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Reifications of Historical Identity through Cultural Memory - A Study of Food and Gender in Elif Shifak's *The Bastard of Istanbul*

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ABSTRACT

Food narratives have been studied for their historicity for some time now. The arguments of this paper propose that in Elif Shafak's novel *The Bastard of Istanbul*, food forms the central crux of the long tale of Armenian-Turkish history being knit. It helps the reader stand rooted and negotiate the tense drama unfolding in the novel. History and familial ties are so intrinsically bound that culture which is in a constant state of flux fails to be codified. It becomes discursively created, transmitted and re-framed through images of food.

Culture to a great extent was believed to be stored in memory and transmitted biologically. The categorisation of memory into biological and social realms, caused a series of sporadic developments, in the field of Memory Studies and as a result in Cultural Studies too. When this novel set in Istanbul and America unfolds food becomes a symbol reshaping existing stereotypes. This paper tries to explore the complex relationship between women, food and power. There are also questions of identity and nationality. People in the Diaspora find food a safe means through which elements of their identity can be preserved unthreatened and passed to the next generation. Women are found to play a key role here.

It will also examine how the capacity to remember and re-create past events is used by minority groups to legitimize their cultural differences through localized and competing traditions. In the post-world war scenario, after untold trauma and regret, it has become a kind of therapeutical regeneration to turn to 'a collective past'. At this juncture of the paper it is hoped that interventions of Maurice Halbwachs, Aleida Assmann and Jan Assmann will find fruitful theoretical resonance. Memories are not static representations of past events but 'advancing stories' through which individuals and communities forge their sense of identity. As a theoretical perspective 'Cultural Memory' has today become one of the most productive areas of research in the field of literary studies. "Family stories intermingle in such a way that what happened generations ago can have an impact on seemingly irrelevant developments of the present day. The past is everything bygone". (Shafak) An analysis of the text shows how common food items/images travel three generations to reverberate with history, revenge and reconciliation in a present-day matriarchal Armenian family.

Key words – Gender, Power and Cultural memory

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Introduction

Food narratives have been studied for their historicity for some time now. The arguments of this paper propose that in Elif Shafak's novel *The Bastard of Istanbul*, food forms the central crux of the long tale of Armenian-Turkish history being knit. Associations related to something familiar like food helps the reader remain rooted and negotiate the tense drama unfolding in the novel objectively. History and familial ties are so intrinsically bound that culture which is in a constant state of flux fails to be codified. It becomes discursively created, transmitted and re-framed through images of food in this text. The text is not about food but food laced memories and incidents in the novel encourage the reader to redefine roles and motifs.

Turkey, a land torn apart by tradition and modernity; by Christianity and Islam; by history and memory finds an objective correlative in traditional food. Elif Shafak is a Turkish novelist, essayist, academic, public speaker and women's rights activist. She has published novels at regular intervals and has been translated into nearly 49 languages. She handles Turkish and English with equal ease and blends oral and written methods of storytelling in her works. On several occasions this has helped her to needle her country's historical amnesia. But on the publication of her novel *The Bastard of Istanbul* (2006) she nearly landed in prison on accusations of 'insulting Turkishness'. The novel is politically laced and refers to certain silences in Turkish history. The passages about the deportations and massacres of Armenians are shocking, as Armanoush one of the protagonist painfully realises. It is a city and a country in denial about the genocide that forms an integral part of its history. Her attempts to make others understand how much the past conditions the present, forms an important line of thought in the novel.

Rose an American marries an Armenian Barsam Tchamakhchian, but the marriage ends in divorce because Barsam's family hates her. Rose is an 'Odar' an outsider. The narrow-minded and intolerant Armenians hold on to Food/cuisine, customs, traditions so tightly that Rose is suffocated. This alliance produces a daughter Armanoush. To get back at her husband's family Rose remarries a Turk, Mustafa. Barsam's family members are genocide survivors. They cannot tolerate Amy being bought up by a Turk, their archenemies. Caught in between this tug of war, without an identity, Armanoush or Amy grows up to become an Armenian American without proper roots or heritage. She is neither 'here' nor 'there'. So she decides to go on a journey "to understand her plurality" to Turkey where her grandmother Shushan Tchamakhchian was born. She decides to go as a guest to her step father Mustafa's ancestral home. There she meets Aysa. Aysa is a bastard who calls her mother "auntie". She lives with her three aunts, mother, grandmother and great grandmother. A male member is conspicuously missing in this family. She too is 'pastless' because she too is unable to trace her heritage. The girls interact and exchange ideas which help Shafak to discuss the Armenian-Turk problem in detail. Food brings the members of both families together during meal times and is a reassuring substance.

Armanoush a representative of third and fourth generations of Armenian (Christian) families settled in America, is on a quest to find reifications for her people's historical identity. Aysa is the Turkish Muslim family nominee in the novel. Narrated mostly through the eyes of four generations of women it reveals buried family secrets, political and sexual taboos, and the need to talk about them. It also reflects the ongoing clash between memory and amnesia. History, memory and culture form a crucial mix that simultaneously integrates and disintegrates, Turkey's collective amnesia. Once the collective unconscious of a society unsettles, memories of nationhood gets unsettled too. According to Benedict Anderson nations are "imagined communities," that are held together by some kind of "hard" essential reality such as family, clan, tribe, rituals food and so forth. Here lies the crux of the argument of this paper. Food here is an agency that is able to transgress political, traditional, social realms of memory to create a unique novel.

