

**WHO IS THE OTHER? MELTING IN THE POT
IN ELIF SHAFAK'S *THE SAINT OF INCIPIENT INSANITIES*
AND *THE BASTARD OF ISTANBUL***

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the ways in which Elif Shafak's novels *The Saint of Incipient Insanities* and *The Bastard of Istanbul*, which are set both in Turkey and the US and centered on the themes of 'migrancy' and 'transculturalism' interrogate and undermine the essentialized boundaries of 'home', 'nation' and 'identity'. *The Saint of Incipient Insanities* revolves around the interactions of a group of international students in Boston, mainly the relationship between Ömer, a graduate student from Turkey, and Gail, the eccentric, manic-depressive Jewish-American girl who later becomes Ömer's wife but commits suicide by jumping from the Bosphorus Bridge, "the perfect place of inbetweenness" in her words, when they visit Ömer's family in Istanbul. In *The Bastard of Istanbul* the family histories of four generations of Turkish and Armenian (-American) women become intertwined, as the novel describes how the members of Kazancı and Tchakmakhchian families, especially Asya and Armanoush, the youngest generation of women of the two families try to come to terms with their past and identity, particularly as they develop a friendship and dialogue in Istanbul during Armanoush's secret visit. Not only the memories of the past but also the objects, images and relationships that simultaneously efface and re-inscribe the traces of the past constitute a significant aspect of the novel as well as this article which argues that the ambiguous part such objects, images and relationships play in establishing links between the past and the present destabilize monolithic conceptions of history and identity. So does the central metaphor of *The Saint of Incipient Insanities*, which inspired the title of this article, namely a childhood game Gail likes playing, in which she can combine and re-combine in endless configurations the letters or ingredients of the 'alphabet soup' in her Bowl of Eden. It is, however, in the unresolved tensions between the characters' individual and collective identities and between their multifarious allegiances that the totalizing discourses on nation, ethnicity, and identity, as well as the concept of 'otherness' that such discourses rest on are called into question.

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ÖZET

Bu makale, Elif Şafak'ın, her ikisi de A.B.D ve Türkiye'de geçen ve göçmenlik ve kültürler arası geçişkenlik konularına odaklanan *Araf* ve *Baba ve Piç* adlı romanlarında vatan, ulus ve kimlik kavramlarının mutlak sınırlarının sorgulanışını incelemektedir. *Araf*, Boston'da çeşitli ülkelerden gelen bir grup öğrenci arasındaki iletişim ve ilişkileri, özellikle de Türk bir yüksek lisans öğrencisi olan Ömer ve sonradan Ömer'le evlenen ve onun ailesini ziyaret etmek için gittikleri İstanbul'da, kendi deyimiyle 'aradakalmışlığın en mükemmel örneği' olan Boğaz Köprüsü'nden atlayarak intihar eden sıradışı, manik depresif Yahudi-Amerikalı Gail arasındaki ilişkiyi konu alır. *Baba ve Piç* te ise biri Türk diğeri Ermeni-Amerikalı iki aileden dört kuşak kadının aile geçmişlerinin, özellikle Kazancı ve Çakmakçıyan ailelerinin en genç kuşak kadınları olan Asya ve Armanuş'un, geçmişleri ve kimliklerini ararken, Armanuş'un gizli İstanbul seyahati sırasında geliştirdikleri arkadaşlık ve diyaloglar ile birbirine bağlanışı anlatılır. Sadece geçmişin anıları değil, geçmişin izlerini hem silmeye hem de canlı tutmaya yarayan çeşitli objeler, imgeler, hatta ilişkiler, her iki romanda ve bu makalede önemli bir rol oynamaktadır. Bu makale, geçmiş ve şimdi arasında kurulan bağlantıların muğlak ve paradoksal öğeleri olan bu objeler ve sembollerin, tarih ve kimlik kavramlarının mutlaklığını sorgulamakta, değişkenliğini vurgulamakta olduğunun altını çizmektedir. Aslında, *Araf* romanının en önemli metaforlarından olan ve Gail'in oynamaktan hoşlandığı 'alfabe çorbası'nın harf ya da malzemelerine sürekli yeni şekiller vermekten oluşan çocukluk oyunu da aynı işlevi görmektedir. Romandaki karakterlerin bireysel ve toplumsal kimlikleri, ayrıca sürekli değişmekte ve yeniden şekillenmekte olan aidiyetleri arasındaki çözülemeyen çelişki ve gerilimler, ulusal ve etnik kimlik üzerine hakim söylemleri ve onların dayandığı 'ötekilik' kavramını sorgulamaktadır.

