

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Unsettled belonging: How Shafak writes identity across rupture, diaspora, and denial

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ABSTRACT

The Ottoman Empire, ruled by the Turks, invaded several lands, including Southeast Europe, West Asia, and North Africa. Istanbul (Constantinople) was the center of the Ottoman authority, which massacred a large number of Armenian people in Turkey. In *The Bastard of Istanbul*, Elif Shafak portrays some Turkish Armenians who had to leave Turkey and move to a safer country to survive. Also, her Turkish Muslims resist the norms and traditions that have been deeply rooted in Turkey. Shafak looks at Armenian residents as the colonized people who are victimized, and she regards the Ottoman authority and Turkish government as the colonizers. Therefore, it can be concluded that Turkish residents must be in a better situation than their Armenian peers. However, this paper argues that Shafak's characters, including both Turkish and Armenian ones, suffer and struggle to adopt some strategies to assert their own identities. This paper aims to examine *The Bastard of Istanbul* as a postcolonial work and analyze the characters' cultural identities by employing Homi K. Bhabha's postcolonial theories, particularly hybridity and displacement, to demonstrate how these Turkish Muslim and Armenian characters struggle to construct new identities. In other words, although *The Bastard of Istanbul* may seem to reinforce a colonizer/colonized divide that privileges Turks and portrays Armenians only as victims, this paper ultimately challenges this view by showing that both Turkish Muslim and Armenian characters are displaced, hybrid individuals who keep reshaping their identities beyond ancestry.

KEYWORDS

Cultural identity, hybridity, displacement, diaspora, Elif Shafak

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Introduction

The story of *The Bastard of Istanbul* (Shafak, 2008) takes place mainly in Istanbul, while it jumps between Turkey and the Armenian community that lives outside Turkey in the United States. The book connects individual family stories to official stories that define national identity and citizenship status. The book continuously explores three significant issues that Turkey faces today: how people remember their past, how they choose to forget it, and how historical events affect their personal identities. Shafak presents women who must navigate patriarchal rules that monitor their behavior, while she shows how social norms shape their sense of belonging. The novel benefits from postcolonial analysis because its characters must navigate multiple legacies that stem from colonial rules, nationalistic movements, and immigration processes. The Armenian figures bear the burden of national loss, yet Turkish Muslim figures face social barriers that limit their ability to express themselves. Shafak shows how people develop their identities through social interactions, which start in their family environment and then expand to their friendships and public spaces like cafes. The paper uses Homi K. Bhabha's hybridity, displacement, and "unhomeliness" concepts to study how Shafak shows cultural identity through characters who experience foreignness even in their native environments (Bhabha, 1994). The main argument presents itself through a combination of accepting and disproving different points. *The Bastard of Istanbul* presents a colonizer/colonized dynamic that gives Turks power while trapping Armenians in a victim status, yet the story shows both Turkish Muslim and Armenian characters experience displacement. The hybrid subjects need to create their identities through processes that go beyond their ancestral backgrounds.

Literature Review

Postcolonial studies demonstrate that cultural identity emerges through power dynamics, representation systems, and historical breaks instead of being passed down as a fixed ancestral heritage. Bhabha established his theory about the "Third Space," which describes how people create new meanings through translation and develop hybrid identities by experiencing ambivalence and partial connection to different cultures (Bhabha, 1994). The discussions about these topics focus on two essential elements, which include displacement and exile. According to Edward Said, exile creates an unfixable separation which drives people away from their original homeland while they experience an enduring sense of sadness (Said, 2001, p. 173). The different viewpoints demonstrate how migration and political violence create new identities for people through their experiences of losing things and their ability to create new ones. *The Bastard of Istanbul* receives most academic attention because readers study how the book explores memory and nation, and its challenge to hidden historical events. Elena Furlanetto (2014) interprets Shafak's two cafes as protected areas where like-minded people gather to showcase different essentialist identity versions that exist in post-Ottoman society. Iulia Waniek (2014) shows how the young characters in this novel experience an identity crisis when their family secrets and historical family stories become visible. Also, Faiz Abdullah's research examines how the novel depicts gender and patriarchal systems through its depiction of women's social control as a space where cultural rules get implemented and challenged (Abdulla, 2017). The current academic research titled "The Postmodern Study of Identity and Memory in *The Bastard of Istanbul*" emphasizes how memory and multiple narrative perspectives enable readers to understand how the novel presents identity through its fragmented and disputed nature (Zubair et al., 2025). The findings of this research paper demonstrate how the author uses disputed historical events and gendered experiences throughout the story. The research presented in this paper extends previous studies by analyzing how Turkish Muslim and Armenian characters develop their identities through hybridity and displacement while their dual nature resists traditional categorization.

