

## LITERAL MEANING AND INDIRECT SPEECH ACTS IN ELIF SHAFAK'S NOVEL *THE BASTARD OF ISTANBUL*

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*Abstract: The substance of Elif Shafak's Bastard of Istanbul is life itself. According to literary critics' pertinent voices, the author offers us an extravagant tale of Istanbul and Arizona, a human comedy where the characters leap off the pages to walk with us or sit beside us. They belong to all categories (brave, silly, intellectuals, dupes). Modernity and tradition are wisely and artistically intermingled. Even if orientalism as a concept may lead to an artificial boundary between East and West or to cultural differences between two worlds, particular attributes are associated either to 'them' or 'us'. My approach and the analysis I undertook to a short fragment of the novel, are indebted to the semantic-pragmatic perspective: Zeliha's appearance in the big city's rainy atmosphere, her way of thinking and behaving, as well as the other characters' language are an opportunity for the novelist to create a world that enlarges the understanding of some magical, mythical and profoundly humane revelations.*

*Past and present are inventively entwined in an exceptional literary and linguistic feast.*

*Keywords: attitude, hearer, level, message, speaker*

1. Between the freedom of thinking and behaving and the acknowledgement of being famous, any writer assumes the responsibility of writing in his/her own way or style.

Elif Shafak is considered to be nowadays a distinctive voice in the contemporary world literature, writing both in Turkish and English.

*The Bastard of Istanbul*, the novel which tells the story of an Armenian and a Turkish family, through the eyes of a woman, is Shafak's second novel in English and the best selling book of 2006 in Turkey. It brings Istanbul not only as a city but also as a symbol, comparable to a colourful Russian doll and at the same time a hall of mirrors where nothing is what it appears or seems. What is really challenging is Shafak's particular attitude and philosophy when referring to the two poles that cannot be either ignored or minimized: East and West. She considers them 'imaginary ideas, ones that can be de –imagined and re-imagined. East and West can mix and 'in a city like Istanbul, they mix intensely, incessantly, amazingly'[Migrations: A Meridians Interview with Elif Shafak; 2004].

2. The perception of the Orient in the novel *The Bastard of Istanbul* implies migrations, ruptures, and displacements. It contains, no doubt, some obvious elements from Shafak's personal history. Between Jalal (a punishing and masculine God) and Jamal (a beautiful and feminine God) the perception of the Orient is relational, depending on the normative value set established by unknown rules and many authorized or simply different attitudes and behaviours: the European world is seen as clever, witty, diplomatic, while the Oriental world is a romanticized human nature one, where the pure human nature prevails and there is no evil in the society.

Orientalism, as a concept may have led to:  
an artificial boundary between East and West;

a cultural difference between two worlds;

particular attributes assorted to ‘them’ or ‘us’;

People in the two ‘worlds’ are defined through qualities and defaults:  
Europeans: active, natural, civilized, sophisticated;

Orientals: lazy, irrational, uncivilized, crude;

Turkey’s position between these two poles seems to be similar to the Bosphorus Bridge – the bridge in between. This in-betweenness brought Balkanism not necessarily as a subspecies of Orientalism, but as a literary image of the ‘other’. It may suggest both a frozen image and a designation. If the Balkans are seen as the ‘other’ of Europe – semideveloped, semicolonial, semicivilized, semioriental- they can also be the West of the East.

Reductionism and stereotyping made the Orient ‘the escape dream through which’:  
Orientals appeared as inferior to the far-sighted Europeans;

Europeans discovered the Orient and the quest for geographical knowledge;

‘Balkanization’ became synonym with the tribal, the backward, the primitive, the barbarian. Still, Orientalism of the 20th century acquired a new dimension: the movement from the far away past to a much expected future meant motion and evolution, from simple to complex, from primitive to cultivated. The message of the books written under the influence of this concept displayed characters’ active participation in everyday life and a more liberal attitude towards different topics. The authors that produced books on Orientalism and Balkanization (and among them Elif Shafak is a dynamic presence) showed a stronger link to philology as a social science.

3. Why did I choose Elif Shafak’s novel *The Bastard of Istanbul*? The answer might be found in the author’s special personality: a writer displaying ‘multiple selves’, struggling to unify different ethnicities, races, classes, religions. According to Elif Shafak’s own words ‘women living in other parts of the world distinguish themselves through a different lexicon, a distinct terminology between ‘colour’ and ‘race’ [Migrations: A Meridians Interview with Elif Shafak, 2004]. Another very powerful reason for having chosen the novel *The Bastard of Istanbul* as a resource corpus for my analysis is the author’s new approach to language use. On one hand *literal meaning* represents the starting point of a neutral attitude that might create enclaves responding to an imposition of a different lexicon, a distinct terminology. On the other hand, taking into account the permanent change of the writer’s focus on different characters, in (a) different context(s), the *literal meaning* becomes an *internal deeper meaning* which depends on the *message sender’s* perception.