When you leave your homeland behind, they say, you have to renounce at least one part of you. If that was the case, Ömer knew exactly what he had left behind: his dots!

Back in Turkey, he used to be ÖMER ÖZSİPAHİLİOĞLU.

Here in America, he had become OMAR OZSİPAHİLOĞLU.

His dots were excluded for him to be better included. After all, Americans, just like everyone else, relished familiarity—in names they could pronounce, sounds they could resonate, even if they didn't make much sense one way or the other. Yes, few nations could perhaps be as self-assured as an American in reprocessing the names and the surnames of foreigners.

Elif Shafak, *The Saint of Incipient Insanities*, 5.

As she stepped into the next aisle Rose's face contorted. International Food. She stole a nervous glance at the jars of eggplant dips and cans of salted grape leaves. No more *patlijan*! No more *sarmas*! No more weird ethnic food! Even the sight of that hideous *khavurma* twisted her stomach into knots. From now on she would cook whatever she wanted. She would cook real Kentucky dishes for her daughter!

Elif Shafak, *The Bastard of Istanbul*, 39.

In her *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*, Avtar Brah writes that, as an Ugandan of Indian descent, who received her college education in the US and is currently based in Britain, her whole life has been "marked by diasporic inscriptions" (1). Having had 'homes' in four of the five countries she reflects on the notions of 'home' and 'identity' as well as "the concept of diaspora as an interpretive frame for analysing the economic, political and cultural modalities of historically specific forms of migrancy" (16), noting, however, that "the specificity of historical experience of a collectivity become *essentialised* into racism and nationalism" (4), and exploring ways in which this can be prevented.

Migrancy, hybridity, and the ways in which they unsettle essentialized conceptions of nation, ethnicity, and identity constitute the primary subjects of Elif Shafak's novels. Shafak who was born in France and spent her teenage years in Spain, Germany and Jordan, as the daughter of a single diplomat mother, before returning to Turkey, has continued her cosmopolitan life between countries, predominantly Turkey and the US, as a scholar and a writer. Her novels *The Saint of Incipient Insanities* and *The Bastard of Istanbul*, which are set both in the US and in Istanbul, point to the fluid boundaries of 'home' and 'foreign land' as well as of 'self' and 'other'.

The Saint of Incipient Insanities takes place in multicultural Boston, and revolves around the social, cultural and emotional experiences of a group of graduate students from Turkey, Morocco and Spain, especially their interactions with both mainstream and marginal Americans. It ends in Istanbul where Ömer, the Turkish protagonist of the novel, and his Jewish-American, manic-depressive, bisexual wife Gail visit his family. In *The Bastard of Istanbul* the stories of four generations of Turkish and Armenian(-American) women converge in such a way that it comes out that they have common ancestry. The second half of the novel is centered on the developing friendship and dialogue

between the youngest generation of women, Asya from the Istanbulite Kazancı family and Armanoush from the Tchakhmakhchian family in San Francisco. Asya lives with her great grandmother, the so-called Petite-Ma, her grandmother Gülsüm, and her four aunties, one of whom is in fact her mother, Zeliha Kazancı, who never told anyone who Asya's father is and who does not mind her daughter calling her Auntie Zeliha. Two of Zeliha's sisters are patriotic and secularist women whereas the other, Banu, the clairvoyant, has dedicated herself to a religious and spiritual life. Despite all their differences, all the Kazancı women sincerely support and care for each other. Asya, who conceives of her past as a 'void', is, like her mother Zeliha, a rebellious young woman who defies social and cultural norms of the traditional Turkish society. What she enjoys most is reading philosophy and spending time in the so-called Café Kundera with her intellectual and marginal friends. Armanoush in *The Bastard of Istanbul* is the daughter of an Armenian (-American) father, Barsam Tchakhmakhchian, who is the youngest male member of the Tchakhmakhchian family, and an American mother, Rose, who is from Kentucky but lives in Arizona with her second husband Mustafa from Turkey. She calls her daughter Amy, not Armanoush. Armanoush lives with her mother in Arizona, but spends all her holidays in San Francisco with her father and his family.

