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## **‘Bastard’ Pits Turkey Against Itself**

By The Associated Press

ISTANBUL, Turkey — Europe's governing body is watching which way Turkish courts will jump as author Elif Shafak is prosecuted for insulting her nation.

For best-selling Turkish author Elif Shafak, this month promises to be one of joy and tribulation.

Nine months pregnant, the University of Arizona literature professor is set to give birth to her first child. Another important date looms: the start of her trial on charges of “insulting Turkishness” in her novel that deals with the waning years of the Ottoman Empire.

In a quiet cafe in the backstreets of Istanbul's historic Beyoglu district, where Turks, Armenians and Jews once lived in harmony, Shafak reflected on the peculiarities of a case in which it is nothing she said herself that is being put on trial, but words she gave to a fictitious Armenian character.

“I think my case is very bizarre, because for the first time they are trying fictional characters,” said Shafak, a striking woman with unruly locks of blond hair.

If convicted Shafak, who divides her time between Tucson, Arizona, and Istanbul, could face three years in prison. Turkey has refused her request to delay the Sept. 21 trial because of her pregnancy.

The case will be closely watched by the EU, which has repeatedly insisted that Turkey abolish laws that limit freedom of expression if it is to fulfill its dream of joining the elite club of nations—which sees itself both as an economic bloc and a beacon of liberal, democratic values.

Shafak said the law on insulting Turkishness “has been used as a weapon to silence many people. ... My case is perhaps just another step in this long chain.”

That chain includes Turkey's best known novelist Orhan Pamuk—a perennial candidate for the Nobel Prize in literature—and dozens of other writers and intellectuals forced to defend themselves against charges of “insulting Turkishness.”

Shafak says he has received hate mail from nationalists calling her a “pawn of the enemies of Turkey.”

Although most of the cases have been dropped for technical reasons—such as the case involving Pamuk—and no one has ended up in prison, the trials have raised serious questions about whether Turkey is ready to embrace European values.

To Shafak, the trials, brought forward by a coalition of ultranationalist lawyers, are an attempt to resist EU-inspired changes toward a more democratic and pluralistic Turkey that some see as a threat to the powerful central state, which has strong ties to the military.

Yet Shafak sees reason for hope: The surge in nationalism, she says, is a clear sign that Turkey is truly undergoing a momentous transformation.

“This ultranationalist movement is taking place not because nothing is changing in Turkey, but just the opposite, because things are changing,” Shafak said. “The bigger the transformation, the bigger their panic.”

Shafak's novel, *The Bastard of Istanbul*, touches upon the massacres of Armenians during the final years of the Ottoman Empire, telling the tale of a Turkish and an American-Armenian family whose lives become intertwined.

The book also deals with other taboos—domestic violence and incestuous rape—which are rarely discussed in this conservative, predominantly Muslim country.

But it was fictional Armenian-American characters in the book who sent Shafak to court. In one passage, a character is deeply concerned about the prospect of his niece being brought up by a Turkish stepfather.

“What will that innocent lamb tell her friends when she grows up?” the man asks. “[That] I am the grandchild of genocide survivors who lost all their relatives to the hands of Turkish butchers in 1915, but I myself have been brainwashed to deny the genocide because I was raised by some Turk named Mustapha!”

Later, a radical Armenian-American blogger who goes by the name of Lady Peacock/Siramark writes: “Do you think [the Turks] are going to say: Oh yeah, we are sorry we massacred and deported you guys, and then contentedly denied it all.”

Turkey insists that the mass evacuation and deaths of up to 1.5 million Armenians during World War I was not a planned genocide.

Labeling it as such can be considered a criminal offense.

The book has sold 60,000 copies since it was published—considered a big hit in Turkey, where readership is low.

The daughter of a female diplomat who raised Shafak alone—her father left when she was young—the novelist said that she first became aware of the Armenian issue after Armenian militants killed dozens of Turkish diplomats across the 1970s and 1980s.

“My very first acquaintance with the word ‘Armenian’ was so negative, it just meant someone who wanted to kill my mother,” Shafak said. “I then started to ask questions, ‘why so much hatred against Turkish diplomats? What is behind this?’”

She does not take sides on the genocide debate, but criticizes Turkey for what she calls a “collective amnesia” of the atrocities.

“Turks and Armenians are not speaking the same language,” she explained. “For the Turks all the past is gone, erased from our memories. That's the way we Westernized: by being future-oriented... The grandchildren of the 1915 survivors tend to be very, very past-oriented.”

The English version of *The Bastard of Istanbul* is to be published next year.

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