

The Possibility of Confluence between Turks and Armenians: A Critical Reading of *The Bastard of Istanbul* by The Turkish Novelist, Elif Shafak

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Abstract: *Confluence means the coming together of people to discuss certain issues. It incorporates a conscious effort to interact genuinely with each other's desire to listen, understand, and appreciate (Murshed, 2). Confluence is also a way of listening and talking with various cultures, sharing considerations and exchanging viewpoints, and arriving at understanding and respect through focusing on mutual views and benefits (Habib, 8). For Turkey and Armenia, normalization and reconciliation can be seen as two sides of the same coin. A critical and achievable breakthrough would be the establishment of full diplomatic relations between the two countries. This paper discusses the possibility of the confluence between Turks and Armenians and delineates the actual steps to reconcile each other and stops all factors behind the reasons for continual conflict between them. It also recommends all strategies of forgetting the tragic past of 1915, opening a blank page in their relationships as well as resolving all mutual problems to get benefits from economic, cultural, and political fields. Likewise, it sheds light on the importance of geographical, racial, and cultural similarities between different nations.*

Keywords: Confluence, Armenians, Turks, Conflict, Genocide

1. Introduction

Elif Shafak was born in Strasbourg, France in 1971; her father was studying for a Ph. D. in philosophy in the city. Unfortunately, her parents separated in her early years, so she returned to Ankara with her mother, where she was brought up between the ages of five and largely by her grandmother. "Divorce was unusual at the time," she tells me. "But what was more unusual was that my grandmother, who was not educated herself, intervened so that my mother could return to university and have a career as she was later a diplomat (Cooke, 8).

Her mother never remarried, but her father got married again to a French wife, who went on to beget two sons, whom Shafak did not meet until she was in her 20s. Once, ElifShafak said, "He was very disconnected from me, so I did not see him much, and I have no photos of us together. There was an issue of anger ... it took me a while to cope with that. Maybe what I found hardest was that he had been a bad, negligent person towards me, but a good father to his sons, and a good professor to his students. That was difficult, coming to terms with the idea that someone can be very good in parts of his life, and a failure in others. For a long time, I felt like the other child, as the forgotten one" (Cooke, 9)

ElifShafak is an award - winning British - Turkish novelist and the most widely - read female author in Turkey. She writes in both Turkish and English languages and has published seventeen books, eleven of which are novels. Her work has been translated into fifty languages, so she has contributed to raising the voice of Turkish literature in the world with her two novels written in English. Besides her descriptive and entertaining style, she depicts a picture of 'modern Turkey' and 'a peaceful world' with dwellers of various types living together despite innumerable differences in her novels (Karati, 1).

Shafak holds a Ph. D. in Political Sciences and she has taught at various universities in Turkey, the US, and the UK, including St Annes College, Oxford University, where she is an honorary fellow. She is a member of the World Economic Forum Global Agenda Council on Creative Economy and a founding member of the European Council on Foreign Relations. An advocate for women's rights, LGBT rights, and freedom of speech, Shafak is an inspiring public speaker and twice a TED global speaker, each time receiving a standing ovation. She contributes to many major publications around the world and she has been awarded the title of Chevalier des Arts et des Letters. In 2017, she was chosen by Politico as one of the twelve people, who would make the world better. She has judged numerous literary prizes and is chairing the Welcomed Prize 2019.

Obviously, at an early age, Shafak had the desire to be a known person, so that appetite drove her to be a writer. By any standards, she has had a remarkable career as the recipient of numerous awards, her bestselling books translated into dozens of languages, and her Ted talks watched by millions. She does not disguise her ambition, telling, that she struggles to believe writers who insist they do not care about awards. Accordingly, she stated, "No, I started writing fiction when I was very young, not because I wanted to be an author, but because I thought life was boring. I needed books to stay sane. To me, story land was much more colorful and enticing than the real world. The desire to be a writer only came in my 20s" (Cooke, 10).