It is through Asya's Auntie Banu's conversations with her *djinn* that important family secrets of both Kazancı and Tchakhmakhchians are revealed to the reader, which no one else but those directly involved know about: that Armanoush's step-father Mustafa is Asya's uncle and father, since, twenty years ago, he raped her eccentric and defiant sister Zeliha in a fit of anger, a traumatic experience for both, and that Armanoush's Grandma Shushan, "the omnipotent materfamilias" of the Tchakhmakhchian family, is Asya's great grandmother. As the only remaining member of her family after the 1915 massacre and deportations, Shushan became wife to Rıza Selim Kazancı, adopting the Turkish name Shermin. She had a son, Levent Kazancı, Asya's grandfather, but she left them to join her brother in America, who, as she finds out, was the only other living member of her family. There she established a new Armenian family, the youngest female member of which is Armanoush.

Armanoush has grown up listening to the narratives of the Tchakhmakhchian family about the atrocities inflicted on the Armenians by the Ottoman Empire during World War I on the one hand, and to her mother Rose's resentful remarks about the Tchakhmakhchian family on the other. Her step-

father Mustafa has simply refused to speak about the past, looking completely indifferent. So, Armanoush decides to visit Istanbul to capture the lost part of her identity. Telling her mother on the phone every day that she is in San Francisco with her father, and her father that she is in Arizona with her mother, she secretly spends a week in Istanbul with the Kazancı family who are thrilled to host Mustafa's step-daughter, except Asya who despises her uncle for not having visited them even once in twenty years. Once in Istanbul, Armanoush discovers that Turkish people are quite different from the kind that haunted the memories and stories of her family, just as Asya learns to look at the history of her nation from the perspective of an Armenian (-American) whose ancestors suffered atrocities there. Through the dialogue and the growing bond between these two young women from so far away yet so close, the novel proposes new angles from which the past and its repercussions on the present can be approached, which, however, do not subscribe to the essentialist discourses of nationalism and patriarchy.

One of the major parallelisms between Tchakhmakhchian and Kazancı families is that they both consist of strong and highly idiosyncratic women. The younger generation of women distinguish themselves especially through their ambiguous identities, which are nurtured by different worldviews and life experiences. 'Difference' is the key term in Avtar Brah's conceptualization of identity as both personal and collective, "neither fixed nor singular" but rather "a constantly changing relational multiplicity" (123), which finds perfect expression in Shafak's characters, who, in the process of their adaptation to shifting cultural environments and discourses, resist being appropriated by any, while incorporating and dialogizing their diverse elements. Brah points to the many and different ways in which ideological and institutional practices mark our everyday practices that are "the matrices enmeshed within which our personal and group histories are made and remade," and to the need "to make a distinction between 'difference' as the marker of the distinctiveness of our collective histories and 'difference' as personal experience, codified in an individual's biography," adding that "[a]lthough mutually interdependent, the two modalities cannot be 'read off' from each other" (89).

The tension between collective and individual histories, and the social and political underpinnings of the characters' association with and/or distance from various collectivities to which they (are expected to) have allegiance are central to Shafak's novels. In *The Saint of Incipient Insanities*, Piyu, Ömer's

Spanish housemate, has trouble understanding the body language his girlfriend Alegre and her Chicana family use although both Piyu and Alegre are 'Hispanic'. Similarly, although Ömer and Abed, Ömer's Moroccan housemate, share a Muslim heritage, Abed calls himself a pious Muslim and Ömer a *lost* one since Ömer does not mind eating pork, drinking alcohol and changing girlfriends all the time. Ömer seems to agree with Abed in his reflections about himself:

'Lost' was precisely what he was, and what he had been more than anything for the last five, ten, fifteen years of his life . . . a graduate student of political science unable to accommodate himself either inside the torrent of *politics* or on the little island of *scientists*; a new-to-the-job husband finding it hard to breathe amid the flora and fauna of the marital institution; an expatriate who retained a deep sense of not being at home here, but not knowing where that home was anymore, even if he had had one sometime in the past; a born Muslim who wanted to have nothing to do with Islam or with any religion whatsoever; a staunch agnostic less because he denied knowledge of God but he denied God knowledge of himself. . . (SII, 14)

Ömer does not feel allegiance to the institutions that mark his personal and collective history, be it nation, religion and patriarchy. These are characteristics he shares with Zeliha and Asya in *The Bastard of Istanbul*, Zeliha being a self-proclaimed agnostic and Asya a self-proclaimed nihilist. In fact, the younger generation of men in the Tchakhmakhchian family also deviate from the staunch collective attitude of their elders. Barsam Tchakhmakhchian's controversial marriage to an American woman, Rose, his reliance on his ex-wife's ability to properly raise their daughter even though she is now dating a Turk, which infuriates his family, and his refusal to remarry and have more kids indicate his difference from his traditional Armenian family, the elder members of which lay great importance on the procreation of Armenians since they were "drastically reduced in numbers," in grandma Shushan's terms (BI, 59). Barsam's detached attitude to the past is in stark contrast with Shushan's, who left her husband and son in Turkey due to her strong attachment to her past (identity).

