

IDENTITY ISSUES IN ELIF SHAFAK'S *THE BASTARD OF ISTANBUL*

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Abstract: *Globalization, which brought about migrations, immigration, displacement of various groups of population, resulting in children being raised bilingually in different cultural environments, has also engendered an exacerbation of nationalism and identity conflicts that may not have been anticipated. However, identity issues may occur not only at the clash of different ethnic and religious forces, but also when individuals are faced with their past, as an analysis of Elif Shafak's bestselling novel, The Bastard of Istanbul (which gained her an immense popularity at home and also pushed her to the forefront of the international stage) shows. We will try to show how the conflictual search for identity of the youngest off-springs of a complex Armenian and Turkish family, Armanoush and Asya, is resolved as they discover the truth about their family history.*

Keywords: *The Bastard of Istanbul, identity issues, Armenian and Turkish family*

Authors of bestselling novels written in English (not translations) have increasingly "exotic" names like Shafak, Lahiri, Ozeki, Rushdie, Tan, Roy, Mukherjee, to mention only a few. It is a phenomenon worth investigating, especially as they have all faced identity problems, as individuals raised in bi-cultural, bilingual families or having experienced at least a major geographical displacement in their life, before becoming cosmopolitan individuals, feeling at home in several cultures. They also address a "new cosmopolitan audience"¹, a younger generation who appreciates literature that mirrors contemporary aspects of globalisation, and who are themselves involved in this "world of emigration, immigration, travel, multiple authenticities, of diaspora and its attendants, a kind of self-conscious hybridity, of language that stretches the borders of nations, communities and ironically, ideas of purity"²

Elif Shafak, born in Strassbourg in 1971, brought up in Turkey as an only child by a single mother, lived in Spain, Germany and the US, and is now dividing her time between Britain and Istanbul, is a good example of the new globalised culture. A novelist and great story teller by vocation,

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¹ Rajan, Gita, and Sharma, Shailja, eds. *New Cosmopolitanisms: South Asians in the US*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2006, p. 159.

² *ibidem*, p. 161

political scientist and journalist by training, activist and public speaker, she is deeply involved in the issues of our times, be they the rise of ultranationalism and fundamentalism or the consequences of the “financial problems and political failures within EU” that “nurtured a series of far-right movements across the continent”³.

Asked about her sense of identity, in interviews and public talks Elif Shafak admits that identity – national and ethnic identity – is a very important matter for her, about which she thinks “almost on a daily basis”. “I am a strong believer in the possibility of having multiple identities rather than a strict, frozen sense of identity”, she says in an interview at the London Book Fair in April 2013. “I’m more interested in belongings. For me belongings are more fluid, water-like, and you can have multiple belongings, you can have multiple homes, sometimes you can have portable homelands. I like to think that things are more fluid because otherwise identity politics very much relies on a distinction between us versus them, and this hidden belief that us is better than them, and I want to question that dualistic framework.”⁴

In her interpretation of ethnicity and nationalism Shafak has been influenced by Etienne Balibar’s analysis⁵, as she admits in some of her articles (for example the above mentioned *Urgency of Cosmopolitanism*), while her novel, *The Bastard of Istanbul*, seems to embody also the very essence of Pierre Bourdieu’s views⁶ about language as a medium, or expression of power by which individuals achieve their personal goals and yet, unconsciously, betray the social structure that they both express and help to reproduce. However, the activist and political thinker is doubled by another, philosophical, meditative dimension, as she declared herself in an interview to the Guardian *“The more you read about Sufism, the more you have to listen. In time I became emotionally attached. When I was younger I wasn't interested in understanding the world. I only wanted to change it, through feminism or nihilism or environmentalism. But the more I read about Sufism the more I unlearned. Because that is what Sufism does to you, it makes you erase what you know, what you are so sure of. And then start thinking again. Not with your mind this time, but*

³ Elif Shafak, „The Urgency of a Cosmopolitan Ideal as Nationalism Surges”, in *The World Post*, 02/19/2014, accessed at http://www.huffingtonpost.com/elif-shafak/urgency-cosmopolitan-ideal-nationalism_b_4732212.html, on November 8 2014

⁴ Elif Shafak talks to the London Book Fair, April 4 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Fqx1Z_-P_U, accessed November 8, 2014

