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# Border Crossings in the Life and Work of Turkish American writer Elif Shafak

Verena Laschinger\*<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>University of Erfurt – Germany

## Abstract

This presentation introduces the work and public persona of contemporary Turkish American writer Elif Shafak. In her appraisal of Sufi spirituality, I argue, Shafak assumes the role of a female dervish writer whose public persona and literary oeuvre are put in the service of promoting Sufi spirituality to non-Muslim American and European audiences. I read her work within the frameworks of both the transnational turn in American Studies and Islam as a transnational social movement, which due to the dynamics of social mobility and modernity is no longer exclusively a reference for those groups who are attached to a place, a territory and a tradition. Instead, Islam now "works as a horizontal social imaginary" all over Turkey, Europe, and the US (G'ule10-11). Having been raised in France, Turkey, Spain, Jordan, and Germany, "[m]igrations, ruptures and displacements have played a crucial role in [Shafak's] personal history" (Shafak cit. in Chancy 56). She experienced the benefits of a cosmopolitan upbringing paired with the discomforts of living in a linguistic gap. The latter she eventually learned to bridge by commuting between Turkish and English as her professional languages just as she was commuting between Arizona and Istanbul - "the two places on the surface of earth that couldn't be more different" (Shafak, "Politics of Fiction", n.p.). As part-time resident of the US, Shafak premiered in English with the *The Saint of Incipient Insanities* in 2004, thus joining "the growing group of international writers who write in English although it is not their mother tongue" (Oztabek-Avci 83). Originally written in English, she next published *The Bastard of Istanbul* in 2006 followed by *The Fourty Rules of Love* (2010), *Honour* (2012), and *The Architect's Apprentice* (2014). While some Turkish reviewers and readers considered her choice of English a "cultural betrayal", her transnational biography plus bilingualism made it possible for Elif Shafak to operate as the representative Turkish American writer despite or rather because of the criticism hauled at her by Turkish nationalists (Shafak cit. in Scharf n.p.). Already in her debut novel *Pinhan*, Shafak narrates the story of a hermaphrodite Sufi mystic. Highly complex in form, her 2003 novel *The Flea Palace* is modeled after the sema, the whirling dervish performance of the Mevlevi Sufi order, but doesn't readily lend itself to a promotional reading. In *The Fourty Rules of Love*, however, Shafak is straightforward in proposing Sufi mysticism as a gentle and spiritual version of Islam, which shares its core dogmas with Christian religions, to an American public deeply upset by radical Islamicist terrorism. Assuming the role of a writer ambassador, Shafak's work promotes interfaith dialogue in the spirit encouraged by US-based Turkish preacher Fethullah G'ulen: "Interfaith dialogue seeks to realize religion's basic oneness and unity, and the universality of belief. Religion embraces all beliefs and races in brotherhood, and exalts love, respect, tolerance, forgiveness, mercy, human rights, peace, brotherhood, and freedom via its Prophets" (G'ulen, "Interfaith" n.p.). G'ulen lives

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\*Speaker

as an exile in the US and was elected one of "the 100 most influential people in the world" by Time Magazine in 2013. The founder of the global G'ulen movement teaches a moderate form of Islam that is based on Sufism as "the spiritual dimension of Islam" (G'ulen, "Sufi", my translation, n.p.). G'ulen moved from being President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's close ally to archenemy. In 2016, he was accused of plotting to overthrow the government in Turkey.