As Shafak depicts with remarkable use of humor and irony the conflict between the characters' sense of belonging and non-belonging, be it in the context of nation, religion or patriarchy, she undermines the totalizing,

categorizing and 'otherizing' discourses of such institutions so as to posit a notion of identity as multiple, processual and transformational. Identity as such bears the imprint of the discourses, which, in their ongoing interactions and contradictions, shape and reshape it, yet opens itself to various others, which constantly transform and re-inscribe it. That process inevitably involves a dynamic interaction between the self and the 'other' as well as the past and the present, rather than a separation from the 'other' or a break with the past, an issue that lies at the heart of both novels. Every attempt on the part of the main characters to escape from the past or the familial, national or social boundaries paradoxically extends those boundaries to points of convergence with others in such a way that they constantly deterritorialize and reterritorialize themselves in a rhizomic universe whose multifariously interrelated elements can be combined and re-combined in endless ways.¹

Gail, the eccentric, young American woman of Jewish descent, who keeps changing names and identities in *The Saint of Incipient Insanities* can be regarded as the embodiment of that dynamic notion of identity. Gail enacts her ongoing transformation in a childhood game she and her mother used to play, which represents identities that constantly change and crystallize in endless configurations in their ongoing interaction.

They played it because sometime in the past God up there in heaven had cooked himself an alphabet soup and let it cool down in a huge bowl near his kitchen window. But then a strong, insolent gale, or a mischievous, rotten angel, or perhaps the devil himself had either incidentally or intentionally (this specific component of the story was subject to change each time it was retold) dropped the bowl to the floor, that is to say to the skies, and all the letters inside the soup were scattered far and wide across the universe, never to be gathered back again. Letters were everywhere, waiting to be noticed and picked up, wishing to be matched to the words they could have written had they remained inside their Bowl of Eden. (*SII*, 37)

The game is significant not only because it contains two main metaphors of both novels, namely language and food, as they stand for both cultural differences and transcultural links, but also because of its diasporic implications that are

¹ For an in-depth discussion of the concepts of 'de-/reterritorialization' and 'rhizome' see Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984)

again crucial to understanding both novels although *The Bastard of Istanbul* deals more directly with the subject of diaspora. The scattered letters of the alphabet soup and the nostalgia for their "Bowl of Eden" evokes the Hebrew and Greek roots of the term diaspora as (often tragic) displacement and dispersal respectively, and the yearning for the lost home.² In fact, Gail refers to her past as a painful one and to her separation from her mother as the latter's exile from her childhood paradise although not more is revealed to the reader about the past of her family:

[N]ever in her life had she given up playing; not even when she had sent her mother into exile from her childhood paradise, and not even when she'd painfully realized in her absence that even if she admitted the fallen Mater back, her childhood had never been a paradise. (*SII*, 37)

Gail's Jewish descent, together with her portrayal in the novel as a figure without a stable identity suggests the idea of "'the jew' as the signifier of an ineffable alterity," representing "all forms of otherness, heterodoxy and nonconformity" as posited by postmodern theory.³ Bryan Cheyette underlines that the "reconstruction of 'the jew' as an ethnic allegory for postmodern indeterminacy [...] can be said to aestheticize, reify and dehistoricize 'the Other'" so as to undermine racial and national absolutes on the one hand, and consolidating "the all-too-usable racial allegory of 'the jew' as an irrevocable 'Other' within Western Christian culture."⁴

Gail who always wears a silver spoon in her hair to stir the alphabet soup, who makes chocolate figures representing diverse cultures and creatures, and who dotes on her two cats named the West and the Rest, the West being female, thus inverting the feminization of the Orient, commits suicide in Istanbul. Fascinated with the inexhaustible complexity and the hectic energy of the city on two continents, between East and West, she jumps from the Bosphorus Bridge, since

² Bryan Cheyette, "Diasporas of the Mind: British-Jewish Writing Beyond Multiculturalism," in *Diaspora and Multiculturalism: Common Traditions and New Developments*, ed. Monika Flaudernik (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2003): 45-82.

³ Cheyette refers to the works of Philip Lacoue-Labarthe, Emmanuel Lévinas and Jean-François Lyotard, 46-47.