⁵ Etienne Balibar, Immanuel Wallerstein. *Race, Nation, Class – Ambiguous Identities*, London and New York: Verso, 1991

⁶ as they are expressed in the seminal book which put together several essays on language, which had appeared separately in French, i.e. *Language and Symbolic Power*, ed. by John Thompson, Harvard University Press, 1993

with your heart."⁷

The Bastard of Istanbul (2005), Shafak's second novel written in English, and the best selling title in Turkey in 2006, has both dimensions mentioned above, namely an analysis of the way power is exerted through language and the manipulation of national or ethnic issues, and a way of transcending these problems by understanding, embracing the other and erasing dualities, in a truly *sufi* manner.

The novel tackles the difficult problem of Armenian – Turkish relationship and the “genocide” of 1915, and it brought her under trial in Turkey for charges of “insulting Turkishness”, according to Article 301 of the Turkish Constitution, for the use of the word “genocide” by one of the characters. The press reviews tried to point out that the book is not political, but about families and “the lies and silences that shape them” and that “Shafak’s overriding interest is not history but gender”⁸, that it is “a deftly spun tale of two families who are burdened by dark secrets and historical tragedies rooted in a common Istanbul past” (*The Economist*), “although this book is crowded with characters, its most vivid one is not one of the Kazanci matriarchs but Istanbul itself” (*Star Tribune*), but they miss one point which I hope to make in this paper. Namely, that the true theme of the novel is identity, the search of self-identity in the case of ethnic communities separated by a historical conflict that some of their members cannot overcome.

The story shows how the female descendants of an Armenian and a Turkish family (the cousins Armanoush and Asya, respectively), who have connected on the Internet, meet in present day Istanbul, and befriend because both need to understand their past. Armanoush has landed in Istanbul because she needs to find the roots of her family, to see the house where her Armenian grandmother, who had survived the events in 1915, lived. In Istanbul she finds that people ignore, or even deny the existence of those events (the Non-nationalist Scenarist of Ultrationalist Movies declares that “this thing didn’t happen”, in the scene at Café Kundera, when Armanoush is introduced to Asya’s intellectual friends⁹).

Each of the girls has a long and painful family history that she needs to exorcise: Armanoush was born to Rose, a naïve Kentucky girl, and to Armenian Barsam Tchakhmakhchian. The young couple separated when

⁷ Rebecca Abrams, “Elif Shafak: Motherhood is Sacred in Turkey”, *The Guardian*, 2010, 19th June, accessed at <http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2010/jun/19/elif-shafak-turkey-40-rules-of-love>, May 15 2014

⁸ *The Bastard of Istanbul* by Elif Shafak, reviewed by Maureen Freely, *The Times*, August 11, 2007, accessed at <http://www.elifshafak.com/images/reviews/times/index.php>, on november 9, 2014.

⁹ *The Bastard of Istanbul*, p. 253

she was two, because of inter-ethnic misunderstanding: Barsam's powerful, typical Armenian family could not accept her (the only one in the family who supported their marriage was the youngest aunt, Surpun Tchakhmakhchian, humanities professor at UCLA, Berkeley and great feminist). By way of revenge, Rose marries for the second time a young Turk whom she met in the international, or ethnic food section of the supermarket: Mustapha Kazanci, from Istanbul, and at the same time Asya's uncle. When she met Mustapha in the store, Rose realized that what she needed was a man "without an ethnic baggage, without a name that was hard to pronounce, without a numerous family"¹⁰. As a result, Armanoush will grow up divided between the two families: summer vacations with her father Barsam's large family, who keep reminding him that his daughter is being raised by a Turk, and the rest of the time with her American mother and Turkish stepfather.

Asya, on the other hand, discovers that she is a bastard, her father unknown: her mother, Zeliha, a beautiful and strong-willed woman, had always been a rebel, against social conventions, against the patriarchal family. When finally, she manages to put her life on a stable track, she has a relationship with an Armenian architect - a detail which puzzles Armanoush when she meets them, but an important element in her healing process. Actually, it is the point when Armanoush realizes that she had come with a baggage of pain and preconceived ideas about Turkey, that she needs to let go – she starts by telling him that he can come to America if he feels oppressed in Turkey, but to her surprise he answers that his family has a five hundred years history in Istanbul, and that Greeks, Armenians, Jews and Turks had all managed to live in harmony. If they had ultimately come to fail lamentably in doing so, they cannot miss a second chance now. In this important aspect – that Armanoush has to forget in order to obtain harmony, we can see the important influence of Sufism, as Shafak herself recognized it. She admitted that the big Sufi lesson was that you need to unlearn in order to really learn and understand the world.

