Relocating Multicultural Identities through Cuisine: Analysing Elif Shafak's *The Bastard of Istanbul*

Dr Manchusha Madhusudhanan
Dr Sabitha S Babu

Elif Shafak's The Bastard of Istanbul (2007) is an attempt to voice the persisting trauma caused by the Armenian genocide in the early 1900s. Turks and Armenians are still unable to forgive and forget. Shafak advances the need to remember the past if one has to embrace the future. In the select novel common grounds of interaction are initiated through food and cuisine. Food-laced narratives intertwine the past and the present with ease and open common grounds for reconciliation. Shafak establishes that Turkish values, culture and history come full circle only through Armenian interference. The catastrophe might have displaced the Armenians, but they are not "placeless." Shafak emphasises that there is space for all in Turkey. As Alan Robert points out in In Justice's Shadow: "Intercultural dialogue is the best guarantee of a more peaceful, just and sustainable world". Shafak appropriates Turkish food and culinary activities as a symbolic language that addresses the issues of identity and acceptance. The family drama that unfolds through food affiliations reflects the psychological discords experienced by genocide victims and their future generations. The novel presents Asya Kazanci and Armanoush Tchakhmakhchian, two teenagers separated and bound together by a catastrophe that struck their families three or four generations ago. Employing food as a platform

for critical communications, Shafak initiates effective and long-lasting remedies through literature.

Keywords: Multiculturalism, Ethnic Identity, Food Narratives, Turkey, Armenian Genocide

Traditional cuisine serves as an identity marker creating micro-narratives that help communities unravel and redefine their identities. It plays an instrumental role in sustaining and asserting a nation's collective identity. On such occasions, food becomes a source and carrier of culture. Taking a cue from this understanding, multicultural writers, experiment and express their nation's polyphonic voices through food narratives in a discursive manner. The paper studies Elif Shafak's description and use of traditional Turkish dishes in her novel The Bastard of Istanbul (2007). The novel chosen weaves Armenian-Turkish history into the story of Barsam Tchamakhchian, whose ancestors were genocide victims. The author overcomes the difficulty of codifying elusive similarities and differences in culture by choosing food as a sign. Frequent references to conventional food items aid the reader in remaining rooted in the context. "Men's and women's ability to produce, provide, distribute and consume food is a key measure of their power. This ability varies according to their culture, their class, and their family organization, and the overall economic structure of their society" (Counihan 2). The text is not about food but food-laced memories and incidents help the readers objectively decode the novel's leitmotifs.

The select novel is set in Turkey, a land torn apart by tradition and modernity, a terrain where silenced histories and memories generate select identity countenances. The most prosperous period in Turkish history was during the Ottoman expansion. During annexation, the Turks tried to absorb, alter and modify the essence of various native cultures of subjugated lands and their societies to suit their beliefs and methods. Armenian settlements existed in the region before the establishment of the Ottoman Empire and till the 1900s Turkish and Armenian populations coexisted almost amicably. Armenians, mostly Christians, never played a dominant role and lived in small pockets in the eastern regions. Traditionally farmers the Armenians dis-

played great community cohesion and held on to their beliefs and ways of life with a passionate zeal. Just before the First World War some of the prosperous Armenian families began to hold important governmental posts and maintain connections with Armenians settled in Russia, simultaneously. This irked Turkish rulers and caused public doubts regarding the loyalty of the Armenian population in Turkey. With the defeat of the Turks in the Balkan Wars the government started to blame the Armenian Christians and began persecuting them. They were forced to move from their villages, under military surveillance, to concentration camps. In many places, rebels and Turkish soldiers clashed leading to what is referred to as the Armenian genocide of 1915. It is estimated that nearly 1.5 to 2 million Armenians were arrested, deported, converted or massacred between 1915-1917 by the Turkish government. This episode left a deep scar in the nation's psyche that has not healed even today.