Culture to a great extent was believed to be stored in memory and transmitted biologically. The categorisation of memory into biological and social realms, caused a series of sporadic developments, in the field of Memory Studies and as

a result in Cultural Studies too. When this novel set in Istanbul and America unfolds food becomes a symbol reshaping existing stereotypes. To explore the complex relationship between nation, women, and food the queries regarding identity and nationality is very significant. People in the Diaspora find food a safe means through which elements of their identity can be preserved unthreatened and passed to the next generation. Women are found to play a key role here. Three generations of women portrayed in the novel help to trace the plot in a coherent manner. Even though Turkey's written culture, media and publishing industries, remain male-dominated, it is mostly women who are the bearers of memory and it is mostly women who keep multiple traditions of storytelling alive.

Hence it can be said that women are bearers of communicative memory. Memories that are personally transferred to the next generation. Women can be seen to work within a framework where histories are created, contested and transmitted. History provides the facts, cultural memory adds meaning to these facts. By repetition of rituals and adherence to social codes of conduct they believe they can prevent history from repeating itself. Cultural memory transmits an experience rooted in history that has reached a culturally definitive, potentially transformative status. They are not bound or limited to the past, but continue to give meaning to the present. George Orwell's observation 'whoever controls the present controls the past' is a central theme in the memory literature. This act of narration/story-telling reminds one of Michel Foucault's notion of counter-memory. (Foucault 1975) The capacity to remember and re-create past events is used by minority groups to legitimize their cultural differences through localized and competing traditions. In the post-world war scenario, after untold trauma and regret, it has become a kind of therapeutical regeneration to turn to 'a collective past'. Memories are not static representations of past events but 'advancing stories' through which individuals and communities forge their sense of identity. As a theoretical perspective 'Cultural Memory' has today become one of the most productive areas of research in the field of literary studies.

With the theoretical interventions of Hayden White, Linda Hutcheon and others' on the subjective nature of History as a discipline, the notional difference between history and literary discourse was nearly nullified. Paul Ricoeur also stated that history and memory are interwoven. For memory, history serves as a critical framework, in which memories can be confirmed or contested. History offers facts, searches for the causes and motives behind certain happening. Memory is the factor that can add consciousness or meaning to an historical event. Whereas history can separate itself from interpretation, meaning and feeling, memory is inevitably linked with these concepts.

"Family stories intermingle in such a way that what happened generations ago can have an impact on seemingly irrelevant developments of the present day. The past is everything bygone". (Shafak 347). An analysis of the text shows how common food items/images travel three generations to reverberate with history, revenge and reconciliation in a present-day matriarchal Armenian family. Shafak is a writer who has one hand of her compass firmly rooted in tradition and with the other she experiments new techniques creating circular waves. She has brought in some links or connector that acts as Leif motifs to link the past to the present. Filled with the aroma of traditional Turkish food the novel mingles past and present, blending the voices of its many characters in a balance as delicate as any savoury dish. The similarity between Turkish and Armenian food is brought out at many instances in the novel. The Kazanci family is surprised at Amy's knowledge of Turkish. They believed in and were proud and possessive of their traditions especially cuisine. Amy the short for Armanoush's reply surprises them. Amy is in Turkey staying with the Kazancis when she sits down to dinner and is able to name their dishes, "I see you have made hummus, baba ghanoush, yalancisarma . . . and look at this, you have baked churek!" "Aaaah, do you speak Turkish?!" Auntie Banu exclaimed (Shafak 156). "No, no I do not speak Turkish language unfortunately but I guess I speak the Turkish cuisine." says Amy. This statement is a clear indication of how culture is transmitted through food. Auntie Banu's surprise and misconception that Armanoush spoke Turkish shows that the Turkish family didn't even realize that the Armenians diet is very similar to their own. Mustafa is mistaken for an

Armenian because of his familiarity with Armenian cuisine.

Knowledge of food creates bonding and identity but it can also become of tool of oppression and discrimination. Rose was a small town country girl who married Barsham, an Armenian man. The Armenian food was unappetizing to Rose and was a point of disagreement between her and her husband's family. Once her marriage ended, Rose was able to cook foods she had been craving: "From now on she would cook whatever she wanted. She would cook real Kentucky dishes for her daughter (Shafak 39)!" This shows her distaste for anything different from her own culture and comforts. Rose, however, was not the only one with an aversion. Her husband's family felt quite similarly about Rose, "When you come to think that the only food she knew how to cook was that horrendous mutton barbecue on buns (Shafak 58)!" Food is inseparable from powerful material and symbolic realities.