Ten years ago, EliefShafak moved to London with her husband, a journalist, and two children after her novel, *The Bastard of Istanbul* sparked a chain of events that led to a trial for "insulting Turkishness". Eventually, she was acquitted, though other books of hers have since been examined by Turkish prosecutors on the grounds of "crimes of obscenity". Now, it is six years since she has felt able to visit Turkey. She thinks about such things as belonging and

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home a lot,” she says that when you are physically away from a place, it does not mean you are mentally disconnected. Sometimes, in your soul, you become even more attached emotionally. The controversial novel *The Bastard of Istanbul* (2007), reflects the politics of tenuously holding onto the cultural memory of the genocide by the Armenian refugees in their resettled lives as American diaspora. Simultaneously, it criticizes the collective amnesia of the Armenian massacre by the Turks (Chakraborty, 55).

The Bastard of Istanbul is driven by a dominant discourse of the Armenian genocide by the Turkish Republic from 1915 - 1923. (Shafak and Chancy, 68). In the abovementioned novel, Shafak utilizes postmodern narrative techniques as she uses metafiction style to problematize the highly controversial Armenian - Turkish conflict but at the same time, she tries to focus on the mutual benefits between them to bring closer the points of view of both parties. As she talks about the conflict between Turks and Armenians, she let the door open for the possibility of dialogue and confluence as the best way for solving the historical enmity between both sides. She refuses the well - made plot, chronological sequence, and the authoritative omniscient author and avoids the rational connection between what characters do, and what they are and the causal connection between the surface and the deep scientific laws of existence (Baktir, 124).

Significantly, *The Bastard of Istanbul* tells the story of their two families and a secret connection linking them to a violent event in the history of their homeland. Filled with humor and understanding, this exuberant, dramatic novel is about memory and forgetting, about the need to examine the past and the desire to erase it. It is also poised between two cultural and geographical imaginaries interweaving a plot about two families – the Armenian diaspora Tchakhmakhchian family in San Francisco and the Turkish Kazanci family in Istanbul. The descendants of the Armenian survivors of the massacre had severed all ties with the country of origin in their restructured lives in America. Yet, the feelings of deterritorialization, alienation, and a sense of betrayal force ArmanoushTchakhmakhchian, a young Armenian –American woman to return to the ancestral land to share her sentiments of sorrow and expect an apology from her imagined perpetrator. Thus, Armanoush visits the Kazanci family in Istanbul to seek some justice or at least an acknowledgment of their guilt and retrieve the memories of her ancestors in exile.

Shafak’s novels focus on multiple women’s voices and how Turkish women and Armenian diaspora women share a lot of features and cultural things. The Turkish women and the Armenian ones of both families show rhetorical agency to persuade, negotiate and assert in the absence of men of the family (men of both families had died early at the age of 40). Yet, they share traits of anxiety, indecisiveness, and eccentricity, having been victimized and left alone by male family members. The women of different ethnic and religious identities also resemble each other in their elaborate trappings of culinary habits. Accordingly, all mutual traits can facilitate and pave the way for confluence and dialogue between conflicted nations and parties.

As an Armenian American living in San Francisco, Armanoush feels like part of her identity is missing and that she must make a journey back to the past, to Turkey, to start living her life. Armanoush’s journey of return to gain a deeper sense of her history confronts her with another reality about her shared cultural heritage with the Turks. The transient nature of such bondage is the heart of the critique expressed in *The Bastard of Istanbul*, as the Armenian American online community hardly ever refers to their shared cultural heritage as a legitimate element of cohesion, but found their identity on cultural hatred instead. The tight interrelation of identity and common enemy paradoxically annihilates the efforts made by the Armenian and the international community to encourage the Turkish government to officially take responsibility for the genocide (Furlanetto, 27).

A result of the difference in culture between Americans and Armenians, which reflects the difficulty of living with each other easily. Accordingly, Armanoush has the dual identity of her parents so when she is living with her father, she is keeping away the habits of her mother’s family. Conversely, she avoids talking about Armenian habits in the presence of her mother. However, she is living with her stepfather in the same home and feeling happy with him. In this way, Armanoush becomes a multicultural girl who coexists and communicates with others easily.

Armanoush’s father had married a Kentucky woman but soon had to divorce her due to incompatibility issues. Armanoush has to stay with her American mother and Turkish stepfather but can spend her vacation with her Armenian father’s family. Despite growing up in a mixed culture, she identifies more with the Armenian Tchakhmakhchian family. Baron Baghdassarian’s conclusive comment: “some among the Armenians in the diaspora would never want the Turks to recognize the genocide. If they do so, they will pull the rug out from under our feet and take the strongest bond that unites us” (Shafak, 263).

