

Thank you, it is a true pleasure for me to join you for this great festival in Berlin—a unique city with its history, memory, progressive vision and diversity.

I want to take you all back in time, if I may—not too far into the past, just a few decades. I want to take you to a specific moment in world history that was full of optimism and hope. After the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union, there was an expansion of confidence in the liberal order. Many people—including leading intellectuals, analysts, academics, journalists—believed that the triumph of liberalism was almost inevitable. Some even regarded it as “the law of history”.

Concurrently, there was a shared understanding among men and women of letters that, sooner or later, all societies would learn to become more modern, democratic, and globally integrated. Thanks to “the forces of globalization” we would all turn into one big global village. Via flows of capital and investments, of people and ideas, national borders would increasingly become *irrelevant*. The nation-state would lose its power to supranational organizations. In this new global order, nationalism would wither away, religions would evaporate, authoritarian regimes would have to crumble, and we would all be globally interconnected.

And here is the paradox: Many of these expectations and sanguine prophecies did come true—to a certain extent. But at the same time, and with an unexpected momentum, the exact opposite also happened. In other words, globalization paved the way for two clashing trends: internationalism versus tribalism. And today we are living in a liquid age in which these tides are pulling humanity in different directions. And we don’t know how to deal with so much complexity and uncertainty.

Only two decades have passed since that time of optimism and we have entered the age of pessimism. Humanity seems to swing from one extreme mood to another. From utter confidence to quick despair. It is as if there is an invisible emotional pendulum, back and forth. Today it is not only the EU that is in crisis. It is also the very notion of “democracy”.

I am a nomad. All my life has been a nomadic existence between cities and countries. Strasbourg, Ankara, Amman, Cologne, Istanbul, Boston, Michigan, Arizona, back to Istanbul and then London.... Wherever I go I listen to people. I ~~love to~~ listen to what they are saying but also *how* they are saying what they are saying—the kind of energy that they put into words. And wherever I go I observe an expansion of emotions: Anger, anxiety, apprehension, fear.... This is the age in which emotions guide and misguide politics, and politics guides and misguides emotions.

As I travel, East and West, I hear people talk about developing new models of “illiberal democracies” or the need for so-called “strong leaders” and I even hear, especially across the Middle East, educated people use terms such as “benevolent dictatorships”. “What we need is strong leadership with a smart cadre of technocrats and decent bureaucrats,” they say.

But there is no such thing as a benevolent dictatorship. There is no such thing as stability without democracy. Undemocratic nations are unhappy nations and unhappy nations cannot possibly be stable. Today there is disproportionately too much emphasis on economic progress and political stability because we are full of fears. And there is not enough emphasis on human rights, freedom of speech and pluralism and diversity because these are seen as “secondary matters”. This is a most dangerous trend.

I live in England, it has been almost 8 years since I moved to London. And I commute between Istanbul and London quite often. So I was in the UK before and during the Brexit referendum. I saw huge road signs that said in capital letters, “Turks are coming. Turkey is joining the EU, 80 million of them. So it is time for us to leave the EU.” Paraphrasing, this was one of the slogans used by the Leave Campaign. It was an illusion, of course. It was a lie. Everyone knew that Turkey was not joining the EU anytime soon, if ever. And even if that day comes, in an unforeseeable future that is now more distant than ever before, the movement of people can be restricted and controlled through adequate rules and regulations. But the Leave Campaign still used this incendiary rhetoric to increase the fear, the anxiety, the emotional confusion. And it worked.

I am not saying that everyone who voted Brexit was against Europe or Turkey’s membership etc. Not at all. We have to make a distinction between the people and the political rhetoric used during campaigns. What I am saying is that populist movements and populist demagogues exploit emotions, such as anxiety and fear, to their interests.

It made me sad to see that for many of my British or French or Dutch friends, the EU is mostly about ‘economy’ “finance” or “trade”. To me the EU is primarily about history, memory and shared values. It involves history because we must never forget the dangers of ultranationalism, religiosity and tribalism. It is about values because these values were not earned in a day. It took a long journey for humanity to arrive to these values, such as pluralism, freedom of speech, rule of law, women’s rights, LGBT rights. Coming from Turkey, I do know that these values cannot be taken for granted. Democracy is fragile. It is an ecosystem that needs to be nurtured every day of our lives.

If the world is changing, so must the literary world. Writers from wobbly and wounded democracies—such as Turkey, Pakistan, Egypt or Venezuela— never had and never do have the luxury of being apolitical. But something interesting is happening today: Nowadays more and more Western authors are feeling the same kind of urgency that non-Western authors have been feeling for so long. Doris Lessing famously called literature “analysis after the event.” Writers need time—to process, to digest, to write. But perhaps today there is so much immediacy and urgency that more and more authors across the world are feeling the need to respond “during the event”—while things are happening. In a paradoxical way, at a time when tribalism and populism are on the rise, culture could flourish. Culture and arts can become an open space to say the unsayable, to make the invisible visible, to generate an all-inclusive humanism and to turn empathy into a voice of resistance.