A book rich in substance, characters, with many layers of meaning, where various critics have seen very different things (as the literary reviews in major newspapers reveal), *The Bastard of Istanbul* probably is, after all, mostly a book about identity and memory, as one critic remarked in the *Observer*: "[it is] about memory, identity, the wilful ignorance of the Turks of the massacres of Armenians in 1915, and whether the past can be shaken off, which are evidently the issues that Shafak really wants her readers to think about"¹¹. And personally I think there is no better

¹⁰ *ibidem*, p. 55

¹¹ Geraldine Bedell, "Turkey's Been Overstuffed – *The Bastard of Istanbul* by Elif Shafak", *The Guardian*, Sunday 29 July 2007, at

definition of 'displacement', a word appearing frequently in Elif Shafak's discourse, next to exile, but leading to 'multiple belongings' if its inherent sadness can be overcome, than the way she describes the feelings of the Armenian family having emigrated in America: "When they had come to America they had left another life in another country and knew that, however often and well they would evoke the past, certain things they would never be able to say."¹² We understand indeed their need to preserve their lost identity and their tendency to remember "too much".

The narrative structure is one dear to Shafak: two parallel threads that finally merge, the Armenian American family who is much more radical and unwilling to forget the past conflict with the Turks than the Armenians living in Istanbul, and the Turkish Kazanci family, who live in Istanbul, and by some somber fate is doomed to lose the men (husbands, brothers) at an early age, so it is composed only of women. But also, past and present mix in cinematographic cuts, starting in Istanbul 19 years before, moving to Arizona at that same time, then, as the story unfolds, going back to 1915, with a beautiful description of the intellectual family of Hovhanes Stamboulian, Shushan's father (a great story teller of the traditional folk tales who did not have the time to complete his work) and a cold, precise narration of the events in their demise.

However, the symbolic structure of the novel is equally based on duality, is constructed by sharp oppositions and antagonisms: Zeliha the rebel daughter versus her family, as well as the mother daughter conflict between Zeliha and Asya, the Kazanci family versus the world, Istanbul versus the world, Armenians versus Turks and finally, a wonderful opposition expressed in culinary terms in Chapter 2¹³: America (and the hamburger) versus Turkey/Armenia, (the so-called ethnic food). Opposition and antithesis is expressed on virtually every page of the novel. Even the cats of the Kazanci family fall in two different genetic lines, the street cats, always named Sultan, the I-st, the II-nd and so on, alternating in the feline family with the aristocratic white angora cats, baptized Pasha I-st, etc. (the present line being represented by Pasha the V-th).

An interesting detail whose symbolism is worth investigating is that each chapter of the novel is named for a food, and, as one critic put it, "the warmth of the Turkish kitchen emanates throughout it". Ethnicity is expressed through food, in many places in the novel, but especially in the

<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2007/jul/29/fiction.features1>, on November 9 2014

¹² *The Bastard of Istanbul*, p. 333

¹³ see *The Bastard of Istanbul*, pp. 54-55: in the international food corner in the supermarket, the Kansas born Rose, decides: No more sarmalar. No more strange ethnic food. From now on she would cook for her little girl only true Kentucky dishes.

food store scene where, after her divorce, Rose refuses 'Armenity' by refusing the tastes and smells of its traditional foods, and takes the decision to cook only true Kentucky dishes.

Antithesis is an important element in the novel, however, when at the end it is revealed that the very "Turkish" Kazanci family is actually half Armenian – actually related to the Tchakmakchians through Shushan, the lost wife of the first 'Patriarch' Reza Kazanci, and that the bastard daughter, Asya, is actually the result of an incestuous rape of Zeliha by Mustapha, the dominant outcome is not pain, but a sense of relief and dissolution of dualities. All the separations and oppositions are reconciled. The force and the audacity of this novel, however upsetting for some persons, stem from these harsh realities of genocide, rape, and rebellion against tradition.

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