Elif Shafak admits that ‘within every minority there are layers’ and hierarchies, power patterns and other factors that can influence the *message*. Among these factors ‘age’ in a Muslim society, attracts power and autonomy. ‘Age’ as a common denominator brings together several categories: being a young virgin, getting married, having a child, being a grand-mother. Such a reality is linked both to patriarchal ideologies, corporality and sexuality.

The novel *The Bastard of Istanbul* is set in United States and Turkey (it has as an opening stance the image of a street in Istanbul). The writer’s interest is divided between two

families: a Turkish family living in Istanbul and another family which is Armenian and live in America. The novel seems to be populated more than other writings, with women. Mustafa, the major male character, a Turkish man and always at the center of the plot, is viewed more as an enigma than as a character. Still, Mustafa's secret – he raped his younger sister who will give birth to a girl, whose name is not only symbolic but also meant to be a bridge between two worlds – Asya – will be finally revealed. Asya, Zeliha and Mustafa's daughter is born in a family where the daily living between the female eccentricity, as a norm and the young generation's desire to unite two worlds and two families. And here a long and a productive parenthesis can be opened when referring to the two families – one Turkish living in Istanbul and the other one in San Francisco, as part of the American diaspora – the readership enters a very old, denied and yet not solved conflict: the one between the Turks and the Armenians, marked by massacres and deportations. This conflict may be felt in the background of the novel among some other important themes: religious cultural belonging, masculinity and femininity, teaching the right from the wrong.

According to a well known reviewer [Unsworth, B: 2007], a novel is first of all a structure of words. In the case of *The Bastard of Istanbul*, the structure is a means for conveying a very powerful message, trying to educate the masses and reshape stereotypes. The reader can also feel satire mingled with poetry, phrases that are considered witty or even aphoristic, recalling a storyteller in the oral tradition. The device of the long-delayed information is risen to a normal one, together with the caustic, humorously tolerant tone.

The title of the novel is a synthesis between a past trauma and its effects in the present, a symbol of continuity and reconciliation.

4. The *literal meaning* - recognized, to some degree, as a problematic one, can be perceived, as a direct transfer and a unique, reversible and complete selection.

How do people understand utterances when the *intended meaning* can be at odds with the *literal meaning* of these utterances? My aim is to analyze these types of meaning from a pragmatic perspective in both direct and indirect speech acts.

Distinguishing between what is *said* (what the words mean) and what is *implicated* (what people mean by the words they utter or write), the two above types of meaning are leveled.

*Utterance-type meaning* is considered to be a predictable type, having a regular inferred interpretation across a range of contexts. The abrupt beginning of *The Bastard of Istanbul*, may be perceived as an idiomatic, philosophical verdict: "Whatever falls from the sky above, thou shall not curse it. This includes rain". It is the writer's voice and, at the same time, it is a general utterance, very near a general truth. The second paragraph continues the same stylistic 'path' which includes the development of the first philosophical verdict: "You (again a general "you" that could be replaced by "one") should never ever utter profanities against whatever the heavens might have in store for us". This second paragraph introduces the name of an important character (can we consider it the main female character as she is the one that will give birth to the child that might explain the title of the book?).

The performative nature of the language is sometimes encoded. *-Ing* forms of verbs like *walking, rushing, swearing, hissing, stalking, sticking* that follow each other as the participants in a car race, can be taken as grammatical objects that describe the state of an

affair at a particular moment, in a city that may be called a *she-city*. Istanbul is an active actor and challenges the character that was introduced to the reader: Zeliha walks, rushes, swears (because she is late to an appointment).

Elif Shafak's prose is driven to destroy established structures, congealed stereotypes, in order to break boundaries. More than that, the layout of the page is meant to draw the reader's attention when the authoress retains in bold characters what she thinks to be the Golden Rule of Prudence or the Silver Rule of Prudence for an Istanbulite Woman: "never respond" and "do not lose nerve". These two Rules have at least one common denominator: the negative injunction which is not only the grammatical image of forbidness but also the formal aspect for what can be considered a strict recommendation.

