

Elif Shafak: 'We are not rootless. We are each other's roots'

The novelist on the deep human need for a homeland and how storytelling can help to unite people in an age of displacement.

I want to begin with five simple words: "You can't go home again." Imagine, for a moment, this being your reality. What would it feel like to be severed from the only life you have known since the day you were born; separated from your friends, your neighbours, your loved ones and the land you have always called your own; what would it feel like to be cast into a complete unknown?

This is precisely what so many people across the world are experiencing right now. According to the United Nations refugee agency, at the end of June 2025, there were more than 117 million people worldwide who have been forcibly displaced due to persecution, conflict, violence and human rights violations. What this means is that one in every 70 people on Earth has been left with no other option than to abandon their home. Of these, the majority have been relocated within their own countries, hence they are not called refugees. The number of refugees therefore is estimated to be around 42 million, more than 40% of whom are children.

Into this complicated picture we need to add another factor: the climate crisis, which is primarily the story of water. Today, out of the most 10 water-stressed nations, seven are in the Middle East and north Africa. Our rivers are dying. In merely a few years, Kabul is expected to become the first capital to be left entirely without water.

Today, the overwhelming majority of refugees and asylum seekers – up to 86% – are being hosted by the global south. The nations with far less economic power are the ones carrying most of the weight.

It is the age of three As: angst, anger and AI. Across east and west, there is an anxiety that cuts deep across age, place and community. Multiple global surveys show that the world is becoming an angry planet. And, as for AI and social media platforms, through algorithms, clickbait and echo chambers, they often exploit and aggravate the levels of emotional frustration, deepening the rifts.

The displacement crisis is accelerating and here to stay. In order to address it, we need to pay attention not only to politics, finance, technology or economy, but also to something essential for human existence: the art of storytelling.

Without stories, people are mere numbers. Human beings are turned into aloof, abstract generalisations, pushed into dualities of "us" versus "them". Our brains are not equipped to grasp the difference between, say, "5,000 people dead" and "50,000 people dead". Only when we know someone's story are we truly able to understand their sorrows, joys, dreams, which are not so different from our own, and perhaps come to realise, in the end, that the person we may have long regarded as "the other" is, in fact, our brother, our sister.

The American author Thomas Wolfe was born in 1900 and lived through a time of immense social, political and economic breakdown, encompassing the First World War, 1929 stock market crash and the Great Depression. Wolfe was gifted, or cursed, with total recall: an extraordinary ability to remember the past with photographic accuracy. He was not only a fiction writer but a memory keeper, a witness of his time, and when he died, he left behind

more than 4,000 pages of unpublished notes and unfinished stories. Out of these boxes of papers came a novel that was published posthumously as *You Can't Go Home Again*. Towards the end of the book it says:

"They did not know that you can't go home again. America had come to the end of something, and to the beginning of something else. But no one knew what that something else would be, and out of the change and the uncertainty and the wrongness of the leaders grew fear and desperation."

The great poet Maya Angelou read and enjoyed Wolfe's novel but there was one thing she did not like about it: the title. She believed that one could never leave home: that whatever happens, no matter how far we are forced to migrate or how utterly unfamiliar the new environments we are catapulted into, we always take home with us: "One carries the shadows, the dreams, the fears and the dragons of home under one's skin," Angelou writes, "at the extreme corners of one's eyes and in the gristle of one's earlobe."

So, on the one hand, you cannot go home again. It is a rupture. On the other hand, you cannot ever leave home, because it will always come with you wherever you go – so much so that its absence will become a presence. I believe every refugee, every immigrant, every exile, every person from a minority background with uprooted ancestry knows what I am talking about.

As an immigrant author in self-exile for so long, as a novelist who has not been back in my beloved Istanbul for more than 11 years, I carry the serpentine streets, the smells, the spices, the seagulls, the simit vendors of Istanbul with me. The old city often seeps into my dreams, my pauses, my smiles, my tears. It is just there, sitting in my chest all the time. I don't know how else to explain this melancholy, but I feel its emotional weight regardless.

At the same time, alongside this sadness, this fractured and fragmented existence, this sense of loss, there is also a cultural enrichment, a possibility for renewal, a spiritual and intellectual growth that comes from meeting fellow human beings from all backgrounds. I have built a new home – both in the UK and in the English language. And perhaps, for every storyteller, there is one unvarying motherland: Storyland.

Why is "home" so essential and existential for humans? The ancient Greeks had a specific word for "homecoming", *nostos*. They were very fond of this idea, and the return of the hero to his homeland was a favourite theme. There is another word closely linked to *nostos*, which is *nostimon*, and it means "sweet" or "pleasant". Homer tells us in *The Odyssey*: "There is nothing dearer to a man than his own land."

The word *nostos* is also related to nostalgia. Inside this concept, in addition to *nostos*, there is *algea*, which means hurt, pain, grief. So nostalgia is the painful longing for a place left behind, for something we have lost but someday hope to find. This is why the idea of "going back to origins" can be intertwined with the idea of returning to a better time, a bygone past, whether real or imaginary. This mode of speaking manifests itself also in the political lexicon – for example, when we talk of regimes suffering from "imperial nostalgia".

