

## The Revolutionary Power of Diverse Thought by Elif Shafak

Elif Shafak at TEDGlobal>NYC

The revolutionary power of diverse thought

21:58

"Can you taste words?"

It was a question that caught me by surprise. This summer, I was giving a talk at a literary festival, and afterwards, as I was signing books, a teenage girl came with her friend, and this is what she asked me. I told her that some people experience an overlap in their senses so that they could hear colors or see sounds, and many writers were fascinated by this subject, myself included. But she cut me off, a bit impatiently, and said, "Yeah, I know all of that. It's called synesthesia. We learned it at school. But my mom is reading your book, and she says there's lots of food and ingredients and a long dinner scene in it. She gets hungry at every page. So I was thinking, how come you don't get hungry when you write? And I thought maybe, maybe you could taste words. Does it make sense?"

And, actually, it did make sense, because ever since my childhood, each letter in the alphabet has a different color, and colors bring me flavors. So for instance, the color purple is quite pungent, almost perfumed, and any words that I associate with purple taste the same way, such as "sunset" -- a very spicy word. But I was worried that if I tell all of this to the teenager, it might sound either too abstract or perhaps too weird, and there wasn't enough time anyhow, because people were waiting in the queue, so it suddenly felt like what I was trying to convey was more complicated and detailed than what the circumstances allowed me to say. And I did what I usually do in similar situations: I stammered, I shut down, and I stopped talking. I stopped talking because the truth was complicated, even though I knew, deep within, that one should never, ever remain silent for fear of complexity.

So I want to start my talk today with the answer that I was not able to give on that day. Yes, I can taste words -- sometimes, that is, not always, and happy words have a different flavor than sad words. I like to explore: What does the word "creativity" taste like, or "equality," "love," "revolution?"

And what about "motherland?" These days, it's particularly this last word that troubles me. It leaves a sweet taste on my tongue, like cinnamon, a bit of rose water and golden apples. But underneath, there's a sharp tang, like nettles and dandelion. The taste of my motherland, Turkey, is a mixture of sweet and bitter.

And the reason why I'm telling you this is because I think there's more and more people all around the world today who have similarly mixed emotions about the lands they come from. We love our native countries, yeah? How can we not? We feel attached to the people, the culture, the land, the food. And yet at the same time, we feel increasingly frustrated by its politics and politicians, sometimes to the point of despair or hurt or anger.

I want to talk about emotions and the need to boost our emotional intelligence. I think it's a pity that mainstream political theory pays very little attention to emotions. Oftentimes, analysts and experts are so busy with data and metrics that they seem to forget those things in life that are difficult to measure and perhaps impossible to cluster under statistical models. But I think this is a mistake, for two main reasons. Firstly, because we are emotional beings. As human beings, I think we all are like that. But secondly, and this is new, we have entered a new stage in world history in which collective sentiments guide and misguide politics more than ever before. And through social media and social networking, these sentiments are further amplified, polarized, and they travel around the world quite fast. Ours is the age of anxiety, anger, distrust, resentment and, I think, lots of fear. But here's the thing: even though there's plenty of research about economic factors, there's relatively few studies about emotional factors.

Why is it that we underestimate feelings and perceptions? I think it's going to be one of our biggest intellectual challenges, because our political systems are replete with emotions. In country after country, we have seen illiberal politicians exploiting these emotions. And yet within the academia and among the intelligentsia, we are yet to take emotions seriously. I think we should. And just like we should focus on economic inequality worldwide, we need to pay more attention to emotional and cognitive gaps worldwide and how to bridge these gaps, because they do matter.

Years ago, when I was still living in Istanbul, an American scholar working on women writers in the Middle East came to see me. And at some point in our exchange, she said, "I understand why you're a feminist, because, you know, you live in Turkey." And I said to her, "I don't understand why you're not a feminist, because, you know, you live in America."

(Laughter)

(Applause) And she laughed. She took it as a joke, and the moment passed.

(Laughter)

But the way she had divided the world into two imaginary camps, into two opposite camps -- it bothered me and it stayed with me. According to this imaginary map, some parts of the world were liquid countries. They were like choppy waters not yet settled. Some other parts of the world, namely the West, were solid, safe and stable. So it was the liquid lands that needed feminism and activism and human rights, and those of us who were unfortunate enough to come from such places had to keep struggling for these most

essential values. But there was hope. Since history moved forward, even the most unsteady lands would someday catch up. And meanwhile, the citizens of solid lands could take comfort in the progress of history and in the triumph of the liberal order. They could support the struggles of other people elsewhere, but they themselves did not have to struggle for the basics of democracy anymore, because they were beyond that stage.