As a grandchild of the Armenian diaspora, Armanoush heard a lot about the brutality of Turks, so she decides to visit her stepfather’s family in Turkey and finds a different ground reality of modern - day Turkey. It exposes the fault lines and fissures of the dominant discourse of the Armenian - American virtual chat group. ArmanoushTchakhmakhchian, all my family tree has been something Somethingian. 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! What kind of a joke is that? (Shafak, 52) The rapprochement between the two nations can be possible if Turkish citizens remember and acknowledge the past genocide and Armenians forget and let go of their past. This policy can improve the chances of both nations forging closer ties with the European Union.

Armanoush feels hatred against Turks in the Armenian community and disrespect for them so avoided talking about her stepfather, Mustafa with her Armenian friends, because of the enmity between Turks and Armenians, so she did not talk about him with non - Armenians either. Not even with

those who had absolutely no interest in life outside of their own community and therefore could not care less about the history of the Armenian - Turkish conflict. It is for Armanoush to communicate and converse with Turkish people because she has a good experience with a Turk, her stepfather, Mustafa.

Obviously, Armanoush does not have troubles with Turks, so she describes her stepfather nicely, as she said, that Mustafa was not a bad man; if anything, he was just a bit dull. He seemed to have no passion whatsoever for anything in life. He had not gone back to Istanbul for twenty years, although he had family there. At times, Armanoush had the impression that he wanted to break away from his past, but she could not possibly tell why. A few times, she had tried to converse with him about 1915 and what the Turks had done to the Armenians. "I do not know much about those things," Mustafa had replied, shutting her out with a genteel but equally stiff manner. "It is all history. You should talk with historians" (Shafak, 104).

She said I have never been able to become an Armenian in the first place, Armanoush wrote, realizing she was on the brink of confessing. I need to find my identity. Do you know what I have been secretly contemplating? Going to visit my family's house in Turkey. Grandmother always talks about this gorgeous house in Istanbul. I will go and see it with my own eyes. This is a journey into my family's past, as well as into my future (Shafak, 116).

Armanoush shows her respect for her Turkish step - father as she said that his name is Mustafa, he is a geologist, who works for a company in Arizona. He is a nice man, but he is completely disinterested in history and ever since he arrived in the USA, which is like twenty years ago, he has never been back home. Once, she stated 'I asked him what kind of people they were and he said, Oh, they are just ordinary people, like you and me' (Shafak, 117). He loves my mom, and my mom loves him, Armanoush replied. She realized that she had for the first time recognized the love between her mother and stepfather as if seeing them through a stranger's eyes. Anyway, I can stay with his family; after all, I am his stepdaughter, I guess they will have to accept me as a guest. It is a puzzle to me how it will be received by ordinary Turks. A real Turkish family, not one of those Americanized academics (Shafak, 118).

Armanoush felt a sudden surge of despondency. Disclosing one secret after another had triggered the feeling of being lonely in this huge world - something she always knew about but waited for the right moment to face. You guys were all born into the Armenian community and never had to prove you were one of them. Whereas I have been stuck on this threshold since the day I was born, constantly fluctuating between a proud but traumatized Armenian family and a hysterically anti - Armenian mom. For me to be able to become an Armenian American the way you guys are, I need to find my Armenianness first. If this requires a voyage into the past, so be it, I am going to do that, no matter what the Turks will say or do (Shafak, 118).

As a nice way of receiving and welcoming the guest, Armanoush by the Turkish family, they let the youngest and

best one of their members in speaking English talk and translate for them. Accordingly, Auntie Banu said,

"Listen Asya, you can keep grouching to us as much as you like, but when our guest arrives, you should pipe down and be nice to her. Your English is better than mine and better than anyone else's in the family... therefore, dear, you will be her translator. You will ferry her words to us and our words to her. " Auntie Banu narrowed her eyes and furrowed her brow in an attempt to hint at the magnitude of what she was about to announce. "Like a bridge extending over cultures, you will connect the East and the West" (Shafak, 134).

"It is wonderful that you two girls are the same age," Auntie Banu concluded her soliloquy. "You two will become friends" (Shafak, 134). "Play now! Be friends!" Being of the same age group automatically meant getting along well; somehow peers were regarded as the broken pieces of the same puzzle, expected to suddenly make it complete when brought side by side (Shafak, 135). Aunte Manu, stated that they can't speak English with the coming guest, so they disable to express and reflect their culture and feelings which led to being misunderstood and considered by others. Accordingly, she said, "The problem with us Turks is that we are constantly being misinterpreted and misunderstood (Shafak, 135).