Images related to food here form a unique objective correlative making significant contributions to the author's efforts to untangle the nation's history. In her introduction to Cooking Lessons: The Politics of Gender and Food Sherrie Inness notes: "At the cultural level, food has a deeper significance than simple survival. Every society invests symbolic importance to food" (xii). Elif Shafak cashes upon this symbolic significance attached to food in Armenian and Turkish traditions to talk on a sensitive issue of national significance. Even in the past narratives have connected ethnic identity to food habits. Food has proved itself capable of defining people and cultures. In this postmodern age of globalisation, images related to food retain a universal and ethnic identity at the same. In "Introduction: Food in Multi-Ethnic Literatures," Gardaphé and Xu describe French sociologist Claude Fischler's convincing argument in "Food, Self and Identity" which states "that food constitutes the self. . . . The saying, 'You are what you eat,' bespeaks not only the biochemical relationship between us and our food but also the extent to which food practices determine our systems of beliefs and representations" (7). Definite eating practices reflect self-identity and social identity and are indicators of family, class, and ethnic community one belongs to.

Elif Shafak, the Turkish novelist, has nineteen works to her

claim. She handles Turkish and English equally well and blends oral and written storytelling methods admirably in her works. Overriding the collective amnesia posed by the dominant centres of her nation, she voices the silenced memories of her land through her narratives. This has positioned her at the centre of many life-threatening controversies. Now settled in the United States of America, Shafak maintains a diasporic identity. In the select novel, when the chief protagonist Armanoush visits Istanbul, in her attempts to understand her identity, a secret is exposed that links the Kanzanci and Tchamakhachian families conclusively to the 1915-17 Armenian deportations and massacres. The shocking discoveries of Armanoush stun both Turkish and international readers alike. The nation in denial is forced to respond and make responsible assertions.

The main characters of the novel are surrounded by a cluster of alienated women. Women are stereotypically assumed to love food and cooking. It is their workspace. Nevertheless, in this seemingly limited space, their collective interactions unravel family secrets and hidden national histories. "The preparation of food is a chain that binds. The willing preparation of food is a link that liberates" (Counihan 2). Through images related to food, the author makes and breaks identities. Ultimate truth values are exposed through incidents and symbols associated with edible commodities. Narrated through the eyes of four generations of women, the narrative reveals buried family secrets, political and sexual taboos, memories, and amnesia and highlights the need to talk about them. "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 anything but bygone" (Shafak 347). Historically and politically conversant characters juxtapose truth claims linked to centuries-old Turkish-Armenian conflicts. This helps readers comprehend misinterpreted information and appropriations in a new light.

Rose, an American citizen, marries an Armenian Barsam Tchamakhchian. A daughter Armanoush is born to them. The alliance soon ended in divorce because Barsam's family could not tolerate Rose, an Odar, an outsider. To get back at her husband's family, Rose remarries a Turk, Mustafa, and allows him to bring up Armanoush, or

Amy in short. Barsam's family members are genocide survivors. They cannot tolerate Amy being brought up by a Turk. Caught in between, Amy dithers between three worlds - American, Turkish, and Armenian. She is neither here nor there. To understand her plurality, she decides to visit her grandmother Shushan Tchamakhchian's (Barsam's grandmother) ancestral home. During her stay in Turkey, she stays at her stepfather's ancestral home. Mustafa's Kanzanci family is shocked when they discover that Amy is of mixed heritage. Hence the plot aids Shafak mix Turkish public history and personal memory. In this attempt, images related to food and cuisine play a pivotal role in distinguishing identities and finding paths of reconciliation.

On reaching Turkey, Amy meets Aysa, a girl of her age, at Mustafa's ancestral home. Aysa is a bastard child. She is forced to call her mother auntie to avoid social stigma. She lives with her three aunts, mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother who are all waiting for Mustafa, the male heir who has settled in America, to return. Hence both Aysa and Amy do not have a validated history. The girls become friends helping Shafak to discuss the Armenian-Turkish conflict in detail. Armanoush represents the fourth generation of Armenian Christian families and Aysa is the Turkish Muslim family nominee in the novel. Nations are imagined communities held together by hard essential realities such as family, clan, tribe, rituals food, and so forth. "Men's and women's attitudes about their bodies, the legitimacy of their appetites, and the importance of their food work reveal whether their self-concept is validating or denigrating" (Counihan 2). The cleverly manipulated use of cuisine in the novel makes it an agency that can transgress political, traditional, and social realms of memory. The characters in the novel are forced to acknowledge their similarities and forget their differences.