⁴ Cheyette draws on Gillian Rose's *Judaism and Modernity: Philosophical Essays* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993) and Sander Gilman's *The Jew's Body* (London & New York: Routledge, 1991).

“she knew with certainty that this inbetweendom was the right place, and this very moment was the right moment to die” (*SII*, 347).

This time she feels as if every moment in her life, every person she came to know, as well as every self she harbored inside, is a letter in an alphabet soup. In her mind she stirs and stirs them all, until they lose their distinctiveness and mold into a delirious whirl [...] an Assyro-Babylonian goddess worshipped at the rising moon . . . a sea of perennial borders . . . chocolate figures congealed on trays . . . birds flying high and alone, unable to remain within their flocks . . . Suddenly everything seems to be perfectly decomposable and yet a perfect component of varying totalities just like the letters in frenzy in an alphabet soup. (*SII*, 350)

Before she adopted the name Gail after several other adopted names before, her name was Zarpandit based on an Assyro-Babylonian goddess. She did not want to be “anchored in a world that fixes names forever” but hoped “to fish out new letters to recompose her name and her fate every time she thrusts her spoon into the alphabet soup” (*SII*, 58). Her attempts to establish a bond between herself and everything else find expression most explicitly in the variety of chocolate figures she made. Before she committed suicide, she was planning to make chocolate figures of whirling dervishes upon her return to Boston. Also during her many conversations with Zahra, Abed’s mother who came from Morocco and spent a week with her son and his friends, Gail was extremely keen on getting better acquainted with their culture. She and Zahra got along so well that Abed was shocked when his traditional mother suggested that he marry Gail instead of his girlfriend back in Morocco.

Gail’s suicidal tendency throughout the novel is inextricably linked with her penchant for self-effacement through a constant re-inscription of her identity, which both reflects and proliferates her ambivalent identity as American and Jew. Her attitude recalls the eternally displaced Jew on one hand, and her Americanness as the ultimate representative of the West on the other, in the particular sense that her attitude corresponds to Terry Eagleton’s definition Western imagination as the global reach of the mind:

The imagination is the faculty by which one can empathize with others – by which, for example, you can feel your way into the unknown territory of another culture [...] But this leaves unresolved the question of where you, as opposed to

they, are actually standing. In one sense, the imagination represents no position at all: it lives only in its vibrant fellow-feeling with others [...] Like the Almighty, then, this quasi-divine capacity would seem to be at once all and nothing, everywhere and nowhere – a pure void of feeling with no firm identity of its own, feeding parasitically off the life-forms of others, yet transcendent of these life-forms in its very self-effacing capacity to enter each of them in return. The imagination thus centers and decenters at the same time, lending you a universal authority precisely by emptying you of distinctive identity [...] The imagination thus has a promiscuousness which makes it something less than a stable identity, but also a mercurial many-sidedness to which such stable identities cannot rise. It is less an identity in itself than a knowledge of all identities, and so even more of an identity in the act of being somewhat less. (Eagleton, 45-46)

Eagleton detects in this kind of attitude a liberal form of imperialism, underscoring that the West does not need a distinctive identity since it “deludedly believes” that it “already knows. It is other cultures which are different, while one’s own form of life is the norm” (46). However, what Gail attempts to do is to subvert this attitude of the West by overdoing it. Her own attitude to the West as the transcendent authority becomes exemplified in her words about God’s transcendence when she responds to Piyu who believes that sometimes God tests man’s faith through ‘such difficulties’ as colonization and discrimination, which Abed complains about:

Geez, who wants to be tested? I definitely not! [...] If anything I would like to remind him how much he needs me. Just as Rilke wrote: *What will you do God, when I die? You lose meaning, losing me.* Be it God, nationality, this or that religion . . . whatever you deem *the* most important, all we need is to tell to it: *When I—meaning this little ant among billions of little little ants—when I die, what will you do without me?* (*SII*, 146)

Gail poses this question to all totalizing systems. By jumping from the Bosphorus Bridge that connects the West and the East, from in-between, she shows that she belongs neither to the West nor to the Rest. In her interaction with and adaptation to ‘different’ cultures’, she undoubtedly makes a ‘difference’ in the lives of people she crosses paths with. She encourages her friends to switch identities, to “choose another from the ‘Other’” (*SII*, 145).

Only if we stop identifying ourselves so much with the identities given to us, only if and when we really accomplish this, can we eliminate all sorts of racism, sexism, nationalism, and fundamentalism, and whatever it is that sets barricades among humanity, dividing us into different flocks and subflocks. (*SII*, 146)

Gail's cultural and intellectual curiosity as well as the diversity and adaptability of her identities breaks the stereotyping attitudes of non-Americans towards Americans and their claims to 'know' America, too. When Ömer set foot in America, "he felt simultaneously a foreigner in a foreign land and yet that the place he'd arrived at was somehow *not that foreign*" (*SII*, 74).

