



PEN International interview series marks International Women's Day 2017

8 March 2017

'It is the extraordinary legacy of women writers and journalists that inspire us at PEN to continue fighting the many barriers women writers still face. Whether that is censorship in the form of physical or emotional violence, a society that stereotypes and marginalizes them, or a publishing industry that still sees women earning less, publishing less, and being reviewed less than their male peers. This is a struggle that affects us all because everyone needs the stories, voices, and craft women writers have always offered – despite a huge number of challenges – in such abundance. The stories, rhythms, and power of women writers have created new worlds, both real and fictional, in which readers can lose and find themselves, glean inspiration to live more visibly and inhabit women's knowledge.'

PEN International is honoured to present this interview series marking International Women's Day 2017 as we speak to 3 women writers. Their individual contributions to the field are inspiring as each one has experienced trials and difficulties simply because they are women.'

Jennifer Clement
President, PEN International

Elif Shafak



When did you know that you wanted to be a writer?

I started writing at a very early age, when I was eight years old. Not because I wanted to be a novelist, I didn't even know that was a possibility. It was because I was a lonely child. I was an only child raised by a single mother and books opened new and undiscovered worlds to me. I loved those worlds. The decision to be a writer came around the time I was 18, which is when I started writing purposefully. So first came the love of books and then the decision to be a writer.

How have your experiences as a woman and your experiences as a writer collided?

In Turkey the literary world might seem very liberal, well-educated and westernised at first glance. But when you scratch the surface it's the same as the rest of Turkish society. In Turkey if you're a male writer you are first and foremost known as a writer but if you are a woman writer, first and foremost you are woman and then a writer. There is this gender lens in Turkish society that everything is seen through. Women writers are recognised when they're much older, but until then as a woman writer you are constantly belittled, ridiculed and looked down upon. It's much harder for women writers, journalists, poets, academics to get the same recognition as their male counterparts.

Has that been your experience?

Yes, that has been my experience. I was very young, 22, when my first collection of stories was published, and 23 when I published my first novel and I was mocked and ridiculed constantly. One of the biggest lesson I learned as a writer was around the time that *The Bastard of Istanbul* was published. I was attacked by the elite of Turkey's society, accused of being a traitor because I talked about the Armenian genocide. I understood then that elite of Turkey and the people of Turkey were very different. I came to discover that my book was being read by people from very diverse backgrounds. The book gained popularity through word of mouth rather than a marketing campaign. Someone would read it and give it to a friend, who would give it to their aunt who would give it to their son who would give it to their colleague – people were sharing my book. This was so inspiring to me at a time when I was being attacked by the political and literary elite. And the positive feedback and love I received from the readers was amazing. I am not an elitists' writer, I am reader's writer and through the art of storytelling I feel connected to readers, which is very important to me.

A lot of women writers that PEN has worked with have faced threats of violence or experienced violence, which is another form of censorship. How do gender roles as perceived in society impact the topics you feel you can write about and what the characters in your books can do? In other words, do you feel that gender roles can restrict writers and what they write about?

I think all of us in our daily lives are reduced to certain roles and identities no matter where we are in the world. But the beauty of fiction and art of story-telling is that you can be multiple people. I have always defended multiplicity; as a writer I have multiple personalities. I believe that a writer's pen must be bisexual, multi-faceted. It is a writer's job to ask the difficult questions, to challenge stereotypes and taboos, not to give answers, readers have to arrive at those answers themselves. The voices of minority communities and the 'other' always play a big role in my writing. I want to give a voice to people whose voices have been silenced. Because I have felt like the other so many times in my own life, including in my own motherland. I have a constant flow of empathy towards the other, both past and present. For me fiction is not necessarily autobiographical, I find that boring. What is much more intriguing is to occupy a different space, to be someone else. That is truly transcendental, that is real freedom.

Who was the first female character that you read that really inspired you and why?

There are so many because my reading has always been really eclectic. Growing up I read lots of Turkish books, but I also read lots of English, Russian and Spanish literature and all of these had a big impact on me.

