

# BİR TECHİRİN (YA DA SOYKIRIMIN?) DALLANMASI: THE BASTARD OF ISTANBUL

L. Filiz ÖZBAŞ<sup>[\*]</sup>

---

## ABSTRACT

The story deals with a historic reality, the deportation of the Armenians in the Ottoman empire in 1905 and its ramifications, interweaving the story of two families, one American-Armenian- the Tchakmakchian family with roots in Istanbul and the other one Turkish- the Kazanci family. The paper examines the layers of the stories of these families, how these families are connected to each other and to the events of 1905 and Elif Shafak's stance as regards what really happened in 1905 in the Ottoman Empire.

**Bases of Research:** Elif Shafak's novel *The Bastard of Istanbul*

**Purpose of Research:** To analyze the levels of meaning and the stance of the author in Elif Shafak's *The Bastard of Istanbul*

**Sources of Data** Elif Shafak's *The Bastard of Istanbul*

**Main Discussion:** What are the levels of meaning in the book and what is the stance of the author?

**Conclusions:** The Armenian deportation of 1905 brought pain and suffering in different ways to both communities; the events in the story are contrived to represent the pain. Elif Shafak tries to avoid the wrath of both communities and to straddle.

**Keywords:** deportation, genocide, rape, punishment

---

<sup>[\*]</sup> Cyprus International University, Faculty of Education

## Ramifications of a Deportation (or Genocide?): The Bastard of Istanbul

### ÖZ

Romandaki öykü, kökleri İstanbul'da olan Ermeni aile ile İstanbul'da yaşayan bir Türk ailenin 1905 yılındaki Ermeni techirinden nasıl etkilendiklerini anlatmaktadır. Elif Şafak bu etkileri kurguladığı olaylarla verirken taraf tutmamaya çalışmakta, hatta iki topluma da yaranmaya çalışmaktadır.

**Araştırmanın Temelleri:** Elif Şafak'ın *The Bastard of Istanbul* adlı romanı

**Araştırmanın Amacı:** Elif Şafak'ın *The Bastard of Istanbul* adlı romanındaki anlam katmanlarını ve yazarın 1905 olayları karşısındaki tutumunu incelemek.

**Veri Kaynakları:** Elif Şafak'ın *The Bastard of Istanbul* adlı romanı

**Ana Tartışma:** Romandaki anlam katmanları nelerdir ve yazarın 1905 olayları karşısında tutumu nedir?

**Sonuçlar:** Ermeni techiri her iki topluma acı getirmiş olup, kitaptaki olaylar bu acıları temsil etmek üzere kurgulanmıştır. Elif Şafak her iki toplumun şimşeklerini üzerine çekmemek için olayların kurgusuyla iki topluma da yaranmayı seçmiştir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** örüntü, mekân, zaman, karakterler, olaylar, çözüm

*The Bastard of Istanbul* is Elif Shafak's extremely colorful and imaginative novel. The story deals with a historic reality, the deportation of the Armenians in the Ottoman empire in 1905 and its ramifications, interweaving the story of two families, one American-Armenian- the Tchakmakchian family with roots in Istanbul and the other one Turkish- the Kazanci family. The former have immigrated to America and now live in Arizona but retain their burning hatred toward the Turks, while the latter are living in a konak<sup>1</sup> in Istanbul, oblivious and imperious to the events of 1905. Both families have a dark secret in their past, which unites them as if they were the two sides of the same coin. This paper aims to examine the layers of the stories of these families, how these families are connected to each other and to the events of 1905 and Elif Shafak's stance as regards what really happened in 1905 in the Ottoman Empire.

<sup>1</sup> Konak: a mansion house

This double-decker novel fuses the stories of two families with the help of one member of each family. On the Turkish side, Mustafa Kazancı who rapes his sister Zeliha leaves his homeland and goes to America to run away from his past. There he marries an Armenian divorcee with a little girl. On the Armenian side is this little girl who is now a young girl, Armanoush Tchakmakchian whom Mustafa has ironically fostered. By leaving her country secretly and going to Istanbul to find her true identity, Armanoush brings about the revelation of what her stepfather has been trying to hide. By moving away from their present realities both are instrumental in bringing out the reality of their joint-past, i.e. that they are from the same family for Armanoush Tchakmakchian's grandmother and the great-grandmother of Asya, Mustafa's daughter by rape who gives the book its name *The bastard of Istanbul* are the same person, which makes them cousins. Therefore, Mustafa and Armanoush Tchakmakchian are second cousins. This is the first level in the plot.