Food in the novel become associated with public history. Both Turkish and Armenian knowledge of food and their cuisine is very similar. This proves that their history, memory and culture are intertwined. The Kazanci family is shocked when they find out that Amy is of a mixed heritage. Amy has Armenian and Turkish parents but is raised in America. This plot helps Shafak mix Turkish public history and personal memory. This act authenticates and destabilises the past experiences. Food helps to differentiate and discriminate not only Rose and her husband, but the sisters of the Kazanci family too. Asya can always tell who is making dinner by taste alone, "Each time she could easily tell if it was Banu or Cevriye or Feride who had prepared the peppers. If it was Banu, they turned out to be full of stuff they'd have otherwise sorely lacked, including peanuts and cashews and almonds (Shafak 24)." Polyphonic voices from the text foreground local stories, local cuisine and local traditions. These voices are truer narrators of histories than found in 'History texts'

The most conspicuous link is the name of food that are used to title the chapters. The title of each chapter is the name of a food that was involved in a crucial moment of a characters life. For example, chapter two is entitled "Garbanzo Beans". This is the chapter in which Rose meets Mustafa and thus the relationship between the Kazanci and the Tchakhmakhchian family was established, which gave Armanoush the opportunity to travel to Turkey and befriend Asya. Other chapter names include Water, Cinnamon, Pine nuts etc. As we reach the last few chapters we understand that these are ingredients used in the preparation of a special dessert Ashure. "Ashure is a symbol of continuity and stability, the epitome of the good days to come after watch storm, no matter how frightening the storm had been." (Shafak 263) The anecdote of how Ashure was prepared first by Noah for the travellers of his ark and its power to wash away sins relates mythology to the dessert and makes it a powerful rendering. It is hence an element of cultural memory more than communicative memory. Mustafa loves Ashure. To punish Mustafa for begetting the illicit child Aysa and refusing to acknowledge it, his clairvoyant sister Banu invites him to a bowl of poisoned Ashure. She adds one last ingredient, Potassium Cyanide to end the past and to help him purge his soul. The chapter titles symbolize the pieces of the puzzle that are added up to form a whole picture, which are the truth of Armanoush and Asya's backgrounds as well as the demise of Mustafa.

Banu Kazanci is a traditional card reader who reads the past and future with help of Hazel nuts, coffee mugs, tarot cards and her two djinni. This helps the author summarise past events quickly, help the readers travel in the past to understand the present and also to help the readers guess the future. Without Banu's djinni many of the stories from the past would have remained untold. But the familiarity of the objects she uses to read the past is interesting and at the same time a reminder of how food and memory is connected. Cafe Kundera and Cafe Constantinopolis are local domains where young Turks and Diasporic Armenians interact. Cafe Kundera has a heritage which is a subject of debate for its customers even today. Cafe Constantinopolis is a virtual space similar to the one Amy experiences psychologically. The present deconstructs the past with respect to the future in these cafes. As a representative Turk Aysa apologises through this medium. These

arenas become psychological battlegrounds where inner conflicts are resolved. The instance of the Janissary's Paradox and the self-scoring Armenian test are litmus papers which help characters reach new decisions. Hence it is once again in and around food that the mnemotechnics of Amnesty(forgive) and Amnesia (forgetting) are challenged. Through the characters Shafak promotes her readers to understand that 'Remembering' is a better tool to forget and move forward.

The symbol of a gold pomegranate brooch with rubies in the place of seeds also has a tale to tell. The owner of the brooch HovhannesStamboulian advocated “togetherness” but soon understands that “once a pomegranate breaks and all its seeds scatter in different directions you cannot put it back together.” (Shafak 245). Within a few days of procuring the brooch Stamboulian watched helplessly as his family is scattered. But the brooch resurfaces as a reminder and connector to the past. In spite of all the suffering and loneliness during the days of massacre, Shushan a girl of four then, remembers this brooch. She had seen it on her father's walnut chest. She recognises it years later when her brother brings it as a token of memory. Shushan leaves it with her toddler and migrates to America. In Stamboulian's collection of folktales a pomegranate tree tells the story of a little lost pigeon. The little pigeon does not want to hear the story if it has a sad ending. The tree replies, “the story I am going to tell you is a happy one.” (Shafak 314). But what the pigeon did not know was that for that happy ending another three generation had to pass. The transient pomegranate brooch travels through centuries to its rightful heir at the end of the novel. It symbolises a memorial of continuity and reconciliation. It is a reminder of history's hold on us and how past can control the present. “life is a coincidence though sometimes it takes a djinni to fathom that”. (Shafak 347) The structure and colour of a fruit is used to symbolise continuity and bonding.

Aram's choice of the tattoo of an uprooted fig tree upside down to tattoo himself is a significant symbol. “instead of earth ,it is rooted in the sky. It is displaced but not placeless.” (Shafak 246). Aram an Armenian seems to be the only character who embraces things as they are. Unlike Armanoush who thinks she should shift/escape to America an Armenian diaspora, he is happiest in Istanbul, where history, modernity and culture meet. Although the struggle between the families and within the families form the main story line in *The Bastard of Istanbul* due course food also attains a character of its own. The food related incidents mentioned in the book serves as a binder between the two families and also builds up to the climax itself. It is individualizes the characters and brings them together.

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