Common elements between Turkish and Armenian food are brought out through many instances, establishing a bond between the two warring sections. The Kazanci family is surprised that Amy can name many of the dishes set on their table: "I see you have made hummus, baba ghanoush, yalanci, sarma . . . and look at this, you have baked churek!" "Aaaah, do you speak Turkish?!" Auntie Banu asked Amy. "No, no I do not speak the Turkish language, unfortunately, but

I guess I speak the Turkish cuisine" replies Amy (Shafak 155). Banu's surprise and misconception that Armanoush spoke Turkish shows that the Turkish family did not even realise that the Armenian's diet preferences are very similar to theirs. Mustafa, a Turk, is also mistaken for an Armenian because of his familiarity with Armenian cuisine. The truth is that both groups have coexisted in the same region for centuries and hence have similar cuisine.

The novel demonstrates how knowledge about food can foster bonding and identity. However, it can also be used as a tool for oppression and discrimination. 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 food items she had been craving: "From now on she would cook whatever she wanted. She would cook real Kentucky dishes for her daughter" (Shafak 39). The incident reflects the trauma of following an alien cuisine. 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! Each time we came to your house, she would put on that dirty apron and cool mutton" (Shafak 58). Food was never able to connect Rose and her husband's family. Mustafa is very particular about the ingredients and taste of the food prepared for him. The women in his household adhere to his minute demands and go to extreme levels to fulfil his diet preferences. Food adorns a gendered halo when addressing the question of who makes it and for whom is it made. "Gender is constituted through men's and women's roles in the production, distribution and symbolism of food" (Counihan 3). Food is inseparable from prevailing material and symbolic realities in the novel. The paper discusses ethnic cultures that are possessive, take pride in their cuisine and utilize it for social validation and cultural homogeneity.

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. If it was Feride, they would be full of rice, each green pepper so ballooned it was impossible to eat without breaking … When it was Cevriye who had cooked the dish, however, it was always sweeter, because she added powdered sugar to every edible thing no matter what, as if to compensate for the sourness in her universe. (Shafak 24)

Polyphonic voices from the text, representing two ethnic communities, foreground local stories, local cuisine, and local traditions. These voices are truer narrators of history than found in History texts. Auntie Feride lovingly prepares manti and reminds: "We Kazancis love red meat! The redder, the greasier, the better!" (74). Auntie Banu uses food as a source of comfort. She offers Armanoush lentil soup to alleviate jetlag and a plate of "two oranges, peeled and sliced" before bedtime as a comfort for a girl whom she thinks studies a lot (Shafak 183-84). Amy compares and notes how her Armenian grandmother, now settled in America, too had a similar habit of offering peeled oranges before bedtime. On Aysa's birthdays, the same dishes are baked every year for the past eighteen years: "She is made to eat the same cake - a triple layer caramelized apple cake with whipped lemon cream frosting" (60). Dialogues and activities related to homemade meals give the characters a context and a sense of belongingness. Zeliha, the youngest Kazancis sister, and Rose are ostracized because neither can cook. These acts authenticate and, at times, destabilise many stereotypical images the cultural representatives in the text had about each other.

The paper now focuses on an interesting strategy adopted by Shafak. Every chapter title in the novel refers to a food item. The ingredient chosen is in some way descriptive of the character or the situation portrayed in the particular chapter. For example, chapter two is titled Garbanzo Beans. Rose, in an act of protest, is buying "hamburgers, … fried eggs and maple-syrup-soaked pancakes and hot dogs with onions and mutton barbecue … hot spicy chilli, or smoked bacon … garbanzo beans" when she meets Mustafa searching for garbanzo beans in the same section (Shafak 38). This encounter restarts a relationship between Kazanci and the Tchakhmakhchian family severed

during the 1915 genocide. The act results in Armanoush travelling to Turkey and befriending Aysa. The fourth chapter is titled Roasted Hazelnuts. In this chapter, Aunt Banu upgrades her clairvoyant reading techniques and begins to use roasted hazelnut to read the future:

> Being the holy lady that she was, rumour had it in Istanbul, she did not demand any money from her needy customers and instead asked them to bring only a handful of hazelnuts. The hazelnut became a symbol of her bigheartedness… Mother Hazelnut they started to call her. (Shafak 70)

Other chapter names include Cinnamon, Garbanzo Beans, Sugar, Vanilla, Pistachios, Almonds, Dried Apricots, Pomegranate Seeds, etc. This tactic adds an element of familiarity, introduces the exotic and adds context to the narrative. In the plot, these images recur, adding more visual continuity.