Methodology

The research uses qualitative textual analysis (close reading) to study how Shafak develops cultural identity through her characters and their dialogue and the symbolic environments she creates. The research framework uses Bhabha's (1994) concepts of hybridity, displacement, and unhomeliness to analyze the data. The text examines three main aspects, which include (1) Armenian diasporic identity through Armanoush and the online "Café Constantinopolis", (2) Turkish urban existence between two worlds through Asya and the physical "Café Kundera", and (3) how gender affects people's ability to belong through Zeliha and the Kazanci family. The research focuses on these specific points because they present ongoing identity transformation processes, which allow researchers to study how personal identity is transformed.

Results/Findings

Displacement and unhomeliness in the Armenian diaspora

In this novel, Armanoush is one of the diasporas whose father is Barsam Tchakhmakhchian, an Armenian-American, and her mother is Rose, an American woman who got divorced and married a Turkish guy called Mustafa Kazanchi. Rose knew how her ex-husband's family hated Turkish people, so she did it intentionally to take revenge on them. Armanoush is exposed to both Armenian and American cultures and traditions. Her paternal family is too worried that Armanoush forgets what the Turks had done to the Armenians in the past. When Barsam defends her daughter and justifies that her ex-wife "really wants to become a grade schoolteacher. She wants to spend her time with kids. There is nothing bad in that." (Shafak, 2008, p. 54), Armanoush's Auntie Surpun spoke: "In an ideal world, you could say, well, that's her life, none of our business. If you have no appreciation of history and ancestry, no memory and responsibility, and if you live solely in the present, you certainly can claim that. But the past lives within the present, and our ancestors breathe through our children, and you know that ..." (Shafak, 2008, p. 55). Armanoush is between her father and her mother. Each of them represents two different cultures with their own beliefs and traditions. Her father's family, who live in Arizona, represent Armenian culture, but her mother, who lives with her husband in San Francisco, stands for the American one. Barsam's family is not happy about the fact that Armanoush lives with Mustafa. They hate Turkish people because of the many murders they committed in the genocide of 1915. Fed up with this situation and eager to find her real identity, she decides to travel to Turkey, which was once her dad's family's homeland. "I need to find my identity. You know what I've been secretly contemplating? Going to visit my family's house in Turkey. Grandma always talks about this gorgeous house in Istanbul. I'll go and see it with my own eyes. This is a journey into my family's past, as well as into my future." (Shafak, 2008, p. 117). Her confusing feeling highlights what Bhabha, in *The Location of Culture*, argues that "in that displacement, the borders between home and world became confused, and, uncannily, private, and the public become part of each other forcing upon us a vision that is divided as it is disorienting" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 9). She suffers from "the unhomeliness—that is the condition of extra-territorial and cross-cultural initiations" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 9). According to Bhabha, "to be unhomed is not to be homeless" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 9). In fact, "the unhomely moment creeps up on you stealthily as your own shadow, and suddenly you find

yourself with Henry James's Isabel Archer, in *The Portrait of a Lady*, taking the measure of your dwelling in a state of 'incredulous terror'" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 9).

Armanoush says: "I am the grandchild of genocide survivors who lost all their relatives at the hands of Turkish butchers in 1915, but I myself have been brainwashed to deny the genocide because I was raised by some Turk named Mustafa" (Shafak, 2008, pp. 53–54). Therefore, her hybrid identity prompts her to travel to Istanbul to find reality, which helps her discover more to form her real identity. She becomes a member of "Constantinopolis Café" where Armenians in the diaspora reveal so many facts about the Ottoman past:

"Café Constantinopolis was a chatroom, or as the regulars called it, a cybercafé, initially designed by a bunch of Greek Americans, Sephardim Americans. And Armenian Americans who, other than being New Yorkers, had one fundamental thing in common: They all were the grandchildren of families once based in Istanbul. The website opened with a familiar tune: Istanbul was Constantinople/ Now it's Istanbul, not Constantinople... (Shafak, 2008, pp. 111–112)