The first pages of the novel should be understood as an opened beginning. More than that, they display what can be called the 'Westernization process'[Migrations: A Meridians Interview with Elif Shafak:2004, p.71] and which is to be read as 'Turkish modernization'. Even if 'the same process was experienced differently, by different women', mothers and grand-mothers are venerated as the embodiment of a culture that showed already its solid roots. That is why, when Zeliha broke the Golden Rule of Prudence, as she cursed at her harasser, the intruded force of an utterance like:

"What's wrong with you, creep?"

cannot be calculated without taking into account the context: a young and attractive woman walking in the rain, is followed and verbally harassed by a taxi driver, in a city where the male-female relationship and cultural background is still debatable. The formal properties of the sentences (we face interrogative sentences from both characters):

a. "Can't a woman walk in peace in the city?" (Zeliha)

b. "But why walk when I could give you a ride?" (the cabdriver)

prove the importance of the functional properties. The *literal meaning* is a component which shows its stability in what, from a grammar perspective, can be a *tag question*:

c. "You wouldn't want that sexy body to get wet, *would you?*"

Besides the fact that, for a taxi driver the correctness of the above question is a wonder, the syntagm 'that sexy body' sends to the image of a universal woman. Elif Shafak is, no doubt, influenced, in her writings, by the American society she lives in. We deal here with a 'cabdriver' and later on with another 'driver', 'a driver of a Toyota'. The two men are unequally presented, through Zeliha's eyes and the feelings she experiences. The physical portrait of the cabdriver is rendered through his teeth that were 'surprisingly white and flawless'. The indirect speech act which continues Zeliha's observing moment, made her wonder 'if they were porcelain capped'. The illocutionary force of the indirect speech act ['...and she could not help wondering if they were porcelain capped'] is less strong than the above questions/replies (a,b,c examples) the two characters changed.

The a,b,c examples illustrate the assertion that 'meaning is not something which is inherent in the words alone' [Thomas, J:1995, p.22], having been produced within the context of utterance (we can admit that the dialogue is 'catalyzed' by the particular social, linguistic and attitudinal environment, the writer brings to the reader's involvement in the novel's plot). According to Thomas, it is quite rare for a speaker to formulate an utterance so that the speaker cannot have any reply. *Meaning in interaction* is the view of pragmatics that takes

into account all types of contributions the speaker, the hearer, the context and the utterance itself may contribute to the shaping of meaning.

5. Using direct or indirect speech acts is a matter of *choice* and the same frequent questions can appear: *how*, *when* and *why* do people use and indirect speech act in preference to a direct one? Answering such questions is to weigh the power or the influence of the speaker over the hearer, to understand if there is a social distance between the speaker and the hearer, the cross-cultural impact on both speaker and hearer, relative rights and obligations both the speaker and the hearer may have. Sentences are generally analyzed both as syntactic structures and semantic representations Their formal properties make the difference between affirmative and interrogative structures:

- i. "...she felt ....desensitised ....as if anesthetized."
- ii. " Could this be why she had had absolutely no interest in fighting the city today?"

Specialists in pragmatics react differently towards indirectness: it can be a relative transparency or opaqueness of *meaning* that appears at the utterance level and at the level of what is implied. There is, however, a correlation between the degree of indirectness of an utterance and the amount of 'work' a hearer can do in order to reach the level of the *propositional meaning*.

Elif Shafak knows what her characters think and even do innerly:

" As she ran, Zeliha swore at the municipal administration, past and present...."

The writer addresses the reader – with a general 'you' making him/her a participant to the *propositional meaning*: "*You* might not be fond of the rain, *you* did not have to be, but under no circumstances should you cuss at anything that came from the skies...."

The functional properties sentences have, make the difference between a negative order like "Don't call me wretched!", coming from "an iridescent bumper sticker glittering on the back of the cab" and an assertion like " The wretched too have a heart".Such a statement can introduce the concept of the *co-text* which is the linguistic context as opposed to the situational context. The above two statements can be taken as *adjacency pairs*, related sentences belonging to two different speakers (even if in the case of Elif Shafak's novel the two sentences are the writer's personal way of making herself present in the plot). The paradox here is that the human voice is only presupposed as the two sentences are 'uttered' by an object – the bumper sticker.

Using indirectness in the above example was obviously the writer's desire to render the whole context more interesting and why not, to increase the force of the message. The utterance level shows how suggestive is, in fact, the writer/speaker's voice when making choices between what is uttered and what is meant: "Rain for us [...] it's about getting angry". In certain situations the *hearer* had to decide how to interpret the force of the message and consequently how to react:

"...it was still pouring and Zeliha had little, if any, forgiveness in her heart."

The collaborative nature of the speech acts, at least, to a certain degree, does not need to be proved:

" The cabdriver laughed, the horn of the Toyota behind, blared again, the rain hastened on and several pedestrians tsk-tsked in unison...."