Many historians, stated that the war victims of 1915 were killed by both teams, Armenians and Turks. However, both parties have to lament and apologize to each other, as well as look for the real story of the events of 1915. Surely, one of the novel's characters addressed Armanoush "Look, I am very sorry for your family, I offer you, my condolences. 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 at the hands of Armenian rebels? Did you ever think about the other side of the story? I will bet you did not! How about the suffering of Turkish families? It is all tragic but we need to understand that 1915 was not 2005. Times were different back then. It was not even a Turkish state back then, it was the Ottoman Empire, for God's sake. The premodern era and its premodern tragedies."

"Look," the Non - nationalist Scenarist of Ultrationalist Movies replied. "Unlike many other people in Turkey, I have done a lot of research on this issue due to my job. I write scenarios for historical movies. I read history all the time. So, I talk like this not because I have heard it elsewhere or because I have been misinformed. Quite the opposite! I talk as someone who has done meticulous research on the topic...the claims of the Armenians are based on exaggeration and distortion. Come on, some go as far as claiming that we killed two million Armenians. No historian in his right mind would take that seriously." "Even one is too many" (Shafak, 210).

To establish modern Turkey, the Armenian population supported the Young Turks in the hope that their treatment of non - Muslims would be fair and decent. The Young Turks had stated it in their proclamation: Every citizen will enjoy complete liberty and equality, regardless of nationality or religion, and be submitted to the same obligations. All

Ottomans, being equal before the law as regards rights and duties relative to the State, are eligible for government posts, according to their capacity and their education (Shafak, 231).

Coexistence and cooperation between Armenians and Turks lead them to live peacefully forever. Accordingly, Hovhannes Stambouljian believed that under the present circumstances, Ottomanism was the best option for Armenians, not radical ideas. Turks and Greeks and Armenians and Jews had lived together for centuries and still could find a way to coexist under one umbrella (Shafak, 232). They are using the same language and deal with each other nicely. In case of sudden issues, the pioneers of both sides can set together and communicate as well as meet each other to solve mutual problems immediately. Also, the same character said "We need to work together, Jews and Christians and Muslims. Centuries and centuries under the same imperial roof. We have been living together all this time, albeit on unequal ground. Now we can make it fair and just for all, transform this empire together" (Shafak, 232).

Historically, Ottoman Empire was open to all minorities, who suffered in their homelands since the second half of the fifteenth century. Accordingly, Turkey became a multicultural and multiple racial and religious state. However, the mentioned minorities were/ are coexisting and living with each other peacefully. In situations of problems and conflicts, the pioneers of all parties set and meet one another to discuss and solve mutual issues on the bases of similar residency and Turkey is for all. Therefore, Aram said, "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).

During the time of communication online between Armanoush with her friends, they inquire her about the reasons behind her journey to Turkey, and where she is living. She told them that she is living with her step-father's family. She also gave a chance for Asya to read and comment on their chat messages. Asya confirms that Turkey is a multicultural country, in which different people are living and coexisting nicely. Conversely, generalizations are still generalizations, so it is faulty to put all fruits in the same box. Accordingly, Asya continued to type on the screen. In Turkey, there are Turks, Kurds, Circassians, Georgians, Pontians, Jews, Abazas, and Greeks.... I find it too over simplistic and far too dangerous to make generalizations of this sort. We are not brutal or barbarians (Shafak, 260).

For the sake of living peacefully with others, it is better to forget unfavorable history and leave it behind to settle the present nicely and go on to flourish future actively. In this statement tried to neglect her situation as an illegal girl (bastard), so she decides to leave the idea of searching for her father and ignore what others say about that matter. Consequently, she had always tried to distance her past as far as possible from the future she hoped to attain. In the

hope that, whatever the memories of times past entailed, no matter how dark or depressing, the past would not consume her. The truth is, as much as she hated to admit it, she knew the past did live within the present (Shafak, 262).