By the end of the narrative, it becomes apparent that each chapter's titular elements are ingredients used to prepare the dessert Ashure. "Ashure was the symbol of continuity and stability, the epitome of the good days to come after each storm, no matter how frightening the storm had been" (Shafak 263). It is a delicacy prepared in connection to Muharrem and is served at marriages, on special occasions, and at funeral functions. Reference to Ashure also adds a sense of continuity and legalises the presence of Turks and Armenians in Turkey. The anecdote of how Ashure was first prepared by Noah for the travellers of his ark connects mythology to the dessert and makes it a powerful identity and cultural marker. Kazancis and Armenians cook and share the dish indicating a similarity in their origins and culture. Ashure does not contain meat and is a mixture of healthy fibre-rich content. Through the choice of this dish, violence and bloodshed are vetoed against peace and prosperity.

Happiness, spirituality, and grief are all attached to the dish. Shafak uses the dish in the novel as a binding agent. No incident suddenly happens. Minor defining elements add on to culminate into major ones; here it culminates into a catastrophe. "In this egalitarian culture, male and female differential control over diverse aspects of the food system is explicitly balanced in belief and practice" (Counihan

3). Banu, Mustafa's clairvoyant sister discovers his crime. He had raped his younger sister and bigoted Aysa. The highly religious-minded Banu saw it as an act of incest that he had to pay for. Banu uses his favourite dish Ashure to punish him. Traditionally attached with a therapeutic and spiritual value here it is presented as a weapon to punish. To all the traditional ingredients of the recipe indicated by the chapter titles, Banu adds an extra ingredient - Potassium Cyanide to help her brother purge his soul. She kills him. Thus, the chapter titles represent the pieces of a puzzle that reveal Armanoush and Asya's backgrounds and nationalities. Ashure is the symbolic remedy that Shafak offers the world. Like the ingredients of Ashure, all groups must come together to create peace and harmony through togetherness. History cannot be rewritten but one should not poison it further with hatred.

Another powerful symbol that expounds the message of unity in the novel is that of a gold pomegranate brooch that has rubies in the place of seeds. Hovhannes Stamboulian, an aristocratic writer acquired the brooch as a family heirloom. For him it symbolised togetherness. But within a few days of acquiring the broach, Stamboulian watched helplessly as his family was scattered during the 1915-17 massacres. In the collection of folktales written by Stamtboulian, a pomegranate tree tells the story of a little lost pigeon. The "the little lost pigeon," is Shushan Stamboulian who was a girl of four at the time of the genocide (Shafak 314). She had to wait for years before she could reunite with her family. "Once pomegranate breaks and all its seeds scatter in different directions you cannot put it back together" (Shafak 245). By the time she was traced by her family, Shushan Stamboulian was married had a toddler and a new Muslim name and identity - Shermin Kazanci. It is the brooch that resurfaces as a reminder and connects her to the past. Despite all the suffering and loneliness during the days of the massacre and displacement, Shushan was able to recognise her father's brooch:

> Her childhood identity was nothing more than morsels of memory, like crumbs of bread she had scattered behind for some bird to nibble on, since she herself would never be able to return the same way back home. Though even the dearest memories of her childhood eventually vanished, the brooch remained vividly ingrained in

> her mind. And years later when a man from America appeared at her door, it would be this very brooch that helped her to fathom that the stranger was none other than her own brother. (Shafak 217)

She leaves the brooch with her toddler before migrating to America with her Armenian family. Barsam is her grandson. The transient pomegranate brooch travels through decades to its rightful heir at the end of the novel. It symbolises a commemoration of continuity and reconciliation. "Life is a coincidence though sometimes it takes a djinni to fathom that" (Shafak 347). It is a reminder not only of how the past controls the present but also emphasises the need to imagine and create a new future for Turkey. The structure and colour of the fruit chosen perfectly blend with the theme and plot of the story.