(the above example is meant to show that it is not sufficient to ‘enter’ the ‘group work’

that was going to begin, unless the participants to the traffic jam in the rain accepted it)

Even if the *hearer* can be taken as a new *speaker*, the succession of the speech acts is essential for the participants to the speech act. The *hearer* can play a role in assigning pragmatic value to the *speaker*’s words. In such a way, the utterance has the potential to become either an offer or a question.

Utterances serve to prepare the ground for making a request. They cannot be judged in isolation. The *speaker* might ‘manipulate’ certain factors which are linked to the context. Jenny Thomas[1995:p.203] underlines the idea that “meaning is not given, is *constructed* (at least in part) by the hearer”, being the result of hypothesizing and testing, of using probability and likelihood:

“Could this be why she had had absolutely no interest in fighting the city today, or the rain for that matter?”

For the other areas of major importance in pragmatics (motivation, indeterminacy of meaning and of pragmatic force), the interpretation of utterances, the mechanisms of informal meaning are still under the analyst’s intuition or participants’ retrospection:

“That must be why she continued to curse at the top of her voice.”

Such examples may lead to additional sources of evidence that are closely interrelated and they combine the effect of an utterance on the *hearer* with the *speaker*’s commentary. Their functional properties make the difference between a negative order like:

“Don’t call me wretched!”

and a statement like:

“The wretched too have a heart”

(the paradox here is that the human voice is only suspected as the replies belong to an

“iridescent bumper sticker, glittering on the back of the cab”).

6. As syntactic structures, sentences have a subject, a predicate-tensed verb + a noun phrase (grouped as constituents):

“The cabdriver *laughed*.”

S + V

“...Zeliha *had been born* with frizzy raven-black hair”

S + V + Prep. Ph

The semantic representation is displayed either through separate words in:

“Like a Virgin”

(in Madonna’s song coming from a very near background)

or words’ combination in:

“...She...sighed a conflicted sigh.”

The context may do the work when we decide what is meant by what is said. If Zeliha unleashed another profanity against the rain (breaking another unbreakable rule from Petite-Ma’s rigid code and thus producing ‘sheer blasphemy’) that meant the character’s decision



(Zeliha's decision) to fight everything coming against her will and desires. The writer concludes in a very short, still complete sentence:

“Zeliha had no time for regrets.”

Words and sentences might make a less important contribution to the understanding of the whole situation. The ‘rain motive’ returns like a leit-motive:

“ Rain, for us [Istanbul's inhabitants?] isn't necessarily about getting wet.

The conclusion cannot come in one sentence. It is something that comes from outside the characters' thoughts:

“ It's mud and chaos and rage.”

and it is added progressively:

“ And struggle. It's always about struggle”

Still, what really makes “the salt and pepper” of Shafak's style is her characters' inner thoughts where she could mean what she really believed and was able to tell to herself:

“ .....she had promised herself that if she was enough of an imbecile to throw a bunch of money....for yet another umbrella....then she deserved to be soaked to the bone.”

7. From the above analysis I can draw the following conclusions:

meaning is a relative phenomenon;

a stronger meaning is attached to nominal phrases rather than to expanded phrases;

adjectives may influence the basic nouns' meaning;

the arbitrariness of meaning (as compared to the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign) is especially felt in the case of prepositions which can occur in English contexts where Romanian would use no preposition;

the semantic component of the language may be ‘much more fixed or predictable’ while the *speaker* and the *hearer* may brave the freedom to determine what is *meant* from what is *said*;

sentences and utterances may have two levels of meaning: what the words *mean* and what is *meant* through these words.

The *literal meaning* is like an *external meaning*, almost static and it is given as a definition to the reader, says Elif Shafak. When she focuses on one element [i.e. race] and leaves apart some other ones, the authoress seems to turn a blind eye to other factors that might lead to the internal, deeper meaning. This is, of course, a false impression, because what really matters to Elif Shafak are her characters and the context(s) they live their lives. Her ‘multiple selves’ are like “a fabric of patriarchal ideologies”. Even if her novel may be understood as “a story of non-belonging”, Elif Shafak is aware of her mission: guiding her readers, bridging two worlds that are separated through stereotypes and dogmas, break boundaries. Her model of thinking is at ease when dealing with dualities.

*The Bastard of Istanbul* is an interesting book for its historical background that underlines a very clear truth: past is interwoven with the present and while it may remain an enigma, the present reveals the woman of the future, audacious and independent, longing for a firm identity and looking for continuity and reconciliation.

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