Through the chat conversation between Asya and Armanoush's friends, an Armenian character talked about her ancestors and their suffering at the Turkish hands in World War I and she mentioned her desire to let Turks apologize to Armenians during the events of 1915. Lady Peacock wrote, "We come from a family line, a culture, a nation. Are you going to say let bygones be bygones"? Conversely, Asya expressed her appetite to be without the past, because it is useless. The Armenians request of apology from Turks like her apology for her unknown and mysterious father whereas, Asya wrote, "All my life I wanted to be pastless. Being a bastard is less about having no father more than having no past ... and now here you are asking me to own the past and apologize for a mythical father!" (Shafak, 262).

Obviously, both parties, Turks and Armenians claim that they were victims of one another and grew their generations on these concepts that led them to hate each other, but it is meaningless and useless for both parties. They have to let what bygone be bygone and try to start a new chapter in their relations and cooperate. Accordingly, Baron Baghdassarian, wrote on the screen, "Apparently, there are some old habits that need to be changed on both sides" (Shafak, 263).

Armanoush's statement in this novel underlines this phenomenon: "Unfortunately, I do not speak the Turkish language, but I guess I speak Turkish cuisine" (Shafak, 156). She utters these words at the dinner table of Mustafa's family in Istanbul, when she realizes that Turkish and Armenian eating rituals and dishes are very similar, including mantı, pastırma, or sucuk (Shafak, 114). Likewise, the dessert aşure with its various ingredients reflects Armanoush's idea of cultural similarity and coexistence.

Certainly, similarity in habits and traditions, and cultures helps to facilitate and pave the way for conversation and dialogue, and a meeting between the conflicted and collide parties. Consequently, the concepts of cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism are illustrated by this originally Armenian sweet dish called anuschabur. Intercultural dialogues over a shared meal can thus help to create global souls who do not feel the need to choose between an "either - or" but will always opt for a "both - and" rightly states that the act of eating might turn into a means of becoming aware of other cultures, as it can create a bond between culinary habits and cultural awareness.

For the possibility of confluence and dialogue between Armenians and Turks, Shafak uses Armanoush's visit to Turkey, online chatting between different characters and food as the novel's overarching theme. Food also is a cultural talisman and something that unites families. By the end of the novel, it functions as a salve that helps to heal past wounds. People from different cultures are allowed to coexist just like different kinds of cuisine, including American, Armenian, Asian - Caribbean, and later also

Turkish dishes. Just like the various ingredients of the sweet dish aşure, Elif Shafak's characters illustrate that various cultural identities can also be united in harmony in one single person. The result could be described as the sensation of sometimes being displaced but not placeless. Neither in a conversation around a fictional table nor anywhere around the real world (Krause, 2).

2. Conclusion

In 2009, The Republic of Armenia and Turkey signed two protocols to initiate a process of rapprochement and facilitate bilateral diplomatic relations but failed to ratify them to date. The ratification of the 2009 protocols could not materialize due to unresolved conflicts between the two nations. The major controversy was related to the demand made by the Armenian diaspora to use the term 'genocide' to refer to the forced migration and mass killing of the Armenian population in 1915. Interestingly, the impediment to rapprochement between Turkey–Armenia is due to the internal dynamics between the Armenian diaspora (the descendants of the genocide refugees) and the Armenian state.

The reconciliation benefits both sovereign states to develop their economy and negotiate European alliances. Turkey has been lobbying to become a member of the European Union since 1999. The political distance between Turkey and the European Union has widened recently due to the autocratic government's policy of making Turkey an Islamist, parochial, and unitary state. For the Armenian diaspora, Turkey's refusal to acknowledge the past genocide remains a non - negotiable issue before initiating any diplomatic relations between the two states. The novel leaves a great message for readers in light of the notion of survival. All of us serving under one sky should keep unity rather than create distance and war. The novel motivates discussion, and most people make it a necessity to know about such subjects which are nicely described in her novel.

Two families are at the center of the book, one in San Francisco, and one in Istanbul. They are linked by a couple who live in Arizona: Rose, an American from Kentucky, and Mustapha, the estranged son of the Turkish - Muslim family in Istanbul. Rose's daughter by her first husband cements this link. Both families cook and love the same foods, despite several generations of separation in vastly different cultural settings. She even discovers that both Armenian and Turkish parents peel oranges and serve them to adult children who have stayed up late at night. The author uses the careful set - up nexus between the people of Istanbul and the Armenian Americans to create a multi - way dialog about controversial issues in Turkish - Armenian history.

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