On a second level these two incidents of running away from the homeland only to meet what is desperately trying to be avoided are used by Elif Shafak to make a general comment on the Armenian deportation of 1905 in the Ottoman Empire. Her starting point is that above all, Turks and Armenians constitute a big family. This is a family matter. Hence, this is much more devastating than enemies killing each other because Armenians and Turks lived together for hundreds of years and became so to speak "one big family." In fact, Armenians were considered to be the most loyal subjects to the Padishah. On a second level that Armanoush Tchakmakchian who believes that what was done in the past was genocide is representative of Armenians trying to prove that genocide was committed by the Turks only to find out that they were a part of the killings of 1905. Mustafa's running away from what he has done is representative of the Turkish stance in general, avoidance of the murders committed in 1905 and their claims that just as Mustafa has acquired a new identity by leaving his country, Turks have also acquired a new identity with the Republic of Turkey by leaving the Ottoman Empire. As one of the characters in the book says on the Turkish view,

*But you have to understand it was a time of war. People died on both sides. Do you have any idea how many Turks have died in the hands of Armenian rebels? Did you ever think about the other side of the story? I bet you didn't! How about the sufferings of the Turkish families? It is all tragic but we need to understand that 1915 was not 2005. Times were different back*

*then; it was the Ottoman Empire, for God's sake. The premodern era and its premodern tragedies (Shafak 209).*

As regards Shafak's stance on the reality of what really happened in the past, the incident related with a djinni is important. Mustafa's elder sister Banu Kazancı who declares herself a soothsayer and who is the master of two djinn, one good (Mrs. Sweet) and one bad (Mr. Bitter), asks her bad djinni if Armenian claims that there was genocide are justified or not because this djinni is very old and therefore the most knowledgeable when it comes to traumatic ends. She has also learned about the rape of Zeliha by Mustafa from this bad djinni. Mr. Bitter is ready to answer her question regarding the Armenian claims, but Banu DOES NOT WANT TO KNOW. This incident can be construed as a desire not to take a definite stand on the Armenian issue. Elif Shafak cannot or does not take a definite stand on the issue and make her omniscient djinni say that either there was or there was not genocide. We witness further examples of this attitude throughout the novel.

Another level in the story is the rape of Zeliha by Mustafa. Rape, which is tantamount to murder, is also symbolic for the killings of 1905. Back in 1905, Armenian rebels killed Turks and members of those families killed Armenians on their march to Syria. Mustafa, being Turkish by his father's line and Armenian by his mother's side, stands for/ represents/ is symbolic of both the Turks and the Armenians who committed these murders. This is not any rape/murder but the rape/murder of a family member with whom the rapist/murderer has lived in the same home for years, thus representing Turks and Armenians who lived peacefully for hundreds of years in the same homeland. Disruption of the microcosmic order, the rape, represents the disruption of the macrocosmic order, the peaceful coexistence of Ottoman Armenians and Ottoman Turks. On the other hand, Mustafa is, at the same time, the embodiment of the Armenians and the Turks who suffered by trying to run away from the responsibility of what they have done. In this respect, each deals with the pain of the trauma by employing different strategies peculiar to them. Turks deny their wrongdoing while Armenians put the whole blame on Turks, denying their responsibility and preferring to savor the cocoon of victimhood.

A further level is that which lies behind the events surrounding Mustafa. For one thing, he is encouraged to kill himself by Banu, his eldest sister, for the atrocity he has committed. Banu puts the *ashure*<sup>2</sup> containing the potassium cyanide next to his bed, they have a conversation about the identity of Asya's father, and Banu tells

<sup>2</sup> Ashure: a Turkish dessert made of a mixture consisting of grains, fruit and nuts symbolic of all the food left in Noah's ark when it landed in Mt. Ararat.

him her djinni has revealed everything to her. After a period of deliberation, Mustafa decides to eat the *ashure*. Thus, it is his family that punishes him for what he has done and he pays for his crime with his life. This represents the Ottoman Empire which did not evade the issue but punished the perpetrators who could not get away with what they had done.<sup>3</sup> 1673 people who were accused of killings were court-marshaled<sup>4</sup> and 67 of them were sentenced to death while many were imprisoned. Furthermore, Mustafa voluntarily undertakes to commit “suicide”. This is highly meaningful in that it represents the responsibility for the atrocities committed both by the Turks who killed the Armenians and by the Armenians who killed the Turks, for he has both Turkish and Armenian blood in him. Elif Shafak makes use of a very intelligent strategy here by making Mustafa punished. Thus, she is able to appear to be on both the Turkish side and the Armenian side.