I think in the year 2016, this hierarchical geography was shattered to pieces. Our world no longer follows this dualistic pattern in the scholar's mind, if it ever did. Now we know that history does not necessarily move forward. Sometimes it draws circles, even slides backwards, and that generations can make the same mistakes that their great-grandfathers had made. And now we know that there's no such thing as solid countries versus liquid countries. In fact, we are all living in liquid times, just like the late Zygmunt Bauman told us. And Bauman had another definition for our age. He used to say we are all going to be walking on moving sands.

And if that's the case, I think, it should concern us women more than men, because when societies slide backwards into authoritarianism, nationalism or religious fanaticism, women have much more to lose. That is why this needs to be a vital moment, not only for global activism, but in my opinion, for global sisterhood as well.

(Applause)

But I want to make a little confession before I go any further. Until recently, whenever I took part in an international conference or festival, I would be usually one of the more depressed speakers.

(Laughter)

Having seen how our dreams of democracy and how our dreams of coexistence were crushed in Turkey, both gradually but also with a bewildering speed, over the years I've felt quite demoralized. And at these festivals there would be some other gloomy writers, and they would come from places such as Egypt, Nigeria, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Philippines, China, Venezuela, Russia. And we would smile at each other in sympathy, this camaraderie of the doomed.

(Laughter)

And you could call us WADWIC: Worried and Depressed Writers International Club.

(Laughter)

But then things began to change, and suddenly our club became more popular, and we started to have new members. I remember --

(Laughter)

I remember Greek writers and poets joined first, came on board. And then writers from Hungary and Poland, and then, interestingly, writers from Austria, the Netherlands, France, and then writers from the UK, where I live and where I call my home, and then writers from the USA. Suddenly, there were more of us feeling worried about the fate of our nations and the future of the world. And maybe there were more of us now feeling like strangers in our own motherlands.

And then this bizarre thing happened. Those of us who used to be very depressed for a long time, we started to feel less depressed, whereas the newcomers, they were so not used to feeling this way that they were now even more depressed.

(Laughter)

So you could see writers from Bangladesh or Turkey or Egypt trying to console their colleagues from Brexit Britain or from post-election USA.

(Laughter)

But joking aside, I think our world is full of unprecedented challenges, and this comes with an emotional backlash, because in the face of high-speed change, many people wish to slow down, and when there's too much unfamiliarity, people long for the familiar. And when things get too confusing, many people crave simplicity. This is a very dangerous crossroads, because it's exactly where the demagogue enters into the picture.

The demagogue understands how collective sentiments work and how he -- it's usually a he -- can benefit from them. He tells us that we all belong in our tribes, and he tells us that we will be safer if we are surrounded by sameness. Demagogues come in all sizes and in all shapes. This could be the eccentric leader of a marginal political party somewhere in Europe, or an Islamist extremist imam preaching dogma and hatred, or it could be a white supremacist Nazi-admiring orator somewhere else. All these figures, at first glance -- they seem disconnected. But I think they feed each other, and they need each other.

And all around the world, when we look at how demagogues talk and how they inspire movements, I think they have one unmistakable quality in common: they strongly, strongly dislike plurality. They cannot deal with multiplicity. Adorno used to say, "Intolerance of ambiguity is the sign of an authoritarian personality." But I ask myself: What if that same sign, that same intolerance of ambiguity -- what if it's the mark of our times, of the age we're living in? Because wherever I look, I see nuances withering away. On TV shows, we have one anti-something speaker situated against a pro-something speaker. Yeah? It's good ratings. It's even better if they shout at each other. Even in academia, where our intellect is supposed to be nourished, you see one atheist scholar competing with a firmly theist scholar, but it's not a real intellectual exchange, because it's a clash between two certainties.

I think binary oppositions are everywhere. So slowly and systematically, we are being denied the right to be complex. Istanbul, Berlin, Nice, Paris, Brussels, Dhaka, Baghdad, Barcelona: we have seen one horrible terror attack after another. And when you express your sorrow, and when you react against the cruelty, you get all kinds of reactions, messages on social media. But one of them is quite disturbing, only because it's so widespread. They say, "Why do you feel sorry for them? Why do you feel sorry for them? Why don't you feel sorry for civilians in Yemen or civilians in Syria?"

