative' of the land from which he or she came. One implication of this was that whenever something negative occurred in relation to a country, the child associated with that country was held personally responsible – which meant mocked, ridiculed and bullied. And I had a taste of this treatment on numerous occasions. After all, during the time I attended this school a terrorist

of my nationality attempted to assassinate the Pope, Turkey got *nul points* in the Eurovision song contest and a military *coup d'état* took place in my homeland. The other children asked me about the film *Midnight Express*, which I had not seen; they inquired whether I secretly smoked, because they thought all Turks were heavy smokers; and they wondered when exactly I would start to cover my hair. Thus I encountered the three main international clichés about Turkey: politics, cigarettes and the veil.

Little by little, I came to learn how national personas were constructed, propagated, internalized. Those who inhabited Storyland belonged to a place that was free-flowing and flexible and open-ended; a collective identity, however, required solidness and precision and immutability. It also demanded some degree of exclusion, for, by definition, it was contingent on the distinction between 'us' and 'them'. Stories were composed of running water, while identities were of solid earth. They required roots. Yet my roots were up in the air.

In Sufi philosophy there is a legendary tree named Tuba. It's like any other tree, except it is upside down. Evergreen and ever bearing, its roots are up in the air, extending towards the vast, blue sky. I like that image. I find it comforting. It helps me to envisage the possibility that one can have roots without actually putting down roots anywhere.

After Madrid, I had other 'homes' – in Ankara, Amman and Cologne. I then moved on my own to Istanbul, the city I have always adored. On my first night in the chaotic metropole, with boxes stacked up in every room, under a pale light penetrating through the bare windows, I heard someone cursing with a passion. A transvestite was lurching down the street, with a broken heel, limping furiously, up and down, a wavy sea, half night, half day, half man, half woman. Drunk and depressed, she was turning the air blue, words I couldn't make out, so slurred was her speech. But she noticed me, a curious face peeking out of a window. She stopped, frowning. Timidly, I waved at her. She turned away her head but quickly looked up again, either out of curiosity or good manners. Then she raised her hand ever so vaguely; whether it was to say 'Fuck off' or 'Hello there' was hard to tell, but it didn't matter anyway. Her anger, her resentment, her vulnerability, her resilience, her humanness all became visible to me in that split second. It was my first impression of this city of ten million souls, ten million conflicts.

million conflicts.

I had written my first novel in Ankara at the age twenty-four. The next three novels were completed in separate flats in various districts of Istanbul. With the publication of each book my circle of welcoming readers expanded, and I received more attention from the Turkish media; and yet the feeling of living in the air, of being somehow upside down, persisted. I moved to Boston, where I wrote my next novel, *The Saint of Incipient Insanities*, in English. This was followed, in 2005, by a visiting professorship at Michigan and a tenure-track professorship at Arizona. In that same year I married a Turkish journalist in Berlin. We walked into the Turkish embassy just off Ku'damm Avenue and asked to be wed, if possible, right away. The clerk, a sweet, warm-hearted man, felt terribly sorry and embarrassed that there were no wedding gowns, tiered cakes, elegant hosts or even witnesses. When our attempts to drag two German homeless people into the embassy got nowhere – they spoke no English and we knew no German – the same clerk asked, blushing up to his ears, if we would accept him as our witness, even though, he added, 'I am neither famous nor cool.' We said we'd be absolutely honoured. Shortly after the wedding my husband flew off to Istanbul, and I returned to Arizona, from where I would be travelling back and forth.

The truth was I had assumed that getting married would help me to settle down, but it did no such thing. Everyone lectured me that motherhood would definitely put an end to my insanely peripatetic life, but it had almost the opposite effect. Nor did my becoming a mother for the second time change anything. My grandmother suspects it is all because I made the terrible mistake of sharing my rice pudding with a gypsy girl who was rummaging through the rubbish bin in front of our house one day. I ran outside to talk to her. We shared the same silver spoon, glass bowl and rice grains – generating some kind of enchantment, or jinx, depending on how you see the outcome. Hence I passed something of my life to that girl and she, of hers, to me. But I have no memory of such a surreal encounter, and I reckon that, like so many of my grandmother's stories, this one is delicately balanced on an invisible line between fact and fiction.