Yet another level is the story of Sushan Stambouljian/Kazanci/ Tchakmakchian. After losing her brother, Yervent on the road to Aleppo, she contracts typhus, a Turkish mother and daughter find and cure her, a horde of bandits take her away and she ends up in an orphanage in Istanbul where her name is changed to Shermin and where Levent Kazanci happens to find her. He marries her because she is the niece of his late master Levon Stambouljian. The couple has a son, Levent Kazanci who is the father of Banu, Feride, Zeliha and Mustafa. Just when Levent is old enough to begin talking, Yervent finds Sushan in Istanbul and gives her the pomegranate brooch which irrevocably reminds her of her real identity, that she is Armenian. Leaving behind a letter explaining her situation and asking for forgiveness, she goes to the United States with her brother and ends up marrying Sarkis Tchakmakchian and raising an Armenian family. She also leaves the pomegranate brooch behind so that it can be given to her son. This is Sushan’s dark secret. She leaves behind a loving husband and a little child who needs her. That little child grows into a bitter and abusive man who is despotic towards his children for he has been denied love and care by his mother and been betrayed. Sushan’s betrayal is the betrayal of the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire, who left to join the enemy ranks during World War I. However, injustice has been done to Sushan by the Turks as well. It was the decision to deport the Armenians that caused her to be left an orphan and deprived of her own kin. If she had not been left an orphan

<sup>3</sup> Fugitive soldiers attacked those being deported in gangs and the protection provided was insufficient due to the fact that the Ottoman Empire was fighting in three fronts at the time. Moreover, some of those responsible for protection insulted beat or extorted the emigrants.

<sup>4</sup> As stated in documents sent to Ministry of Foreign Affairs by Ministry of Internal Affairs on February 19<sup>th</sup>, March 12<sup>th</sup> and May 22<sup>nd</sup> 1916.

would she have done what she did is a question to be asked as well. Elif Shafak is now trying to appear on the side of Armenians who claim to be victims and to make excuses for them.

To counterbalance this attitude Shafak creates another incident in the plot. After Armanoush Tchakmakchian takes a self-scoring test that measures the degree of one's "Armenianness", she feels she needs to find her true identity, and for this purpose, she decides to go to Istanbul, to her step-father's family in order to discover her past. In contrast to this Armenian girl who is unsure of her identity is another character created by Elif Shafak, and it is Aram Martirossian, an Armenian settled very happily in Istanbul and confident of his identity<sup>5</sup>. When Armanoush suggests that he move to America where there are many Armenian communities, thinking Aram may be under Turkish oppression, Aram's response is:

*Why would I want to do that, dear Armanoush? This city is my city. I was born and raised in Istanbul. My family's history in this city goes back at least five hundred years. Armenian Istanbulites belong to Istanbul, just like the Turkish, Kurdish, Greek and Jewish Istanbulites do. We have first managed and then badly failed to live together. We cannot fail again (Shafak 254).*

Aram can speak Armenian, while Armanoush cannot, which shows the freedom of the atmosphere he was raised in. Thus, with these words coming from the mouth of an Armenian we see Shafak on the side of the Turks who have always allowed Armenians to retain their language, religion and culture, that is, their identity. What is more, Aram is Zeliha's significant other, which shows that Armenians and Turks can and do live together harmoniously like they did before in the Ottoman Empire.

Mustafa is dead and gone. The Armenian question belongs to the past, to the times of the Ottoman Empire, yet bygones cannot be bygones. The bastard remains. This bastard is many things at the same time. It is the bastard of Istanbul. As one of the characters says Istanbul is not a city but a vessel. The people are all passengers there who come and go in clusters. Istanbul is like Noah's ark where *ashure* was made on the last day, and all animals contributed, each by supplying one of the ingredients. Istanbul is a microcosm for the whole world and it has a bastard. This bastard is, above all, illegitimacy, representative of the fact that both what has been done in the past and what is being done today is wrong. It was wrong for the

<sup>5</sup> It was the Gregorian Armenians that were deported not the others, and they lived in middle Anatolia, not in Istanbul.