The members are supposed to choose "a specific discussion topic. Though the themes varied greatly, they all tended to revolve around their common history and culture—"common" oftentimes meaning "common enemy": the Turks. Nothing brought people together more swiftly and strongly—though transiently and shakily— than a shared enemy." (Shafak, 2008, p. 113)

Similarly, her Muslim Turkish counterpart, Asya, also suffers from a lack of stability in her character. She also has a hybrid character although she is not a victim of the Ottoman Empire. Asya Kazanci is an illegitimate child whose mum is Zeliha, one of Mustafa's sisters, who lives in Istanbul. At the end of the story, it becomes clear that Mustafa is Asya's father. He raped his sister, and before Asya's birth, he moved to the USA. While Armanoush tries to find out about her past, Asya wants to escape from her tragic childhood, which was full of loneliness, sadness, and confusion, as she complains, "I don't even know who my father is. I never ask, they never tell. Sometimes when my mother looks at me, I think she sees him in my face, but never says a word. We all pretend there is no such thing as father." (Shafak, 2008, p. 146)

It can be noted that Asya and her family didn't have to leave Turkey since they were not Armenians, but she assists hybridity to keep living in her own country, since Turkish society doesn't approve of her existence because she is an illegitimate child. "Asya exclaimed with a forged zest. "Alzheimer's is not as terrible as it sounds. The past is nothing but a shackle we need to get rid of. Such as an excruciating burden. If only I could have no past—you know, if only I could be a nobody, start from point zero and just remain there forever" (Shafak, 2008, p. 148). Although she tries to forget about the past and avoids talking about it, she desires to find out who her father is. In other words, she is in a loop, digging into the past and escaping the present situation.

All I know about my past is that something wasn't right, and I can't attain that information. For me history starts today, you see? There is no continuity in time. You can't feel attached to ancestors if you can't even trace your own father. Maybe I will never be able to learn my father's name. If I keep thinking about it, I'll go nuts. So, I say to myself, why do you want to unearth the secrets? Don't you see that the past is a vicious circle? It is a loop. It sucks us and makes us run like a hamster on a wheel. Then we start to repeat ourselves, again and again. (Shafak, 2008, p. 180)

Asya is in 'the third space,' which leads her to create her own space far from her mum's sisters at Café Kundra, which gives her peace. She imitates Westerners and listens to Johnny Cash, an American singer. She imitates him and welcomes his presence in her life: "She knew everything about him: the myriad details of his trajectory from Arkansas to Memphis, his drinking buddies and marriages and ups and downs, his pictures, gestures, and, of course. His lyrics. Making the lyrics of "Thirteen" her lifelong motto at the age of eighteen, Asya had decided she too was born in the soul of misery and was going to bring trouble wherever she went" (Shafak, 2008, pp. 62–63).

She doesn't want a birthday cake. She doesn't enjoy celebrating her birthday with her aunts and her mum; she also calls her aunt. She is in her hometown, which is Istanbul, but she is upset, and she lacks something in this city. She lives in a world which is called "unhomely world" by Bhabha: "To live in the unhomely world, to find its ambivalencies and ambiguities enacted in the house of fiction, or its sundering and splitting performed in the work of art, is also to affirm a profound desire for social solidarity: I am looking for the join... I want to join... I want to join" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 18).

Her favorite place is Café Kundera, which has a hybrid atmosphere. "Café Kundera was a small coffee shop on a narrow, snaky street on the European side of Istanbul. It was the only bistro in the city where you wasted no energy on conversation and tipped the waiters to be treated badly" (Shafak, 2008, p. 76). Asya Kazanci enjoys spending time at this café due to "its comatose indolence and farcical disharmony." (Shafak, 2008, p. 84) While Shafak depicts the café as a symbol of motionlessness, she portrays the city of Istanbul as "a city-boat" (Shafak, 2008, p. 170) which is "more twisted and multifaceted" (Shafak, 2008, p. 246).