Banu Kazanci is a traditional card reader who deduces the future and past with the help of Hazelnuts, coffee mugs, tarot cards, and her two djinnis. 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 once again connects food, history, and memory. Other images connected to food are Cafe Kundera and Cafe Constanipolis. It is a space where young Turks and Diasporic Armenians interact. Cafe Kundera is now located in a space where Armenian settlements thrived before the massacres. So heated discussions take place at this arena and Amy gathers many valid pieces of information from here. On the other hand, Café Constanipolis is a virtual space, an adjunct to Amy's psychological space. As a representative Turk Aysa's apology through this medium is another message Shafak has for her readers. These arenas become psychological battlegrounds where inner conflicts are resolved.

Aram, an Armenian character, born and brought up in Turkey, is the only one who embraces things as they are experienced. Aram's choice of tattoo - an uprooted fig tree upside down is another significant symbol. "Instead of earth, it is rooted in the sky. It is displaced but not placeless" writes Shafak drawing attention to the relevance of the upside-down fig tree (246). Amy and Aysa count their losses and feel the need to retrace history. In contrast through the introduction of the upside-down fig tree, Shafak reminds the readers that there is a space

for all. Unlike Armanoush who feels the need to escape to America, Aram is the happiest in Istanbul, where history, modernity, and culture meet. "Cultural differences should not separate us from each other, but rather cultural diversity brings a collective strength that can benefit all humanity," says Robert Alan (quoted in Hoogerwerf, 3). Aram represents those who are aware of the past atrocities the nation has undergone but are ready to embrace the future.

Food is the element through which the author validates Armenian presence in Turkey. "These two families are presented as examples of several Turkish religious groups who share the bondage of similar cultural cuisine. Shared culinary heritage helps them in understanding and respecting each other's emotions and feelings" (Jawad 684-85). The choice of cuisine individualises the characters and adorns them with specific and interactive identities bringing them to full, defining and rejuvenating selves. The paper establishes how through subtle strategies Shafak has oriented the plot forcing one to recall Roland Barthes's ideas related to food from Mythologies: "It is not only a collection of products that can be used for statistical or nutritional studies. It is also, and at the same time, a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations, and behaviour" (167). The text conversationally re-frames images from the past to reveal an intense dramatic matrix that touches on love, revenge, trauma, and ethnic discrimination. Emphasis on cultural food choices is a source that alleviates differences and opens deliberations on significant socio-political concerns of the nation. This food narrative reminds and restructures political and social affinities to suit present times.

Works Cited

Barthes, Roland (1961). Toward a psychosociology of contemporary food consumption. In C. Counihan & P. Van Esterik (Eds.), *Food and culture: A reader*. Routledge, 1997, pp. 20-27.

Counihan, Carole M. and Steven L. Kaplan. (Ed). (2005). Introduction. *Food and gender: Identity and power*. Harwood Academic Publishers. pp. 1-12.

Gardaphe, F. L., and W. Xu. (2007). Introduction: Food in multi-ethnic literatures. MELUS. (vol. 32, no. 4, pp. 5-10), doi:10.1093/melus/ 32.4.5

Hoogerwerf, Ryan Patrick. (2018). Creating intercultural competency: Justification and design of a church leader intercultural encounter workshop. *Communication studies undergraduate publications, presentations and projects,* pp.3. https://pilotscholars.up.edu/cst_studpubs/89

Inness, Sherrie A. (Ed.). (2001). *Cooking lessons: The politics of gender and food*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Jawad, Tayyaba. (2018). Food: An expression of Turkish culture and tradition in Elif Shafak's The Bastard of

Istanbul. *International journal of English literature and social sciences*. (Vol 3, issue 4, pp. 680– 685). https://dx.doi.org/10.22161/ijels.3.4.27.

Shafak, Elif. (2007). *The Bastard of Istanbul*. Viking.

Dr Manchusha Madhusudhanan
Assistant Professor
Department of English
Maharaja's College, Ernakulam
Pin: 682011
India
Email: manchusha@maharajas.ac.in
Ph: +91 9446746441
ORCID: 0009-0005-7939-9724
&
Dr Sabitha S Babu
Assistant Professor
Department of English
Maharaja's College, Ernakulam
Pin: 682011
India
Email: sabitha@maharajas.ac.in
Ph: +91 9746837396
ORCID: 0009-0008-9593-2834