Back in the Ottoman Empire, thresholds were regarded as the abode of the *djinn*. Likewise, in Topkapi Palace, just outside the quarters of the favourite

concubines, there is an area called Cinlerin Meşveret Yeri, ‘The Gathering Place of the *Djinn*’. Unlike we humans, the *djinn* were created of smokeless fire. So says the Qur’an. They were nebulous, intangible. Although some were known to be good and generous, you could never trust a *djinni*. Not surprisingly, in Islamic cultures thresholds have been seen as elusive places, zones of ambiguity.

I have always been fond of thresholds, though. Even as a child I was not terrified of them, despite the warnings of the elderly Muslim women around me never to step anywhere near them. When entering or leaving a house or a flat or a room, one had to be extremely cautious when passing through the threshold, for this was where the *djinn* gathered and partied, especially at night-time. They were great partiers, the *djinn*. If you stepped on one by mistake, he or she would put a terrible spell on you, as a result of which you could lose your gift of speech or the ability to think rationally. Then you would have to go to the shrine of Lokum Baba to light a candle with dozens of other ‘patients’ in a similar state, and pray to be saved. If the saint believed you were sincere, he would help you from his tomb. Otherwise you would have to go to a doctor or a hospital in search of treatment, which everyone knew would be useless, because medical people didn’t believe in supernatural beings, and how could they cure an illness they didn’t recognize in the first place?

Growing up with these teachings meant feeling wary every time I had to go to the toilet at night. I would tiptoe in the dark, trying to assess exactly where a threshold started and where it ended. Should I have no option other than to place my foot upon a square where a *djinni* might be residing, I would have to be sure to utter a prayer in Arabic first. It was okay that I myself didn’t understand Arabic. The *djinn* were frightened of words. And this was something I could easily relate to. I did believe, after all, that words were magic.

And perhaps the threshold is, in fact, where we writers need to reside. To write, we need ambiguity and changeability as much as dedication and discipline; we need to be unsure of the ground beneath our feet, to be without any dogmas, or even any firm beliefs and belongings, always keeping one foot on the threshold, somewhere in an inbetweendom, vacillating between cultures and peoples, close to all sides but also incurably lonely.

Even today I am commuting between London and Istanbul with my children. For people like me, topsy-turvy Tuba trees or air plants without roots grounded in earth, inhabitants of the limbo between civilizations, the worst thing is to be

in earth, inhabitants of the limbo between civilizations, the worst thing is to be asked – in fact, to be obliged – to choose between two homes and then to have to stick to that choice for ever and ever.

My grandmother was traditional but strongly secular; my mother visibly Westernized but quite 'Eastern' when it came to her taste in music and the arts, among many other things … Hybridity was everywhere, at the core of our existence. There is a plethora of lifetsyles among Muslims, a variety of personal stories to consider; and yet only some of these stories come to the fore. They almost always happen to be the most problematic ones: we seldom hear about happy Muslims, in particular about happy Muslim women. Honour killings, female circumcision, child brides, the veil, gender segregation, lack of freedom … Gender is the number-one topic where the so-called Clash of Civilizations is manifest and crystallized. It is no coincidence that a considerable number of books related to Islam have female images on their covers, and in many, if not most cases, these females appear to be sad, silenced, secluded or suffering. Women with their mouths covered, or eyes peeking from behind their hijab, or heads bowed miserably down …

This is not to deny in any way the gravity of the predicaments many Muslim women face today. Equality between the sexes cannot be postponed nor can the need for it be underestimated. What I am saying, instead, is that these darker stories ought to be situated within a bigger context in which there is also room for tales of the strength, success and spirit of the women in the Muslim world.

My mother has never covered her hair, and as far as I know the thought never even occurred to her. My grandmother did wear a headscarf, though only in her old age and always with a shag of peppered hair showing in the front. Our neighbours, female relatives of my friends, female readers, the Middle Eastern and European/American Muslim women I have observed throughout the years are altogether an amazing mixture. I have seen highly educated modern women who have internalized the values of male-dominated societies to such an extent that they pray for a boy when they discover they are pregnant and feel miserable when their prayers are unanswered. I have seen traditional, 'ignorant' women who are the indisputable matriarchs in their houses and have the final say in every matter. There are cases where mothers support the decision to kill a daughter for 'soiling' the family honour. Then there are other mothers who do everything in their power to further their daughter's education and dedicate their

everything in their power to further their daughter's education and dedicate their lives to this end. Likewise, when my mother went back to Ankara with a toddler in her arms and was stigmatized as a 'divorcee', it was my grandmother who stood by her against all the gossips. At no point in this trajectory did my grandmother pressurize my mother to remarry and let a man take care of her and her child. Ours might not be a common case, but it surely wasn't exceptional. There are countless Muslim women who are headstrong, commanding, independent and, I dare say, happy.