When I was younger I loved *Little Women* and the character of Jo really spoke to me. Over time I discovered Jane Austen and George Elliot and I loved reading Gogol and Dostoevsky. And I vividly remember the first time I read Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*, it really blew me away.

Does story-telling have the power to challenge social injustice?

Absolutely. I think storytelling has the power to open up an inner space in all of us, and that space is so neglected in our lives. For example in Turkey I have readers from all backgrounds – leftists, secularists, Turks, Kurds, Jews, Greeks and people from very conservative backgrounds and women who wear the hijab. And many of us feel so restrained by different parts of our identity, particularly publically. But I have spoken to scores of readers from all these backgrounds who say to me that they cried when a gay character or an Armenian character in my books were hurt. So there's this real connection with the 'other' through my novels even if they don't profess similar views in public. I think that when we are alone and we can retreat into our inner space we become a little more open minded and a little more ready to empathise with stories that we may not necessarily recognise as our own.

But when we are in the company of others, when we are in groups or communities we become more closed, more ready to subscribe to the group narrative. Art, in whatever form it takes, opens up inner spaces in all of us and can ultimately change us.

What book should every girl read?

I think every girl should read constantly. Our favourite books should change over time. But the act of reading should be continuous, never ending, particularly if you want to be or are a writer.

Grace Mutandwa



When did you know that you wanted to be a writer?

I didn't wake up one day and say, 'Oh yes I want to be a writer.' What I do remember is that in junior school I wrote the most creative compositions in class and it made me happy. I think from a very early age if I was not reading I liked writing stories. Going into journalism just seemed like the most normal thing for me and eventually writing a novel and contributing to various books just felt very comfortable. I cannot put a place and date to the full realisation that I wanted to be a writer because all I know is that it is something I just slid into and I felt at home.

How have your experiences as a woman and your experiences as a writer collided?

I am confident in so many ways but as a woman and a writer sometimes I am not always sure that the story I have to tell has a readership. I battle with some of the stories inside me because I wonder if they are not "too woman" or "too revealing of my soul". I am at ease with my womanhood but struggle with how some of the women around me would relate to the stories I have locked up inside my heart and head. I find that I judge and criticise myself more harshly than I should and that makes me falter at times. I am a woman with an opinion and not scared to put it in the public domain and as a writer that fulfils me but does not necessarily satisfy some readers who believe truth should be reshaped or avoided in writing. As a woman what I write is analysed and criticised more by fellow women and ironically embraced by men. I have to work three times harder than male writers to prove that I can write stories that resonate with everyday life. I have to withstand the withering attacks of male privilege that seek to trivialise women's issues.

A lot of women writers for whom we have worked have faced threats of violence or experienced violence, which is another form of censorship. How do gender roles as perceived in society impact the topics you feel you can write about and what the characters in your books can do? In other words, do you feel that gender roles can restrict writers and what they write about?

I am a non-conformist. I am daring and curious. I am sensitive towards minority rights and sometimes I feel drawn to write more about issues that affect those whose rights are threatened. As a newspaper columnist I have written about gay rights and received death and "corrective rape" threats and insults via email but it has not scared me off speaking up about gay rights. I am currently working on a book whose main protagonist is a lesbian and I am quite certain when the book is eventually out I will be subjected to all sorts of threats and insults but I am too old to care and I believe in standing up for something. Women writers who are ambivalent about how they might be

perceived if they don't restrict themselves to the "nice and tame" roles demanded by patriarchy will most certainly have problems getting their characters to mimic real life. We live in a beautiful but dangerous, cruel, dirty, violent and sexually explosive world where things are not always black or white – there are grey areas and splashes of bold colour too. I find writing exciting and stimulating when I am true to myself and when I address the world frankly.

Who was the first female character that you read that really inspired you and why?

The late Florence Onyebuchi "Buchi" Emecheta in her autobiography *Head Above Water* inspired and motivated me to be a writer. Her character spoke to the sacrifices black African women have to make in foreign lands while struggling to meet cultural demands and expectations. She fought hard to remain true to her values but also made the tough decision to put her needs first. In an unforgiving patriarchal society that had (still has) a reach that followed her all the way to the United Kingdom, Buchi was way ahead of her time in the battle for space to grow and for equality. If she was here today, she would be in the trenches not just holding up the banner; "Women in the Changing World of Work: Planet 50-50 by 2030," but actively pushing the barriers that keep popping up in gender parity. Warm and soft, she exuded a strength of character that I admire.