What America did to the conventional stranger-in-a-strange-land correlation was to kindly twist it upside down. In other parts of the world, to be a newcomer meant you had now arrived at a new place where you didn't know the ways and hows, but you could probably and hopefully learn most, if not all, in the fullness of time. In coming to America for the first time, however, you retained a sense of arriving at a place not *that* new, since you felt you already knew most, if not all, there was to know about it, and ended up unlearning your initial knowledge in the fullness of time. (*SII*, 73)

Indeed, although Ömer took pride in his sentiment that as a foreigner he was "better acquainted with their culture than with his own" thanks to the 'S-factors', meaning *Seinfeld*, *The Simpsons*, *Saturday Night Live*, *South Park*, the Sundance Film Festival, among others (74-75). Ömer's stance can be easily compared to the West's imagination of the East, except that the parts are reversed and Ömer who is assumed to be an Easterner does the imagining and claims the knowledge. However, he soon discovers that it was a delusion quite similar to the West's deluded claims to know its 'others' and that America is by no means a homogenous entity that can be reduced to certain abstractions.

Before he used to perceive America as a despite-its-vastness-and-variety-simple-in-essence land, somewhat like a diluted solution that came in all sorts of bottles with more or less the same ingredient in each. After he started living in it, his perception of America was altered to despite-its-simplicity-too-vast-of-a-variety land, more like a concentrated powder you could turn into myriad drinks depending on how you diluted it. (*SII*, 74)

Ömer's conception of America now resembles Gail's 'Bowl of Eden' where diverse elements interact in such a way that they form and transform into infinite constellations. His thoughts following Gail's suicide reveal his insight into Gail's fluid, 'homeless' identity, which in fact reflects the inexhaustibly varied nature of America as well as all other nations. He realizes that not only Gail but he himself is a 'stranger to himself'.⁵

She won't die. No she'll not. People do not commit suicide on other people's soil, and this is not her homeland. But did she ever have one? Who is the real stranger—the one who lives in a foreign land and knows he belongs everywhere or the one who lives the life of a foreigner in her native land and has no place else to belong? (*SII*, 350-51)

The Bastard of Istanbul also ends with a suicide, Mustafa's suicide in Istanbul, which is both his home and a strange land since America is his home now. He returns to Istanbul with his wife Rose who panicked upon learning that Amy was in Istanbul. For Mustafa, this is a return to the past which he would rather forget, a past which he has never come to terms with. Besides Mustafa and Zeliha, there is only one other person in the Kazancı household, who knows about the traumatic confrontation between the two twenty years ago: Banu. When Mustafa asks her about Asya's father she answers, "I wish I didn't know the things I know" (336). When Banu comes to Mustafa's room later that night with a bowl of *ashure*, puts it right beside his bed and leaves, Mustafa knows "why it was placed there and what exactly he was asked to do. The choice belonged to him . . ." (*BI*, 336). Before he eats the *ashure*, he remembers the day when he visited the shrine of El Tradito in Arizona.

"Forgive me," he had written there. "For me to exist, the past had to be erased." Now, he felt like the past was returning. And for it to exist, he had to be erased... All these years, a harrowing remorse had been gnawing him inside, little by little, without disrupting his outer façade. But perhaps the fight between amnesia and remembering was finally over. Like a sea plain stretching as far as the eye could see after the tide went out, memories of a troubled past surfaced hither and

⁵ Inspired by Julia Kristeva's book titled *Strangers to Ourselves* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), which explores the notion of foreignness not only in a foreign land but also in one's home and self, with emphasis on the unresolved tensions between individuality and collectivity.

tither from the ebbing waters. He reached out to the *ashure*. Knowingly and willfully, he started to eat it, little by little, savoring each and every ingredient with every mouthful.

It felt so relieving to walk out on his past and his future at once. (*BI*, 337)

Memory of the past as well as the links between the past and the present constitute the central subject of the novel. When the members of the Tchakhmakhchian family find out that Barsam's ex-wife Rose is dating a Turkish man, they are alarmed and want to 'save' Armanoush who they think will otherwise be brainwashed to deny the 'genocide'. According to Barsam, as long as Armanoush is taken good care of, it does not matter who Rose is dating, whereupon his sister says,

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 . . . (*BI*, 55)

Barsam defends his ex-wife Rose who, as a shy girl from Kentucky with no multicultural background, naturally had difficulty adjusting to her husband's family whose concerns and traumas were alien to her.