Café Kundera's guests are frightened by the energetic Istanbul outside the café, and they are not able to deal with the variety of identities seen in the city:

Because we cannot abandon this rabbit hole for fear of a traumatic encounter with our own culture. Western politicians presume there is a cultural gap between Eastern civilization and Western civilization. If it were that simple! The real civilization gap is between the Turks and the Turks. We are a bunch of cultured urbanites surrounded by hillbillies and bumpkins on all sides. They have conquered the whole city. (Shafak, 2008, p. 81)

The Café appeals to Asya since "this place was out of time and space. Istanbul was in a constant hurry and yet at Café Kundera only lethargy prevailed" (Shafak, 2008, p. 84). The place impresses her because it "was the negation of the whole city." (Shafak, 2008, p. 84). Therefore, hybridity is witnessed in this location, whose customers experience something different from the outside. They also feel "in-betweenness," which is a result of two cultures: the West and the East.

We are stuck. We are stuck between the East and the West. Between the past and the future. On the one hand, there are the secular modernists, so proud of the regime they constructed, you cannot breathe a critical word. They've got the army and half of the state on their side. On the other hand, there are the conventional traditions, so infatuated with the Ottoman past, you cannot breathe a critical word. They've got the general public and the remaining half of the state on their side. What is left for us? (Shafak, 2008, p. 81)

The in-between status is felt at the Café since some customers deny what the Ottoman Empire committed, and some of them are opposed to the social structures of the Turkish government. This is the second definition of cultural identity by Stuart Hall, which recognizes that "as well as the many points of similarity, there are also critical points of deep and significant difference which constitute 'what we really are'; or rather, since history has intervened –'what have become'." (Hall, 1990, p. 225)

Mustafa, who is introduced as her uncle at the beginning of the novel, turns out to be her father. The only son in the Kazanci family moved to Arizona and didn't come back until Rose, his American wife, asked him to accompany her to bring Armanoush from Istanbul to the USA.

He is not Armenian, but he left Turkey and lives in the United States. Shafak portrays him as a diaspora. He got married to Rose, who was a single mum. This type of marriage is severely criticized in the Turkish community. He doesn't want to go back to Turkey because of a terrible memory of having sex with his own sister. "He would never forget the fierce look on Zeliha's face when she called him "a precious phallus." The embarrassment of that moment still burned through him today. He knew Zeliha could see behind his forced masculinity to the real story of his upbringing." (Shafak, 2008, p. 45) Like the other diasporas, he undergoes so much hardship, mostly at the beginning: He had hoped that if he had a housemate, he would feel less lonely in Arizona, but the result had been quite the opposite. At night, alone in his bed and thousands of miles away from his family, he couldn't fight back the voices inside his head. Voices questioned and blamed him for who he was. He slept poorly. He spent many nights watching old comedies or surfing the Internet. It helped. The thoughts stopped at those times. Yet they would return with daylight" (Shafak, 2008, pp. 44–45). However, he soon learns that he should adopt American culture and lifestyle to survive. In his own country, he seems to be silent since he is surrounded by his four sisters. In the USA, he finds the courage to marry a woman whose ex-husband was Armenian. Shafak changes his cultural identity as he moves from one place to another. Stuart Hall in Cultural Identity and Diaspora elaborates the meaning of cultural identity, which "is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history, and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories, but like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation." (Hall, 1990, p. 225) Likewise, Mustafa's identity is prone to change. He learns English very soon and tries to create a new identity in the USA by reducing his family ties and dependence to get rid of his Turkish identity.

His sister, Zeliha, tries to be different from the other Turkish women who were forced to obey what was imposed on them by Turkish rulers. Her hybrid character is opposed to what Turkish rulers imposed on them. She is very tall, and it is enough for her to be different, but despite what society asks her to follow, she wears "donning miniskirts of glaring colors, tight-fitting blouses that played her ample breasts, satiny nylon stockings, and yes, those towering high heels." (Shafak, 2008, p. 4) Shafak writes "She was the only woman in the whole family and one of the few among all Turkish women who used such foul language so unreservedly, vociferously, and knowledgeably..." (Shafak, 2008, p. 4). Her hybrid character is clearly witnessed when she is in the doctor's office having an abortion. She comes from a Muslim family that disapproves of having sex outside marriage and abortion. When she realizes she is pregnant, she decides to get rid of the fetus. Therefore, she wants to follow Western beliefs, but as soon as she hears the voice from the mosque near the clinic, she starts to shout and cry, although she is unconscious because of anesthesia. Her decision for abortion has changed because of the Islamic voice coming from the mosque for prayer, although she