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I come from a land where words are heavy. Every Turkish writer, poet, journalist or intellectual knows that words can get one into trouble. Because of a poem, a novel, an interview, or even a tweet, we can be stigmatized in pro-government media, lynched on social media by trolls and possibly put on trial, detained, arrested or exiled. All because of words. We carry this knowledge at the back of our minds. As a result, there is widespread self-censorship among Turkey’s literati. This is not an easy subject to talk about. It is also embarrassing. Few people will publicly acknowledge it. But the truth is there is too much tension, intimidation, polarization in Turkey. Wherever these elements come together, it means there is self-censorship.

Turkey’s literary world might look modern, liberal, progressive. But underneath the make-up it can be just as patriarchal, sexist, homophobic as the rest of the society. One of the biggest and

deepest problems in authoritarian countries is the lack of solidarity among the opposition. In Turkey and in the Turkish diaspora this is visible. Writers attack writers, women against women, leftists against liberals or vice versa. I find it sad that there is so much anger and bitterness among Turkey's opposition. So much fragmentation. When the opposition is badly divided the only thing that benefits from this is the status quo. Similarly, when women are badly divided the only thing that benefits is patriarchy.

Born in Budapest at the turn of the last century, the British-Hungarian writer Arthur Koestler was no stranger to the dangers of authoritarianism. But it was the corroding effects of such states on the human soul that preoccupied him as much as an unbridled concentration of power. In one of his most haunting statements, Koestler said, "If power corrupts, the reverse is also true: persecution corrupts the victim, though perhaps in subtler and more tragic ways." So it is not a coincidence that in non-democratic countries, democrats cannot unite and end up quarrelling among themselves.

It's a difficult habitat for us storytellers. Novelists, just like hermits, are solitary creatures. When our books are published we find ourselves catapulted into the public space, giving talks, signing copies. But we'd rather live inside our imaginary world, in our "Storyland"—a country without passports or borders. So as soon as we can, we go back to our loneliness. That is why it is a real challenge for introverted writers to turn into activists.

George Orwell analyzed the ways in which literature was damaged and diminished throughout history under Nazi Germany, fascist Italy or communist Russia. And forewarned future writers. He said, "Poetry might survive in a totalitarian age, and certain arts or half-arts, such as architecture, might even find tyranny beneficial, but the prose writer would have to choose between silence or death."

Over the years, ultranationalism, Islamism, sexism and authoritarianism have all been on the rise. Some people might see these as unrelated processes. I believe they are deeply interconnected. When authoritarianism escalates, so does nationalism. When nationalism spreads, so does sexism. It is not a coincidence that as Turkey became less democratic, violence against women increased.

For a proper democracy to exist you need more than the ballot box. You need separation of powers, rule of law, a diverse and free media, an independent academia, women's rights, minority rights and freedom of speech. Together with all these components a democracy can survive and thrive. If none of these components are present, except for the ballot box, that system cannot be called a democracy. At best, it can only be "majoritarianism." But at worst, it will turn into a dark, dull, dangerous form of authoritarianism.

Today Turkey has become the world's biggest jailer for journalists, surpassing China's sad record. Columnists, editors, literary editors, cartoonists have been kept in prison, waiting for months on end without even knowing what they are accused of. Thousands of academics have lost their jobs and many of them were sacked for signing a peace petition. How can it be a crime to sign a peace petition? In a rule of law, every individual is regarded as innocent until proven guilty. In Turkey, it is the opposite. People can be labelled "guilty" based on hearsay, and baseless accusations and then they are expected to prove their innocence. How?

I started my talk with the swing from optimism to pessimism, now I want to swing back to a bit of optimism. Because the truth is we need both. As Gramsci said it beautifully, we need the pessimism of the intellect and the optimism of the will.

We must never forget that the government and the people are not the same. Turkey has an amazingly dynamic, energetic civil society. In fact, as the latest referendum has shown, there are two Turkeys, in truth, competing, clashing, failing to coexist. Women, youth, minorities (ethnic, social & sexual), there are many democrats in Turkey whose voices we might not hear, but they do exist. It is important to support them. We can criticize authoritarian governments, and in my opinion, we should. But let us not isolate the people. Even the people who vote for those governments. Connect with the people.

We need stories and storytellers now more than ever before. Stories connect us, expand our cognitive flexibility, and help us to transcend artificial borders of religion, race, ethnicity, nationality. The world is messy enough today, no doubt, but a world that has lost empathy, imagination and nuances will be a much darker place.

The loss of democracy in Turkey holds important lessons for progressives everywhere. What happened over there could happen anywhere, even here. Hence allow me to go back and correct what I've said at the beginning. Not only Turkish or Pakistani or Egyptian writers, we have entered an age in which all of us, from all professions and walks of life, East and West, we all need to become more outspoken, more supportive of each other and more dedicated **activists**—activists for humanism, freedom of speech, pluralistic democracy and global solidarity.

Elif Shafak