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## **Turkish Fiction**

Turkey is a country caught between two worlds. It is a largely Muslim nation, and yet it has a secular government, one that has always been aligned with the West. It was a founding member of the United Nations and belongs to both the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development. But it is not a member of the European Union, in part because of concerns about the country's commitment to such democratic principles as freedom of speech.

Those concerns got a fresh airing, thanks to the trial of one of Turkey's most celebrated novelists, Elif Shafak. Her crime? A work of fiction that referred to Turkey's treatment of the Armenians in 1915 in less than complimentary terms. In almost every civilized country apart from Turkey, the killing of more than a million Armenians for nothing other than their ethnicity is considered an act of genocide. But in Turkey it is a crime to speak of such things, and a group of nationalist lawyers have made it their goal to prosecute every perceived infraction.

Ms. Shafak was charged under Article 301 of the Turkish penal code, which makes it a crime to "insult Turkishness" or the Turkish Republic. The case was dismissed yesterday by a judicial panel. Ms. Shafak is not the only one to have been caught by this dangerously vague and sweeping law, although she was the first to be charged in relation to a work of fiction.

Another famous Turkish novelist, Orhan Pamuk, was charged last year for a comment he made to a Swiss newspaper about the Armenian genocide (the charges against him were dropped earlier this year on a technicality), and a Turkish journalist was recently sentenced to six months in prison for stories criticizing Article 301. There are reported to be more than 60 other cases currently under way in Turkey against authors and journalists.

Not surprisingly, such attacks on freedom of speech have been seized on by many who oppose the country's admission into the European Union. It has even been suggested that the cases against Ms. Shafak and Mr. Pamuk are part of a campaign by Turkish nationalists to keep their country out of the EU. If so, the strategy may be working. The use of Article 301 against authors and journalists appears to be a major sticking point for the EU when it comes to Turkey's future status.

Under EU pressure, the Turkish government has implemented human-rights reforms over the past several years, but as the trial of Ms. Shafak

shows, there is still much work to be done. Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan said that he welcomes Ms. Shafak's acquittal and that he is willing to consider an amendment to the penal code to remove Article 301. If his government is serious about joining the EU, that should be one of its priorities.

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