The only child of a kind Southern couple operating the same hardware store forever, she lives a small town life, and before she knows it, she finds herself amid this extended and tightly knit Armenian Catholic family in the diaspora.

A huge family with a traumatic past! How can you expect her to cope with all of this so easily? (*BI*, 58)

He adds, "Mind you, the very first word she learned in Armenian was *odar*" (*BI*, 58). Later in the novel Armanoush notes, "Since her mother was an *odar*, what could have been more normal for her than to get married to another *odar*?" (*BI*, 93). Indeed, it is Tchakhmakhchian family that constitutes Rose's traumatic past now, which interminably haunts her present.

Her husband's family was from another country where people bore a surname she couldn't spell and secrets she couldn't decipher. Rose had always felt like an outsider there, always aware of being an *odar*—this gluey word that had stuck on her from the very first day. (*BI*, 37-38)

Although she is determined to leave behind the past full of unpleasant memories of her life with her ex-husband's family, she constantly acts upon the urge to prove her independent self to or to take revenge on them. She wants to surprise them "with the new woman she would soon become" (*BI*, 37). The beginning of her relationship with Mustafa is also marked by her desire to upset her ex-husband's family. She confides in her little daughter: "I wish your grandma-the-witch could have seen me flirting with that Turk. Can you imagine her horror? I cannot think of a worse nightmare for the proud Tchakhmakhchian family! Proud and puffed up . . ." (*BI*, 46) thinking "[T]here existed on the surface of the earth only one thing that could annoy the women of the Tchakhmakhchian family even more than an *odar*: a Turk! How interesting it would be to flirt with her ex-husband's archenemy" (*BI*, 47).

This paradoxical tendency to suppress the past through a re-invocation of it also becomes evident in Zeliha's life in Istanbul. She keeps wearing a nose ring, glittery accessories, miniskirts of glaring colors, tight-fitting blouses that displayed her ample breasts, satiny nylon stockings, and towering high heels and still uses foul language, all of which had led to her traumatic experience with her brother Mustafa years ago. Moreover, the series of tattoos entitled "the management of abiding heartache" she launched in her tattoo parlor are meant to produce a similar cathartic effect:

Every tattoo in this special collection was designed to address one person only: the ex-love. The dumped and the despondent, the hurt and the irate brought a picture of the ex-love they wanted to banish from their lives forever but somehow could not stop loving. Auntie Zeliha then studied the picture and ransacked her brain until she found the animal that person resembled [...] then tattoo the design on the desolate customer's body. The whole practice adhered to the ancient shamanistic practice of simultaneously internalizing and externalizing one's totems. To strengthen vis-à-vis your antagonist you had to accept, welcome, and then transform it. The ex-love was interiorized—*injected into* the body, and yet at the same time exteriorized—left *outside* the skin. Once the ex-lover was located in this threshold between *inside* and *outside*, and deftly

transformed into an animal, the power structure between the dumped and the dumper changes. (*BI*, 73)

Zeliha's outfits, piercings and tattoos, as a means of coming to terms with the past, have significant bearing on the discursive aspects of memory and the relationship of discourse to embodied or practical forms of remembering as posited by Paul Antze and Michael Lambek in *Tense Past: Cultural Essays in Trauma and Memory*, who claim that the body bears signs of import as "index of the past, and hence guarantor of the present" (xii). Antze and Lambek also underline the significance of historicizing memory, in other words, of a conception of memory as "the culturally mediated acts, schemata, and stories [...] that comprise our memories, and the way we think about them (xv). Underscoring that "memory is widely called upon today to legitimate identity, indeed, to construct it or to reconstruct it," they interrogate "the invocation of memory within a number of broader identity discourses (political, historical, ethnic, gender, therapeutic, autobiographical, juridical)" (3). Zeliha, for her part, challenges the gender boundaries imposed on her by patriarchal discourse not only by giving birth to Asya out of wedlock, another form of externalization of the internalized experience, but also by continuing to wear outfits which most Turkish women give up until a certain age—Gülsüm, her mother, criticizes her for looking like a whore—and by being "the only woman in the whole family and one of the very few among all Turkish women who used such foul language so unreservedly, vociferously, and knowledgeably" (*BI*, 4). In this respect, Zeliha resembles Gail of *The Saint of Incipient Insanities* in a certain phase of her life. When Gail was making a transition from "Zarpandit the feminist magpie" to "Zarpandit the chauvinist swine," Debra Ellen Thompson, her feminist, lesbian girlfriend suggested they use "the strategy of DD—Deliberate Distortion to turn patriarchal linguistic codes upside down," in other words, "to play a game of squash with patriarchy" (*SII*, 46) by "embracing antiwoman terms, until they'd be neither anti nor related to women" (*SII*, 47).