always undermines Islamic rules and principles. Zehila looks for a space which is neither Islamic nor Western. This space is the defined "third-place" or "in-between space" by Bhabha, who uncovers the notion of hybridity as "a liminal space, in between the designations of identity, becomes the process of symbolic interaction, the connective tissue that constructs the difference between upper and lower, black and white" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 4). Therefore, it is not easy to identify the cultures separately since, as David Huddart explains, "cultures are not discrete phenomena; instead, they are always in contact with one another, and this contact leads to cultural mixed-ness, a space within which no hint of purity or authenticity can be traced" (Huddart, 2006, pp. 6–7). According to Bhabha, this hybrid third space is an ambivalent site in which cultural meaning and representation lack 'primordial unity or fixity'. (Bhabha, 1994). Zeliha works in a tattoo salon. Society doesn't look at her job positively. There are too many tattoos on the walls of the salon, with pictures of tattoos on different parts of customers' bodies. Each tattoo can have a meaning, revealing disparate identities among Turkish people.

Inside, it was like a little museum. Across from the entrance, there was a huge, framed photograph of a woman of uncertain nationality, her back turned toward the viewer to better expose the intricately detailed tattoo on her body. It was an Ottoman miniature. It looked like a scene from a banquet, with an acrobat above the diners walking a tightrope from one shoulder to the other. Such a traditional miniature tattooed on the back of a modern woman was startling. Below was a phrase in English: A TATTOO IS A MESSAGE SENT FROM BEYOND TIME! (Shafak, 2008, p. 248).

Here, it is worth noticing that history with social structures can have an impact on the construction of identity. The tattoos with different images represent hybrid bodies and hybrid identities resulting from exposure to two cultures. The tattoo salon scene also strengthens the novel's critique of fixed cultural identity by turning the human body into a visible space where past and present meet and interact. The Ottoman miniature tattoo on the back of a modern woman symbolizes the coexistence of historical memory and contemporary self-expression. From this perspective, identity in the novel is not something inherited in a pure or stable form. Instead, it is constantly rewritten through layered cultural signs that reflect both tradition and modernity. What appears on the body is therefore more than simple decoration. It becomes a form of expression through which the individual carries the marks of competing histories and social expectations.

This image also reflects a broader pattern that can already be seen in the novel's main characters. Armanoush, Asya, Mustafa, and Zeliha all wrestle with identities shaped by rupture, shame, memory, migration, and social pressure. Although their experiences are different, each of them exists in an in-between space that keeps identity from ever becoming fully complete or settled. Armanoush searches for belonging between Armenian memory and American life. Asya remains in Turkey yet feels disconnected from both family and history. Mustafa tries to leave his past behind through migration. Zeliha challenges the gendered expectations that society places on her. Together, their experiences show that identity is continually formed through negotiation rather than secured through ancestry alone.

Seen in this light, *The Bastard of Istanbul* does not simply set up a contrast between Turks and Armenians or between colonizer and colonized. Instead, the novel shows that cultural identity emerges through unstable encounters among history, gender, family, and displacement. Shafak presents identity as an ongoing process shaped by both external forces and inner conflict. That is why her characters repeatedly move between attachment and rejection, memory and forgetting, belonging and alienation. In the end, the novel suggests that hybridity is not an exception but a defining condition of modern existence, especially in societies marked by historical violence and contested memory

Conclusion

The Bastard of Istanbul ultimately complicates any simple colonizer/colonized binary by showing that identity is shaped through displacement, memory, gender, and social pressure on both sides of the Turkish-Armenian divide. Through Armanoush, Asya, Mustafa, and Zeliha, the novel presents belonging not as a stable inheritance but as a continual negotiation in what Bhabha describes as hybrid and unhomely spaces. The novel's symbolic sites, especially Café Constantinople and Café Kundera, show how public and private histories overlap and how subjects construct themselves between past and present, East and West, homeland and diaspora. Read in this way, Shafak's novel demonstrates that identity is not fixed by ancestry alone; rather, it is produced through conflict, memory, movement, and the ongoing struggle to create a livable self within fractured historical worlds.

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