

**MULTICULTURALISM, IDENTITY AND FAMILY TIES IN ELIF SHAFAK'S "THE BASTARD OF ISTANBUL"**

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*Abstract: The paper aims to discuss a novel by the Turkish-born writer Elif Shafak, which tackles important issues such as family relationships, generation gaps, personal and general history - including the Armenian genocide, identity, migration and multiculturalism.*

**Keywords:** *Shafak, novel, identity, family, migration, conflict*

Born in France and educated at Colegio Británico de Madrid, the Turkish writer Elif Shafak has had a cosmopolitan life, due to which English has become her second language. She has used both languages in her works, and *The Bastard of Istanbul* is her second novel written in English, published in 2006.

"Elif" is the Turkish word for Aleph (allusion to Borges? whose books are read by Armanoush Tchakhmakhchian), the first letter of the Hebrew and Persian alphabet (Giné, 2012:26) and "Shafak" is her mother's first name, meaning "dawn". This is the chosen name (and true identity, apparently) of a writer who reflects on the fact that women keep changing their names, which do not reflect their true identities. ("I was wearing my father's name when I was living with my mother, but he meant nothing for me, they were divorced and I didn't see him. Now I'm wearing my husband's name, which is artificial. My pen name, Elif Shafak, is who I really am", Falconnier, 2010:5)

When talking about her life, Elif Shafak always remembers reading a lot in her childhood. Among her favourite books, those which have influenced her, she mentions *Gulliver's Travels*, *Arabian Nights*, *Alice in Wonderland*, and *Don Quixote*, so it's not surprising that she admits to falling in love with her characters, and having trouble letting them go (we remember how, while writing his novel, Cervantes got close to his main character, who turned from a ridiculous parody – meant to put an end to chivalresque mania – to almost a self-portrait).

Although in her creative writing seminars she urges her students not to write only about what they know, it seems she somehow mirrors her own experience in her texts and characters. Not a migrant or an exiled, she still feels a certain in-betweenness, as she confessed in an interview: "When I'm in London I miss Istanbul, when I'm in Istanbul I miss London. So there's always something missing from the picture" (Doshi, 2012)

One of her main characters in *The Bastard of Istanbul*, the American Armanoush Tchakhmakhchian, "a true bookworm" (like her author, apparently), experiences the same feeling. Split between her divorced mother in Arizona, and her father and his extended Armenian family in San Francisco, she is "in-between" her two identities (the American and the Armenian one). Amy (as her mother calls her) feels suffocated by her American mother's (dissatisfied) love and communication with her may be difficult at times.

Rose, her mother, had divorced her Armenian husband not being able to cope with and stand his family's constant meddling in their marriage (which, for a close family as theirs, must have seen as something natural).

Rose (according to Barsam) – "had no multicultural background. The only child of a Southern couple operating the same hardware store forever, she lives a small-town life, and before she knows it, she finds herself amid this extended and tightly knit Armenian Catholic

family in the diaspora. A huge family with a very traumatic past. How can you expect her to cope with all of this so easily ?” (Shafak, 2008:58)

Food is an important part of culture and of the heritage migrants take with them wherever they go, and people from outside their community react differently to ethnic food which may, sometimes, require an acquired taste. For Barsam’s family, Rose is an Other (or *Odar*, the Armenian word) also due to her lack of culinary talent. After her divorce from Barsam, her Armenian ex-relatives still comment that “the only food she knew how to cook was that horrendous mutton barbecue on buns” (Shafak, 2008:58), changing the sauce every now and then.

The dislike seems to have been mutual as, for Rose, separation from her husbands means freedom of changing her diet and returning to her American culinary habits. In a supermarket, she passes by the section of “International Food. She stole a nervous glance at the jars of eggplant dips and cans of salted grape leaves. No more *patlijan*! No more *sarmas*! No more weird ethnic food! Even the sight of that hideous *khavourma* twisted her stomach into knots. From now on she would cook whatever she wanted. She would cook real Kentucky dishes for her daughter! For one long minute Rose stood there racking her brain to find an example of the perfect meal. Her face perked up as she thought of hamburgers. Definitely! she assured herself. What’s more, fried eggs and maple-syrup-soaked pancakes and hot dogs with onions and mutton barbecue, yes especially mutton barbecue.... And instead of that squelchy yogurt drink that she was sick of seeing at every meal, they would drink apple cider! From now on she would choose their daily menu from Southern cuisine, hot spicy chili or smoked bacon... or... garbanzo beans. She would serve these dishes without complaining. All she needed was a man who would sit across from her at the end of the day. A man who would truly love her, and her cooking. Definitely, that was what Rose needed: a lover with no ethnic luggage, no hard-to-pronounce names, and no crowded family; a fresh new lover who would appreciate garbanzo beans.” (2008:39) Her final revenge on her ex-relatives is marrying a Turk, Mustapha Kazanci.

Armanoush likes the city of San Francisco, where her father’s (Barsam’s) family lives, and she likes being in the house of her relatives. She has grown up listening to their stories, enjoying their dishes and seeing the world through their eyes, proving once more the idea that the family figures most prominently in the individual’s initial identification with an ethnic group, being the first social group in which an individual becomes incorporated, and the parents’ ethnic identification and the sense of ethnic attachment fostered during childrearing are significant in the formation of the individual’s ethnic group identity (as we read in Jendian, 2008:15)

For her Grandma Shushan, the matriarch of the family, “life was always a struggle but if you were an Armenian it was three times as grueling” (52) and Barsam’s Armenian relatives keep talking about the genocide, keeping alive its memory, convinced that the past influences the present and that it mustn’t be forgotten.