And also to use patriarchal compliments pejoratively. Make slut a compliment, maiden an insult! [...] We're extracting terms targeted against women out of their soil. Stealing the enemy's dirty property is quaint robbery! (*SII*, 47)

In inverse parallelism to Rose who marries a Turkish man, partly to upset her ex-husband's family, Zeliha starts dating an Armenian man, Aram, with whom she attains a fulfilling relationship, a choice which also implies a resistance, a statement against patriarchy in Turkey, for instance, against the past dominance and violence of her father Levent Kazancı, the son left behind by Shushan. Shushan's return to her past by joining her brother in America, which also meant a new future for her, prepared a traumatic past for her son Levent who projected his grudge on the women of his own family, his wife and daughters, while doting on his only son Mustafa.

In addition to the characters' attempts to simultaneously erase and revive the past in their personal relationships, which emerges as a form of rebellion or resistance on their part, certain objects and images also assume a symbolic meaning in relation to the past in both novels. Those objects and images serve not only as tokens of rebellion or resistance, such as Gail's hair spoon or Zeliha's tattoos, which have been discussed earlier, but also as a means to preserve the past from effacement or oblivion, to commemorate the past, both its happy and sad parts. Antze and Lambek point out, "As memory emerges into consciousness, as it is externalized and increasingly objectified" it becomes important to look at "the symbols, codes, artifacts, rites and sites in which memory is embodied and objectified" (xvii). Both *The Saint of Incipient Insanities* and *The Bastard of Istanbul* abound in such symbols and artifacts, which are cherished by the characters as a link between their present and their past. In *The Saint of Incipient Insanities*, the dinner Alegre serves to all her aunts in the china set her grandaunt Tía Piedad has kept boxed for years to pass it on to Alegre as the youngest member of their Chicana(-American) family so that she would keep it there from then on turns into a rite commemorating the past:

One by one *todas las tías* pulled out a chair, and though still visibly uncomfortable, started to dine on the longest surviving memory of the family that had come a long, long way without even a scratch. It was the past, it was always the past that cropped up in every aspect of their interaction [...] talking about the past, talking with and within the abundant conjugations of the Spanish language, while the future tense waited aside, barely used. (*SII*, 310-311)

In *The Bastard of Istanbul*, all kinds of decorations, paintings, icons in the Tchakhmakhchian household as well as Grandma Shushan's silver pendant of

Saint Anthony that she always wore serve the same purpose: “The patron saint of lost articles had helped her numerous times in the past to cope with the losses in her life” (BI, 52). However, Shushan had left another object of memory to her son Levent before she left for America in the hope he would remember and forgive her, which is in Banu Kazancı’s possession now: “a graceful brooch in the shape of a pomegranate, delicately smothered with gold threads all over, slightly cracked in the middle, with seeds of red rubies glowing from within” (BI, 226). It was a gift meant for Armanoush Stamboulian, the wife of Hovannes Stamboulian, an Armenian intellectual in Istanbul, who was Shushan’s father and Armanoush’s great grandfather and who did not get the chance to give it to his wife before he was taken away by Turkish soldiers. Although Banu is tempted to give the brooch to Armanoush, for she believes it belongs to her, she hesitates because she does not know how to explain it all to her. The final chapter of the novel contains an excerpt from a fairytale, which succinctly expresses some of its main subjects: remembrance and silence:

Once there was; once there wasn't. God's creatures were as plentiful as grains and talking too much was a sin, for you could tell what you shouldn't remember and you could remember what you shouldn't tell. (BI, 354)

In both *The Saint of Incipient Insanities* and *The Bastard of Istanbul*, Elif Shafak explores, through the multicultural experiences and interactions of her characters, migrant groups’ or individuals’ processes of coming to terms with their past and its marks upon their identity. By pointing to the contradictions, changes and transformations in both individual and collective experiences and histories, which constitute identity, she displays the inexhaustible variety and adaptability of identity, whose conception as such will no doubt challenge monolithic, essentialist and totalizing discourses on nation, race and ethnicity, so as to pave the way for a more peaceful and mutually enriching social, cultural, and political interaction.

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