Does story-telling have the power to challenge social injustice?

It does, especially if you believe that our words are powerful – they can make or break a person. We use words to build or destroy and in story-telling we both infuse and extract value. My father told me folk stories told to him by his parents when he was a child. They taught me about both the wise and foolish ways of man and the world. I learnt right from wrong from story-telling. In Africa we have a long tradition of instilling values of social justice through story telling. Sure, stories are told to entertain too but they always have a moral. Story-telling has the power to challenge social injustice and to encourage and nurture people on the importance of social justice in a democratic society.

What book should every girl read?

Definitely Ngaahika Ndeenda (I Will Marry When I Want) by Ngugi wa Thiong'o and the late Ngugi wa Mirii. Set in post-colonial Kenya this is a story whose narrative still holds true to some of the struggles post-colonial Africa is still facing. Navigating between tradition, Christianity, holding onto ancestral land and trying to embrace change brought on by urbanisation is an ongoing battle. The simmering tensions of political dissent and social classes still abound. Every girl should read *I Will Marry When I Want* at the start of their journey in creating a space for themselves in fighting for how resources are shared, decisions are made and where and how they should fit into social justice and governance issues. Every girl should read it and vow never to be invisible but to stand up and be heard.

Hanan al-Shaykh



When did you know that you wanted to be a writer?

My mother left us when I was five years old. I remember every time I would visit her I hid something of mine in her new home, so that the next time I visited I would assure myself that I had been there before and spent time with my mother. One day I stopped doing that, instead, I wrote my feelings and felt happy writing them. I thought; this is what I'd like to do. Write. At sixteen, I started sending articles to the newspaper. I was from a small, conservative neighbourhood and for a girl to be published was a big thing.

How have your experiences as a woman and your experiences as a writer collided?

Being a woman helped me. In Lebanon, I was rebelling against traditions, against my father and what he wanted me to be. I was rebelling against the war as well. It was a man's war and I was writing about my experiences of war as a woman. This was not common in the Arab world.

A lot of women writers with whom we have worked have faced threats of violence or experienced violence, which is another form of censorship. How do gender roles as perceived in society impact the topics you feel you can write about and what the characters in your books can do? In other words, do you feel that gender roles can restrict writers and what they write about?

It depends on the writer, but *I* was never restricted. Since I was fourteen, I've written whatever I've wanted. For example, with *The Story of Zahra* I couldn't find a publisher. They thought it was too explicit with rough language and rebellious politics. So I took the manuscript to a friend, who was a children's publisher, and told her I was going to throw it out the window (in those days you didn't have photocopies). My friend closed the window and told me, 'We're going to publish it, you and me.' That's what we did. Now, things have changed, there are many female writers from the Arab world who write about what they want.

Who was the first female character that you read that really inspired you and why?

I was inspired by Huda Sha'rawi. I read about her life in newspapers. She was the first woman who took off her veil in Egypt. Also, my neighbour, who was a tram conductor and an avid reader, knew I loved books and gave me the first translated book from English to Arabic: *Jane Eyre*.

I thought to myself, 'Oh my God, she says she's not beautiful.' How amazing! I had never known a character in a book in Arabic to speak that way.

Does story-telling have the power to challenge social injustice?

Definitely. I wrote *The Story of Zahra* and *Beirut Blues* about the civil war in Lebanon. When you saw the news, the war was about the fighting, but you never knew how the people felt — the human experience. Literature takes you by the hand and shows you the effect of war on individuals and on humanity. Books can help us understand each other and give us courage.

What book should every girl read?

I love *Housekeeping* by Marilynne Robinson. It's beautifully written. Also *1001 Nights*. The stories are juicy and they throb with humanity. They teach that each person in life has to have the right to live the way they want to live — and to be treated justly.