

Book Review

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Elif Shafak - *How to Stay Sane in an Age of Division* (2019)

Elif Shafak's essay *How to Stay Sane in an Age of Division* touches upon her fundamental creeds that she has often been reiterated in conferences, radio interviews, public appearances: cosmopolitanism, the power of storytelling to bridge together cultures, voices and individuals, the power of emotions and of language.

One of Shafak's biggest concerns is the weakening of democracy. In the early 2000s, she states, there was great optimism about the development of communicational technology. It was believed that technology would bring people together more than ever before and would spread democracy to all corners of the world. However, as she points out, social media has become a platform both for spreading narcissism (extreme individualism) and hatred: "On our television screens or Youtube channels ... we watch people from opposite camps, talking and shouting over each other. They are not there to listen and they are not there to learn" (Shafak 6). Instead of encampment and the lack of reflection and tolerance, Shafak proposes that we should make room for more wisdom: "We live in an age in which there is too much information, less knowledge and even less wisdom. That ratio needs to be reversed. We definitely need less information, more knowledge and much more wisdom" (Shafak 1).

The author distinguishes between knowledge and wisdom. Whereas knowledge requires reading books, in-depth analyses or highly qualified investigative journalism, wisdom may be acquired by means of fiction, through stories and storytelling. Both knowledge and wisdom are products of the reflective effort of individuals. No one can become knowledgeable and wise by googling and Wikipedia alone. Both self-knowledge and knowledge of the world are antidotes against the narcissistic temptation of this age.

Fiction is related to identity, to a weak or strong sense of self. For instance, bearing an untold story is likened to a burden, an agony. In fact, one's sense of humanity and by extension, of fulfilment, is given by the ability to tell their personal story. On the contrary, being silenced is akin to feeling anxious, even dehumanized. It is through storytelling that we get a more nuanced version of history, hence Shafak's interest in the 'periphery', in voices that would otherwise remain voiceless: "my first instinct as a storyteller is to dig into 'the periphery' rather than 'the centre' and focus my attention on the marginalized, undeserved, disenfranchised and censored voices". (Shafak 13-4) One novel in which this interest is made manifest is *The Bastard of Istanbul* (2006), in which the two young female protagonists are both trying to make sense of their past – Asya, the Turkish bastard and Armanoush, the Armenian expat who visits his Turkish stepfather's family in Istanbul in order to discover the turbulent history of the Armenians.

Emotions play a pivotal role in our contemporary understanding of the world. The book *How to Stay Sane in an Age of Division* details the implications of three emotional responses to modern-day situations. Defined as a type of worry about "the state of the world, and our place in it, or placelessness" (Shafak 1), anxiety is projected against the tendency of seeing the world in terms of various crises. To give just a few examples, the crisis of Western civilization, of refugees or of healthcare are mentioned.

Anger, the second strong emotion discussed in the book, should be managed with

caution, as Shafak notes. If it is not turned into something productive, it runs the risk of becoming “highly combustible and blindly destructive, burning through buildings and bridges and human connections” (Shafak 5-6).

The third emotion mentioned is apathy, which the author defines as a combination of many emotions: “anxiety, disillusionment, bewilderment, fatigue, resentment” (Shafak 1). The term *apatheia* has a rich cultural history. A key element of Stoic thought, it was defined as being averse to desire, as a way of cultivating a feeling of calmness when faced with adversity, a feeling of indifference to suffering. The early Church Father Gregory of Nyssa defined *apatheia* as a Christian virtue, coating the Stoic concept with a redemptive power.

In the book reviewed, control over emotions becomes in conjunction with rational scrutiny are viewed as secular virtues in themselves, as key elements of a possible good life, a sane life. This good, saner life, as Shafak implies, is only discoverable through active participation, since a lack of involvement in the public space has the potential of turning people into isolated, narcissistic, disconnected and apathetic individuals (Shafak 3).

One of the most original observations Shafak makes is related to aspects related to the pandemic. In short, the world was in crisis way before the pandemic was declared. It is just that during the pandemic we had had more time to ponder upon what topics such as democracy, ‘normal’, happiness, selfishness or freedom really mean. What on the surface is a health and economic crisis could also be a crisis of meaning.

Although there is talk of coming back to the pre-pandemic ‘normal’, we should think deeper and choose between two paths. One of them is the path of nationalism and protectionism, a situation which authoritarian leaders have taken advantage of and have used the pandemic in order to consolidate their authority (Shafak 18). The second path is the democratic, open and global perspective, the spirit of ‘international communication’, a spirit of humanism concerned with solving climate change issues, poverty, “cyber terrorism and the dark side of digital technologies” (Shafak 18).

This embrace of openness and multiplicity as a desideratum is where Shafak tends to fall into a hyper-optimistic, even naïve set of ideas. This hyper-technologized, fast-paced world was famously labelled by Zygmunt Bauman as ‘liquid modernity’. The experience of living in such a modernity is characterized by the collapse of long-term thinking, planning and acting. A fragmented life does not stimulate ‘vertical’ orientations, but rather ‘lateral’ ones. (Bauman 3).

Overall, Elif Shafak’s essay *How to Stay Sane in an Age of Division* tries to achieve a balancing act between the incentive to act in a socially responsible way without however, letting emotions overcome the feeling of justice, therefore possibly compromise a possible revolution in mentality. Such balanced wake-up calls are hard to achieve, but Shafak’s book is a noteworthy addition to recent outlooks on the state of the world such as Ashley ‘Dotty’ Charles’ *Outraged: Why Everyone is Shouting and No One is Talking* (2019).

Works Cited:

Shafak, Elif. *How to Stay Sane in an Age of Division*. London: Profile Books Ltd., 2019. eBook.

Bauman, Zygmunt. *Liquid Times: Living in an Age of Uncertainty*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007. Print.