

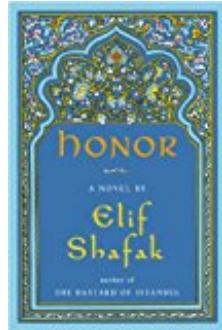
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Jenny McPhee

Understanding the Other: Elif Shafak's Honor

On the front and back covers of the Turkish edition of Elif Shafak's novel *İskender* (to be published in the U.S. as *Honor*), the author appears in two different poses dressed as her male protagonist İskender, a handsome, savvy-looking youth with slick hair and a five o'clock shadow wearing a stylish suit. In Shafak's story, he is the murderer of his own mother. *Honor* is a sprawling saga about a Turkish-Kurdish mixed family who emigrate in the 1970s to London, a city simmering with racial tension and a hothouse for an emerging radicalism. Spanning several generations, time frames, cultures, and geographies, the narrative unfolds from the viewpoints of multiple characters and seeks to discover the myriad forces and influences that lead İskender to commit such a heinous crime.



Asked why she opted to appear so disguised on her book, Shafak explained that one of the most difficult aspects of writing the novel had been to put herself in the murderer's shoes, "to see the world the way he sees it, without judging him from above." Shafak wanted to emphasize to her readers that one aim of her fiction is to inhabit her characters' otherness to the point where she is able to understand each of them as part of herself. In Shafak's inspiring TED talk, "The Politics of Fiction," she furthers this idea by discussing the restrictiveness of identity politics, challenging the notion that fiction writers should necessarily "write what they know." She quotes James Baldwin, who recoiled at the "homosexual writer" label constantly pinned on him by critics: "There's nothing in me that's not in everybody else, and there's nothing in everybody else that's not in me."

Shafak is disturbed by the tendency among critics, especially in the West, to insist writers -- particularly "ethnic" women authors -- stick to subjects that describe their own direct experience (or what the critics hold to be their experience). Shafak believes it is the fiction writer's prerogative to use his or her imagination to go as deeply as possible into characters who are different in order to gain -- and pass on to one's readers -- an understanding that goes beyond our own. She finds deep parallels between mystical traditions such as Sufism and the creative writing endeavor: both attempt through empathy to transcend the limits of the self in order to find universal truths. In her talk, she tells of when the poet and mystic Rumi met his spiritual companion Shams of Tabriz: "One of the first things the latter did was to toss Rumi's books into the water and watch the letters dissolve. The Sufis say knowledge that takes you not beyond yourself is far worse than ignorance."

Born in France in 1971 to Turkish parents, Shafak returned to Istanbul with her mother as a young girl and was partly brought up by her grandmother, a healer. Her mother became a diplomat and Elif's teenage years were spent in Madrid, Cologne, Amman, Ankara, and Boston. She has a degree in international relations, a master's in gender and women's studies, and a PhD in political science. Described by her publisher as "postfeminist, cosmopolitan, commuter, mystic, and human rights defender," Elif Shafak is, after Orhan Pamuk, the most renowned Turkish writer in and out of Turkey. She has written eight novels and three works of nonfiction including a memoir about suffering from postpartum depression entitled *Black Milk*. Her best-selling novel *The Bastard of Istanbul* (2006) caused the Turkish court to bring criminal charges against her under the infamous Article 301 of Turkey's penal code for "denigrating Turkish national identity." She was eventually acquitted.

When I asked Shafak about the "postfeminist" tag she told me, "There's no such thing. As long as one woman is oppressed anywhere in the world due to her sex, feminism is needed, and I am a feminist." She said, however, that she felt feminism so far hadn't found a broadly effective way to include men and make them understand that the subjugation of women results ultimately in their own misery. By conforming to misogynistic practices, they end up harming those they love and becoming alien to themselves. Shafak also thinks women willingly collaborate in their own enslavement by not questioning their beliefs and practices. "For example, we bring up our sons as 'little sultans.' It's unfair to our daughters but to our sons as well. We all suffer because of it, and we must take responsibility for that and change it."

At the heart of Shafak's novel is an honor killing, a concept Westerners find difficult to fathom in this day and age. We wonder how a man's self worth can be so rigidly linked to his control of female family members that he would be driven to commit murder over the loss of it. Yet for every Gul Meena, Gastina, and Shafila Ahmed, victims of recent honor killings that have featured prominently in the Western press as evidence of barbaric "Muslim tribal practices," we pay little attention to our own barbaric crimes which we call "domestic violence" and shove under the rug. As the Violence Against Women Act languishes in Congress, the number of women murdered at the hands of men they knew intimately continues to rise. In the past decade, according to the FBI domestic violence statistics, 11,766 women have been killed by men close to them.

In *Honor*, Shafak shrewdly addresses the role of the press in shaping our perception of what some call a "global war on women," by looking at the issue through the murderer's eyes. In prison, İskender reports: "A journalist came to see me... She visited me a few times, seemed to be on my side. 'Please rest assured, Alex, I only want to understand the story, and increase awareness in society by writing about it.' How noble is that! Then she goes and pens the shittiest article. I was mucked around with as a child. It was all Mum's fault: as the elder son, I'd been spoiled by her. 'This is a typical case of Middle Eastern patriarchal tradition,' blah, blah, blah."

In a recent article entitled *"Kassandra Perkins Did Not Have to Die,"* the feminist blogger Jessica Valenti warned that Western journalists are quick to depict domestic murderers' behavior as aberrant -- he was an alcoholic, on drugs, he snapped thereby enabling a culture of violence

against women. "Because if you don't contextualize this violence as part of a structural misogyny you give credence to the myth that there was nothing anyone could have done to stop it."

İskender gets to the point when he says, "To all these people, I'm invisible. So is my mother. We're just a means of furthering their own ends."

In her TED talk, Shafak urged: "Imaginative literature is not necessarily about writing who we are or what we know or what our identity is about. We should teach our young people and ourselves to expand our hearts and write what we can feel. We should get out of our cultural ghetto and go visit the next one and the next. In the end, stories move like whirling dervishes drawing circles beyond circles. They connect all humanity regardless of identity politics and that is the good news."

Jenny McPhee's novels include [A Man of No Moon](#), [No Ordinary Matter](#), and [The Center of Things](#). She lives in London, but mostly she resides at www.jennymcphee.com.