

The Turkish Lover

A Memoir

Esmeralda Santiago

For Discussion

1. What differences and what similarities do you note between Santiago's relationship with her mother and her relationship with Ulvi? To what extent might her childhood and upbringing have led to her relationship with Ulvi? To what degree might all our relationships have roots in our early family lives?
2. Why do you think Ulvi chose Santiago as his lover? What traits of hers and what traits of his might have governed his choice?
3. In what ways might the mysteriousness of Ulvi's character and activities have attracted Santiago (accustomed as she was to the openness, outspokenness, and turbulence of her family)? How does that mysteriousness complicate her undertaking to narrate and explain their relationship?
4. Santiago writes: "What I loved most about the middle of Midtown, Forty-second Street between Third and Eighth Avenues, was its transient nature." (p. 74) In what ways did Santiago herself share this "transient nature"? What role did transience play in her life, the lives of her mother and father, and Ulvi's life?
5. Discussing reincarnation and the lessons of Buddhism with Santiago, Jacqueline remarked that "our meeting was no coincidence . . . we have a lesson for each other." (p. 107) In what ways might we all have lessons for one another? At what points in your life have you sensed that you have exchanged lessons with another person? What were those lessons?
6. How might the relationship between Alma, a Puerto Rican American, and Bill, a Japanese American, reflect both the problems and possibilities experienced by cross-ethnic couples in the United States?
7. In response to Santiago's news that her former boyfriend, Jürgen, has called from jail proposing marriage, Ruth remarked: "You Puerto Ricans are so romantic." (p. 114) What do you think she means by that? To what extent do you think her remark was accurate and to what degree a reflection of a stereotypical view? What part did stereotypes play in Santiago's life, and what part do they play in her book?

8. How do Santiago's relationship with Ralph Ortiz and her confrontations with various Puerto Rican protesters illustrate the dynamics of ethnic activity and representation in the United States? How might we reconcile Santiago's view of herself as a groundbreaker at the Museum of Modern Art and the protesters' view of her as "a sellout, a traitor to my people, and a token . . ."? (p. 136)

9. On her way to Paradise Island to meet Ulvi, Santiago became "anguished by the inescapable responsibility for my own life." (p. 141) How did she arrive at a recognition of such a responsibility, and to what extent did she succeed, or fail, in acting upon that recognition? What does "the inescapable responsibility for my own life" mean to you, and how would you define its causes and consequences? Why is such a responsibility inescapable?

10. What did Santiago learn from the women—and the men— of various ethnic and socioeconomic groups with whom she came into contact? To what extent did these women and men expand Santiago's self-identity as a Puerto Rican woman and her understanding of the wider culture in which she lived and worked?

11. Of Ulvi in Lubbock, Texas, Santiago writes, "It astounded him that Americans were so ignorant about the rest of the world and so optimistic about the United States' place in it." (p. 163) To what degree do you think Americans today display that same ignorance and optimism? How have recent events affected our understanding of other nations and cultures and our sense of America's place in the world?

12. After the scarifying ride in neutral down the mountain from the Santa Fe National Forest lookout, Ulvi assured Santiago, "I was in control, I promise you." (p. 175) How would you explain Ulvi's certainty that he is always in control and his need to be?

13. What does the phrase *el que dirán* mean, and how did it affect Santiago's life as a young girl and as a young woman? How and when was she able to arrive at the realization that *el que dirán* didn't matter? In what ways might each of us act under the constraints of *el que dirán*?

14. "It was less painful to be Chiquita for him [Ulvi] and Essie at work," writes Santiago, "than to expose Esmeralda to the disdainful gaze of those who would judge me." (p. 209) Why might that have been so? What were the main traits and characteristic behaviors and appearances of Santiago's four "me's" — Esmeralda, Negi, Chiquita, and Essie? Why did she reserve "the real Esmeralda in a quiet secret place no one could reach . . ." (p. 210), and with what consequences? To what degree did Santiago succeed in integrating her four identities?

15. When Ulvi suggested a winter vacation in Puerto Rico, Santiago remarked that she would want to see her family; and Ulvi told her not to include him. "With those words," Santiago writes, "I saw Ulvi for what he was, a stop along the journey." (p. 272) Why do you think it took Santiago more than five years to realize that "there was no future for us as a couple"?

16. Santiago writes that the only Turkish words she learned from Ulvi were *Inshallah* (if Allah wills it) and *kismet* (destiny, or fate). (p. 290) In what ways and to what degree was Santiago's life determined by the will of God and by *kismet*? To what extent did she simply allow her life

just to happen, or to make conscious choices and decisions? She later writes that Ulvi “attributed the constant failure to achieve his goals on bad luck. I didn’t believe in luck, and blamed failure on personal flaws, in myself and in others.” (p. 296) How might we reconcile Santiago’s reliance on kismet on the one hand and her rejection of the concept of luck on the other?

17. Santiago refers several times to the fact that she missed her family and the excitement of life in a Puerto Rican household. Yet when her mother and younger siblings moved back to Puerto Rico, she lost track of them. How might we explain her failure to maintain contact with Mami and her brothers and sisters? How might we explain her alternating rejection of and yearning for her family?

18. Recalling Ulvi’s appearance at her final “Song of Songs” performance, Santiago writes, “He believed I was his creation, but I had created myself under his protection, not in his image.” (p. 315) How accurate is this as an assessment of her “creation” of herself? How suitable is the phrase “under his protection”? How would you describe Ulvi’s role in Santiago’s ultimate creation of herself?

19. What examples of racism, sexism, and feminism does Santiago examine and illuminate?

20. Award-winning filmmaker and author Frances Negrón-Muntaner has written of Santiago: “Perhaps Santiago’s main contribution to U.S. literature is placing a subject not even considered American nor socially meaningful— Puerto Rican women—at the center of the American story” and that one of Santiago’s most powerful themes “is how to protect the inside, which is represented as the Puerto Rican soul, from the outside, the forces of assimilation.” How does *The Turkish Lover* substantiate those statements?

About the Author

Esmeralda Santiago is the author of two other highly acclaimed memoirs, [*The Turkish Lover*](#) (“Fascinating and inspiring, Santiago is a born storyteller” —*New York Times Book Review*) and [*Almost a Woman*](#), which was made into a film for PBS’s Masterpiece Theatre. She has also written a novel, *América’s Dream*, and has co-edited two anthologies of Latino literature. She lives in Westchester County, New York.