The Muslim world is not, and has never been, a homogeneous whole. The Muslim world is not, and has never been, stagnant. Christianity has always been understood in a multitude of ways, and now Islam, too, is being widely interpreted and reinterpreted. From Saudi Arabia to Turkey, from Malaysia to Morocco, from converts to Islam to immigrants in Europe, what we are faced with is a broad spectrum of practices and perceptions. Furthermore, as the Arab Spring has demonstrated, even societies that seem inward-looking and unchanging are, in fact, undergoing a transformation.

But to see this variety only through the lens of politics is dangerous. It removes nuance and complexity and encourages generalization. Exploring Muslim migrants' failures and achievements, joys and sorrows, from cultural, philosophical, artistic or literary perspectives, however, will reveal myriad stories. Some of these will be stories of conflict, perhaps even hostility, but countless others will be stories of healthy coexistence and investment in a common future. By focusing on current politics and nothing else, antagonism will be all that we see.

One of the most notorious slogans of ultra-nationalism in Turkey has been 'Either love it or leave it!' It is meant to block all kinds of fault-finding from within. The implication is that if you criticize your country or your state, you are showing disrespect, not to mention a lack of patriotism, in which case you had better take your leave. If you do stay, however, the implication is that you love your homeland, in which case you had better not voice any critical opinions. This black-and-white mentality is an obstacle to social progress. But it is not only Turkish ultra- nationalism that is fuelled by a dualistic mentality. All kinds of extremist, exclusivist discourses are similarly reductionist and sheathed in tautology. Either/or approaches ask us to make a choice, all the while spreading

the fallacy that it is not possible to have multiple belongings, multiple roots, multiple loves.

Yet often it is in multiplicity and flexibility that we find the salve for many of today's problems. In an age when millions of people learn to express themselves in more than one language, it is not a pipe dream to talk about multifarious connections. One can be, for example, a Cypriot Turk and a Muslim and a Sunni and a firm supporter of secularism and a European and a global soul and a mystic and an admirer of the Labour Party … One can even feel Western in the East but Eastern in the West … There are many people like this and there will be many more in the century to come. People on the cusp of civilizations, natural-born commuters, connecting places and cultures and traditions, striving to overcome the prejudices on all sides, ferrying memories from one shore to the other. You can be a European with Eastern elements in your past and in your personality, for East and West cease to be mutually exclusive categories as soon as we stop regarding them as oil and water.

When politics hijacks the debate on the Muslim diaspora in Europe, it disregards this complexity and reduces individuals to one or two labels. Both Islamic fundamentalism and the anti-Islamic extreme-right are similarly intolerant of the *and … and … and* aspect of our lives. In a system where human beings are confined to one solid and stable identity, as opposed to having open-ended multiple connections, it will be harder to find a common ground that will keep them together.

A Pew Research Center poll of Muslims in Britain conducted in 2006 found that when asked whether they saw themselves as *either* British first *or* Muslim first, a whopping majority of 81 per cent opted for the latter. Apparently, only 19 per cent saw themselves as 'British first'. This then led some media experts to conclude that British Muslims were weakly bound to the ideals of the country that was home to them. However, when a *Sky News* poll posed the same question, but without asking the interviewees to make a choice between 'British first' or 'Muslim first', 46 per cent stated they were 'British first'.[5] When faced with the choice between one identity and another, most made one decision; but when they were allowed to have multiple attachments, the decision they made was not necessarily the same.

My contention is one can have several homes, instead of a single, fixed homeland. One can belong to numerous cities and cultures and peoples, regardless of the way current politics situates them apart. In an age of migrations and movements, when many of us already dream in more than one language, it is time to discard 'identity politics' altogether. It is no longer doing us any good. All it does is to create further antagonism and deeper *Angst*. Instead, what we need are 'liquid attachments' – bonds of love and memory and commitment that are constantly in flux, defined and redefined ad infinitum.

One of the things I remember well from my childhood is my grandmother's silver mirror. It was an antique mirror, ornamented on the reverse side with an elegant design of roses in bloom and singing nightingales. She would comb her long, chestnut hair, never moving her eyes from her reflection. Every mirror was a passage to another universe, she said, and when you peeked deep within something there peeked back into your soul, too. From time to time, Grandma would declare it was time for this passage to shut down and rest a little bit. It wasn't healthy for human beings to stare at their reflections all the time, she would add by way of explanation. On such days all the mirrors in the house would be turned back to front, and I would go to school without knowing what my hair looked like.