And I think the people who write such messages do not understand that we can feel sorry for and stand in solidarity with victims of terrorism and violence in the Middle East, in Europe, in Asia, in America, wherever, everywhere, equally and simultaneously. They don't seem to understand that we don't have to pick one pain and one place over all others. But I think this is what tribalism does to us. It shrinks our minds, for sure, but it also shrinks our hearts, to such an extent that we become numb to the suffering of

other people.

And the sad truth is, we weren't always like this. I had a children's book out in Turkey, and when the book was published, I did lots of events. I went to many primary schools, which gave me a chance to observe younger kids in Turkey. And it was always amazing to see how much empathy, imagination and chutzpah they have. These children are much more inclined to become global citizens than nationalists at that age. And it's wonderful to see, when you ask them, so many of them want to be poets and writers, and girls are just as confident as boys, if not even more.

But then I would go to high schools, and everything has changed. Now nobody wants to be a writer anymore, now nobody wants to be a novelist anymore, and girls have become timid, they are cautious, guarded, reluctant to speak up in the public space, because we have taught them -- the family, the school, the society -- we have taught them to erase their individuality.

I think East and West, we are losing multiplicity, both within our societies and within ourselves. And coming from Turkey, I do know that the loss of diversity is a major, major loss. Today, my motherland became the world's biggest jailer for journalists, surpassing even China's sad record. And I also believe that what happened over there in Turkey can happen anywhere. It can even happen here. So just like solid countries was an illusion, singular identities is also an illusion, because we all have a multiplicity of voices inside. The Iranian, the Persian poet, Hafiz, used to say, "You carry in your soul every ingredient necessary to turn your existence into joy. All you have to do is to mix those ingredients."

And I think mix we can. I am an Istanbulite, but I'm also attached to the Balkans, the Aegean, the Mediterranean, the Middle East, the Levant. I am a European by birth, by choice, the values that I uphold. I have become a Londoner over the years. I would like to think of myself as a global soul, as a world citizen, a nomad and an itinerant storyteller. I have multiple attachments, just like all of us do. And multiple attachments mean multiple stories.

As writers, we always chase stories, of course, but I think we are also interested in silences, the things we cannot talk about, political taboos, cultural taboos. We're also interested in our own silences. I have always been very vocal about and written extensively about minority rights, women's rights, LGBT rights. But as I was thinking about this TED Talk, I realized one thing: I have never had the courage to say in a public space that I was bisexual myself, because I so feared the slander and the stigma and the ridicule and the hatred that was sure to follow. But of course, one should never, ever, remain silent for fear of complexity.

(Applause)

And although I am no stranger to anxieties, and although I am talking here about the power of emotions -- I do know the power of emotions -- I have discovered over time that emotions are not limitless. You know? They have a limit. There comes a moment -- it's like a tipping point or a threshold -- when you get tired of feeling afraid, when you get tired of feeling anxious. And I think not only individuals, but perhaps nations, too, have their own tipping points. So even stronger than my emotions is my awareness that not only gender, not only identity, but life itself is fluid. They want to divide us into tribes, but we are connected across borders. They preach certainty, but we know that life has plenty of magic and plenty of ambiguity. And they like to incite dualities, but we are far

more nuanced than that.

So what can we do? I think we need to go back to the basics, back to the colors of the alphabet. The Lebanese poet Khalil Gibran used to say, "I learned silence from the talkative and tolerance from the intolerant and kindness from the unkind." I think it's a great motto for our times.

So from populist demagogues, we will learn the indispensability of democracy. And from isolationists, we will learn the need for global solidarity. And from tribalists, we will learn the beauty of cosmopolitanism and the beauty of diversity.

As I finish, I want to leave you with one word, or one taste. The word "yurt" in Turkish means "motherland." It means "homeland." But interestingly, the word also means "a tent used by nomadic tribes." And I like that combination, because it makes me think homelands do not need to be rooted in one place. They can be portable. We can take them with us everywhere. And I think for writers, for storytellers, at the end of the day, there is one main homeland, and it's called "Storyland." And the taste of that word is the taste of freedom.

Thank you.

(Applause)