Armenians to revolt against the Ottoman Empire when the empire was fighting on three fronts in World War I. It was wrong of the Ottoman Empire to deport women and children on foot to Aleppo. It is wrong of the Armenians to accuse Turks of genocide today and of the Turks to pretend nothing has happened. This bastard is alive. It has to be dealt with, one way or another. The Armenian issue has to be resolved and the time has come for both nations to reconcile.

This is Elif Shafak's stance in the novel. The plot of *The Bastard of Istanbul* is symmetrical<sup>6</sup>. This echoes and accentuates the fact that the Armenian issue has two sides to it, with the Armenians accusing the Turks of genocide and the Turks blaming the Armenians in their effort to defend themselves. The intelligently contrived incidents of the plot swing from one side to the other, never taking a stance on one side. One can ask the question is Elif Shafak aspiring to achieve total objectivity by being unbiased in the face of a historical tragedy, or is she trying to curry favor with both Armenians and Turks by not offending either party? The answer to this question is not an easy one; yet, one thing is for sure. Elif Shafak is a Turkish born writer who divides her time between the US and Turkey. It is only natural for her to identify with both the people of her native land and the Diaspora living in the US and not try to antagonize either one. The most important incident in the book regarding what Elif Shafak really thinks is Banu's incident with Mr. Bitter, the bad djinn who is fully equipped with the knowledge to relieve Banu of her quandary. "I was a vulture... I saw it all... should you want to know what happened... My memory can be yours, master" says Mr. Bitter (Shafak192). This is the closest we get to a verdict of genocide or acquittal in the book. Yet, the creator of the djinn, the omniscient master of the novel does not allow herself to blurt out the so-called "truth" of what really happened in 1905. She makes Banu, half Armenian and half Turkish, tell the djinn to shut up. Banu prays to Allah to grant her the bliss of ignorance or to give her the strength to bear the knowledge. And Shafak, qua Banu, chooses the bliss of ignorance because she does not want to be unhappy with her findings if she truly probes into the truth of the matter. The implication is that the Armenians and the Turks do not really want to know what really happened. In so doing Shafak hopes not only to escape the wrath of both communities but also to enable both parties to use this piece of the plot to their advantage in strengthening their point of view. Had the plot not been constructed the way it was, we could say that Elif Shafak adopts an objective attitude toward the Armenian deportation. Despite her efforts not to take sides but to straddle, Elif

<sup>6</sup> An incident in the first chapter is counterbalanced in the last chapter, a second in the chapter second from the last, and so on.

Shafak cannot evade criticism from her native land. When this novel was published in Turkey, Shafak was accused by nationalistic lawyers of insulting Turkish identity. Later, the charges were dropped.

Finally, we can argue that Elif Shafak does not have a definite answer as to the course of action the two societies should take either, but in this context, as Sükrü Elekdağ former ambassador to the USA, says in his letter dated April, 16<sup>th</sup>, 2010 to Barack Obama, “the best course should be, in line with an ethical and even-handed approach, to encourage the parties to bring to light and to clarify the obscure and ambiguous aspects of the conflict between the Ottoman State and the Armenians. This would best be accomplished by employing a common, scientifically disciplined research effort by Turks and Armenians regarding their mutual history and by completely opening their archives to examination for unless the existence of the material and mental elements of the crime as well as its execution with the specific intent have been proven, and unless the perpetration of the crime has been determined by a competent court, a charge of “genocide” leveled against a person or a state has no legal value and only constitutes a defamation. *Nullum crimen sine lege, and nulla poena sine lege* - there is no crime without a law, and no punishment without a law.”

## WORKS CITED

Laçiner, Sedat. <http://www.tumgazeteler.com/?a=4459288>

Sarinay, Yusuf. *Ermeni Techiri ve Yargılamalar*, (The Armenian Deportation and the Trials)

içinde Mustafa Çalık (ed.), `Ermeni Soykırımı` İddiaları, (The Armenian Genocide Claims) Ankara: Cedit Neşriyat, 2006, pp.184-190.

Shafak, Elif. *The Bastard of Istanbul*, Penguin Books Ltd., London: 2007.