According to Nanda and Warms (2012:204-5), the massacre of the Armenians in Turkey, during and after World War I, was related to the attempts of the newly created Turkish state to foster Turkish nationalism by eliminating from the country large parts of its population who were religiously and culturally different from the Turkish-speaking, Muslim majority. Amid the deepening of conflicts between the Turks and Armenians due to several causes, Turkish leaders decided to deport the Armenians from certain areas. The Armenians were beaten, robbed, raped and deprived of food, water, and shelter. It is still a touchy topic. The Armenians care because their history under the Turks is a source of great suffering and trauma that has not lost its power and figures centrally in Armenian identity in the diaspora.

The Turks care, continue the authors, because Turkey is a modern nation with a strong interest in joining the European Union and many European nations, who characterize Turkish treatment of the Armenians as genocide, will not vote for Turkish membership until the Turks admit to their genocide and allow open discussion of the Armenian massacre without considering it an insult to Turkishness anymore. (Which is exactly why Shafak was prosecuted and acquitted around the time she gave birth to her daughter, in 2006)

“Ethnicity is a process of construction or invention which incorporates and adapts preexisting communal solidarities, cultural attributes, and historical memories” (see Jendian, 2008:17) Raised by her father’s relatives to consider herself Armenian, Armanoush feels however that something is missing, that she is incomplete. “Being the only daughter of an Armenian father, he himself a child of survivors, and of a mother from Elizabethtown, Kentucky, I do know how it feels to be torn between opposite sides, unable to fully belong anywhere, constantly fluctuating between two states of existence.” In search of her identity, she decides to travel to Turkey and visit “her roots”, to make “a journey into my family’s past, as well as into my future”. (Shafak, 2008:116-117)

The people she meets in Istanbul do not fit the image she has on Turks, they don’t have a problem with her being Armenian. While bringing into discussion the “hot topic” of the genocide, noticing the Kazancis’ lack of reaction, Armanoush realizes that she, “as an Armenian, embodied the spirits of her people generations and generations earlier, whereas the average Turk had no such notion of continuity with his or her ancestors. The Armenians and the Turks lived in different time frames. For the Armenians, time was a cycle in which the past incarnated in the present and the present birthed the future. For the Turks, time was a multihyphenated line, where the past ended at some definite point and the present started anew from scratch, and there was nothing but rupture in between.” (Shafak, 2008:164-65)

The Turkish family feel no connection to things that happened in the past. In Auntie Banu’s opinion, “There are things so awful in this world that the good-hearted people, may Allah bless them all, have absolutely no idea of. And that’s perfectly fine, I tell you; it is all right that they know nothing about such things because it proves what good-hearted people they are. Otherwise they wouldn’t be good, would they?” (Shafak, 2008:69) This may apply both to historical truths, and to family secrets (like Mustafa Kazanci raping his sister, Zeliha, Asya’s mother) which should continue to remain so.

Asya Kazanci, the Turkish bastard who gives the title of the novel, has been raised in a house full of women. Shafak confessed in more than one interview that “I have always been interested in families, probably because I did not grow up in one. I was raised by a single, working, feminist mother. [...] Families intrigue me. (Skidelsky, 20012)

“It is so demanding to be born into a house full of women, where everyone loves you so overwhelmingly that they end up suffocating with their love; a house where you, as the only child, have to be more mature than all the adults around. (...) the problem is that they want me to become everything they themselves couldn’t accomplish in life. You know what I mean?” will later tell Asya to her American guest, Armanoush, who understands perfectly what she is talking about, thinking of her own family, back home. (Shafak, 2008:171)

According to Asya, “my family is a bunch of clean freaks. Brushing away the dirt and dust of the memories! They always talk about the past, but it is a cleansed version of the past. That’s the Kazancis’ technique of coping with problems; if something’s nagging you, well, close your eyes, count to ten, wish it never happened, and the next thing you know, it has never happened, hurray! Every day we swallow yet another capsule of mendacity....” (Shafak, 2008:147)

In spite of their differences, the two families discover their kinship partly through the recipes each though peculiar to their tribe. While writing her novel, Shafak was interested in the small things which are so important in women's lives, amazed how food transcends national boundaries (while still marking identities) and becomes multicultural (see Tonkin, 2007)

Even the names of the chapters are ingredients for a recipe called *ashure*, which, for the Kazancis, are the symbol of continuity and stability, the epitome of the good days to come after each storm (272), Mustafa's favourite desert.

Fragility is also expressed through something related to food. The apparently tough and independent Zeliha has always had a problem with tea cups which crack so easily and keeps buying tea sets, getting mad when cups happen to crack. Sorrow, crying at her father's grave, brings to her mind the image of tea glasses cracking under an evil eye. But, sometimes, people and characters are not so frail as they think.

Thus, blending the stories of the two families, relying on family ties and behaviours, showing how knowing or ignoring the personal and collective past influences people's lives and identity, Elif Shafak writes a novel reminding of magic realist ones.

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