Years later, I cannot help but lament the loss of this age-old wisdom. Perhaps we gaze too much and too often at our own reflections, in the sense that we generally, if not solely, interact with people who think like us, vote like us, talk like us and are like us. If asked whether we have anything against those outside our cultural cocoons, the chances are that we will firmly and sincerely say no. Of course, we are not biased. Of course, we have nothing against *them*. On the contrary, we relish some degree of multiethnic diversity. The Iranian grocery shop that is open on Sundays and sells high-quality saffron, the Turkish restaurant where they serve tea in small glasses, the travel agency around the corner that offers flights with Bangladeshi Airlines for a reasonable price … All of this enriches our environment. It's just that we don't socialize with *them* …

Unfortunately, this invisible flight from hybridity occurs on multiple levels. Among the rich and the poor, liberals and conservatives, East and West …We tend to form comfort zones based on similarity, and then produce macro-opinions and clichés about 'Others', whom, in fact, we know so little about.

When people stop talking, genuinely talking, to each other, they become more prone to making judgements. The less I know about, say Mongolians, the more easily and confidently I can draw conclusions about them. If I know ten Mongolians with entirely different personalities and conflicting viewpoints, I'll be more cautious next time I make a remark about Mongolian national identity. If that number is 100, I may be even more detailed in my approach, for I will know that, while they share common cultural traits, Mongolians are not a monolithic mass of undifferentiated individuals. As a storyteller I am less interested in generalizations than in undertones and nuances. These may not be visible at first glance, but they are out there, lurking beneath the surface, durable and distinct.

At the beginning of this essay I wrote that the immigrant experience is conducive to *Angst*. The opposite can also be true, however. Edward Said has stated, 'The more one is able to leave one's cultural home, the more easily is one able to judge it, and the whole world as well, with the spiritual detachment *and* generosity necessary for true vision.'[6]

There is a story in Rumi's *Mathnawi* that reminds me of this. A certain sage was walking in the woods one day when he saw a crow and a stork together. He was surprised. These birds were of different kinds – how could they be in each other's company? Slowly, gently, he approached, and then he realized that both were limping. Lame birds, they were. Somehow, somewhere, each had separated itself from, or fallen behind, its flock, unable to keep up with the others, and started to fly on its own. Along the way, their paths had crossed, a stork and a crow, and they had become unlikely companions of the road.

The world we live in is full of lame birds who manage to learn to fly together. They share much in common, except appearance. Cosmopolitanism – encounters with different species, and the fellowship that ensues – can be a huge blessing. Today culturally and economically advanced cities also happen to be places where there is a dynamic intermingling of ethnicities and nationalities. Sydney, New York, London, Amsterdam, Berlin … the amalgamation of diverse entities is surely not an easy process, and yet it holds tremendous possibilities for a new world. In this life, if we are ever going to learn anything, we will be learning it from those who are different from us. It is in the crossroads of ideas, cultures, literatures, traditions, arts and cuisines that humanity has found fertile grounds

literatures, traditions, arts and cuisines that humanity has found fertile grounds for growth.

Unfortunately today there is too much emphasis on the distinguishing features of Muslims and non-Muslims in Europe, and too little on what they have, potentially and actually, in common. Too much attention is being paid to the possible dangers of immigration, while too little to the benefits of cosmopolitanism. We don't have to be romantic, we don't even need to be optimistic. But we need to see the larger picture. Systematic *Angst* is the fuel of a vicious circle that spins on a global scale. Hardliners create more hardliners elsewhere. Anti-Islamic rhetoric in the French parliament incites anti-Western sentiments in a London suburb populated by immigrants; and anti-Western discourse in the Moroccan community in Berlin reinforces the clichés against Islam in the mind of a Swedish or Danish extremist. And on and on we wallow in this quagmire without ever realizing how our own fears serve to buttress the very things of which we are afraid.

Today the dialogue between Europe and Islam cannot be left to politicians or diplomats alone. Nor can it be left to extremists on both sides. Though as human beings we cannot entirely rid ourselves of our existential *Angst*, we can stop making it our primary guide in our relations with one another. After all, the happiness of blond people and the happiness of dark-haired people are intertwined, not separate.

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