Let's concentrate on the positive aspect of *nostos*. This sentiment is so important in ancient Greek culture that when Odysseus is offered immortality and eternal bliss by the goddess Calypso, he rejects the offer and instead chooses to return to his homeland, Ithaca. Odysseus is the hero of fascinating adventures, he has achieved extraordinary things,

travelled far and wide, but in the end, he yearns to return to his craggy, humble Ionian island because it is home.

Here, Homer has observed and discerned something crucial about human beings: a universal truth that many populist demagogues and agitators, sometimes deliberately, sometimes out of sheer ignorance, fail to comprehend today. Nobody wants to leave their home, and nobody will leave home unless they have no other option.

I was born in Strasbourg, France, and moved to Ankara, Turkey, with my mother at a young age after my parents separated. From then onwards, I was raised by a traditional grandmother – a loving, compassionate matriarch in an extremely conservative and patriarchal environment. I was an only child and a very lonely child. My friends were imaginary beings. Books became my companions. Before I turned 10, I moved to Spain, where I had to learn both Spanish and English quickly.

I enrolled in an international school in Madrid, where I was the only Turkish student in my year. One day, a Turkish terrorist attempted to assassinate the Pope, shooting and severely injuring Jean Paul II while the pontiff was greeting a crowd. There was worldwide shock and horror, and I was appalled like everyone else. I did not expect to be attacked, lambasted and bullied the next morning when I walked into the classroom. “What’s wrong with you people?” said one boy. “You lot don’t even have respect for a holy man? You are all criminals!”

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I didn’t know what to say. I was a clumsy, shy, angst-ridden introvert already finding it hard to keep up with the raucous outbursts and extroverted energy levels of my classmates, but now I felt rooted to the spot.

What should I say in response? Should I say: “No, we are nice people, good people. You haven’t met my grandmother.” Or should I say instead: “What’s this got to do with me?”

Should I agree to be regarded as part of something larger than myself or insist on being seen as just silly, little me. What difference did this nuance make anyway when others perceived me through the lens of a national/ethnic/religious category.

Of that uncomfortable and unsettling day, these words stayed with me:

“You lot. You are all criminals...”

Until then, I thought I was just my own confused, struggling, solitary self. I didn’t know I was part of a collective noun until someone called me: “You lot.”

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Today, we are constantly pushed into various artificial, frozen dichotomies. We are told that one can either choose to care about the safety and security of their country, or defend totally open borders without any checks. Either you are a patriot who loves their homeland or you are in the opposite camp, without much thought for your own people or land.

We do not have to accept this binary imposition. Caring deeply about the future and wellbeing of your motherland is not an obstacle for caring about the future and wellbeing of humanity or vice versa. We are almost never encouraged to think of ourselves as “containing multitudes”, in the words of Walt Whitman. Never in terms of multiple belongings. Something fluid and changing, expanding, more plural – like ripples spreading across water.

It wasn't always like this: going all the way back to the ancient Greek philosopher Diogenes of Sinope, there have been thinkers for whom love for the local and love for the universal were inextricably connected. For Immanuel Kant, the foundational German thinker of the Enlightenment, cosmopolitanism was an essential quality for a more meaningful life. He passionately believed that there has to be an all-encompassing respect for the dignity of every human being.

A moral cosmopolitan is someone who defends the equality of all humans, regardless of race, class, gender etc. Kant argues that empathy – active empathy, not dormant – is a responsibility, an ethical duty.

Kant also believed that civic cosmopolitanism and patriotism are not at loggerheads but can go hand in hand. In her brilliant book *Kant and Cosmopolitanism: The Philosophical Ideal of World Citizenship*, the scholar Pauline Kleingeld shows that he “goes so far as to say that patriotism is a cosmopolitan duty”.

We do not have to accept the rhetorical dualities imposed on us. We can love our own culture, our ancestral heritage, our country, feel an affinity with our compatriots, and at the same time, deeply and genuinely care for humanity. I am not expecting everyone to feel this way. But if enough of us do so, we can keep the flame of peace, coexistence and empathy alive, even in the midst of the winds and storms of this turbulent century.

Hannah Arendt is celebrated for her writing on the origins of totalitarianism, but less known are her sentiments on the notion of home and belonging. Arendt wrote eloquently about what she perceived as “homelessness on an unprecedented scale, rootlessness to an unprecedented depth”. She also said: “We refugees, we do not like to be called this name.”

Whatever we call ourselves – refugees, immigrants, exiles, newcomers, natives, patriots, locals – our stories and our destinies are profoundly intertwined. We are not rootless. We are each other's roots.

Algorithms continue to drive us apart into clashing certainties and warring tribes. But inside Storyland – where there are no passports, no frontiers, no dualities and no hierarchies – we can find one another, listen to unheard stories, rehumanise those who have been dehumanised. We can gently but passionately heal the wounds, mend what has been broken, and remember that we are all citizens of one humankind.

A longer version of this essay was delivered as the inaugural Counterpoints Lecture at London's Southbank Centre last month. This edited version of Elif Shafak's lecture was first published in The Observer on 5 July.