

6. Bastardized History: Elif Shafak's Transcultural Poetics

Comic Survival or the Endless Repeat Melody

[Asya] offered one of the headphones to Armanoush. Armanoush accepted the headphone warily and asked: "Which Johnny Cash song are we going to listen to?" "Dirty Old Egg-Suckin' Dog!" [...] And the song started, first a listless prelude, then country melodies fusing with seagull shrieks and Turkish vocalizations in the background. [...] There were a few tables scattered outside on the sidewalk. A grim couple settled themselves at one of them, and then another couple, with stressed-out, serious urban faces. Armanoush watched their gestures with curiosity, likening them to characters from a Fitzgerald novel. (Shafak, *The Bastard* 200, 205)

This urban scene taken from Elif Shafak's novel *The Bastard of Istanbul* (2007) not only mixes dissonant sounds and clashing images, it also envisions a transnational encounter on several semantic levels: Asya, the Turkish girl and native Istanbulite, takes Armanoush, her American cousin of Turkish-Armenian descent, on a tourist tour accompanied by local city noises as well as American country songs, while her visitor compares this foreign urban setting of Istanbul to her own, yet fictionalized American background. It is a scene that while with "a touch of enchantment" above all offers a disturbing and dangerous vision "full of contradictions and temper, utterly disharmonious [...] and ready to explode at any time" (200). This hypersensitive urban locale, focalized through the young female visitor's stunned gaze, alludes to interpersonal and transnational intersections crisscrossing familial, cultural, and ethnic histories. Even though employing the standard trope of a tourist's first-encounter perspective, Shafak evokes Istanbul not so much as the mythologized city located on two continents joining Europe and Asia, but as

a chaotic, puzzling, and multifarious “hodgepodge of ten million lives. It is an open book of ten million scrambled stories” (243). Istanbul thus figures both as distinctly Turkish cultural focal point and as a global city that shows resemblances to multi-million cities across the world and history, especially including U.S.-American metropolitan sites.

It was Leo Marx, who in his effort to un-puzzle (anti-)urbanism in classic American literature, sharply distinguishes American from European cities. Tying together the unlikely couple of Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* and Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, Marx shows that while often negative images like the scaffold or the valley of ashes represent facets of the dominant culture of industrial capitalism, there are also abundant moments of alternative “pastoral” visions not so much of resistance, but of simple withdrawal into nature and thus into the realm of the “pre-socialized resources of the self” (78). This notion of reclusive and idyllic life prior to social and political turmoil stands, of course, in stark contrast to the actual development of American cities. “Most American cities, after all, have been built since the onset of industrialization,” claims Marx and “unlike London, Paris, or Rome”—and I want to include Istanbul in this list here—

they embody relatively few features of any social order other than that of industrial capitalism. If the American city is perceived chiefly as the locus of a particular socio-economic order, that view accords with the historical fact that millions of Americans have moved to cities, not because they preferred urban life to rural life, but rather because of the inescapable coercion of a market economy. (Marx 78)

Nevertheless, writers like Shafak expand this intra-American dichotomous perspective to encompass a transcultural scope of lived metropolitan experience both in the New and Old World. Shafak accordingly writes against an “etherialization” of history that Lewis Mumford discusses in his study on *The City in History* as counterpoint to the materiality of the city. Instead of the notion that cities have taken part in “etherializing” history, Mumford argues for an oscillation between the ethereal and material, between the symbolic and the concrete:

The rhythm of life in cities seems to be an alternation between materialization and etherialization: the concrete structure, detaching itself through a human response, takes on a symbolic meaning, uniting the knower and

the known; while subjective images, ideas, intuitions [...] likewise take on material attributes. (113)

Ihab Hassan takes up this idea of a city design being linked to a social process of materialization and points towards the abstract, theoretical, and hidden 'nature' of cities, for the city, he says, "acts as mediator between the human and natural orders, as a changing network of social relations, as a flux of production and consumption, [...] as an arena of violence, play, desire, as a labyrinth of solitudes, as a system of covert controls, semiotic exchanges" (95). Hassan's effort is to reveal "the city as a fiction composing many fictions" (97) and thus to claim a complicity between fiction and the city that against all experiences of disaster, terror, and destruction remains a visionary space for writers: "We stand as ever between history and hope. And standing there I perceive the postmodern city as a place of ecumenism" (108).

Shafak's metropolitan novels envision such ecumenical spaces in a more literal sense than Hassan may have had in mind. In her earlier novel *The Saint of Insipient Insanities*, she brings together three male roommates from three different countries, all students in Boston between 2002 and 2003. Abed, the devout Moslem from Morocco, engaged to marry a girl back home in an arranged marriage and watching slasher films at night to soothe his multitudinous worries, and Piyu, the devout Catholic from Spain, very much in love with the bulimic Mexican-American girl Allegra, are joined by Ömer, the Turk, who is not so religiously inclined, sexually very agile, but falling in love with Gail, a half-Jewish, half-Protestant lesbian, feminist, and vegan chocolate maker, who is also very much prone to suicidal tendencies.

All three students in different ways pursue romantic longings, none of them succeeding very well. It becomes obvious that their struggle for survival within an often hostile American environment brings them closer together, even though they vastly differ in their respective cultural and personal backgrounds. But all agree, for example, on their love for food, a topic that in *The Bastard of Istanbul* is explored in even greater detail and depth, where the 'surprising' similarities between traditional, yet transculturally available Armenian and Turkish cuisines are starkly contrasted against a globalized McDonald-fast food culture devoid of long-standing local practices.

The three unlikely roommates of *The Saint of Insipient Insanities* judge their lives in exile in terms of balancing the gains and losses, be it through engaging in food, alcohol, education, relationships, or religion. It is, however, above all the intercultural relationships between Ömer and Gail as well as Piyu and

Allegra—and Abed’s significant lack thereof—that the novel represents as intersecting and mirroring instances of transcultural negotiations leading up to an uncanny climax in the end: Gail kills herself during their honeymoon in Istanbul by jumping off the bridge crossing the Bosphorus. What is at stake here is, in particular, the issue of time, sequence, and development. As much as the novel’s narrative structure denies any logically motivated linearity of plot, with the first chapter taking place rather towards the end—but not quite the end—of the plot, the many chapters mostly taking a specific character into focus add up to a scattered mosaic of ironically comic survival situations in an alien location.

The importance and vagaries of time are especially articulated through the voice and actions of Ömer. As primary embodiment of Shafak’s displaced migrant, the “stranger in a strangeland” as she herself claims in an interview (“Migrations” 57), his measurement and thus perception of time relies not on the passing of seconds, minutes, hours, and days, but on an individualized pattern of recurrence instead:

Ömer Özsipahioğlu was, in every single layer down to the lowest echelons of his soul, demoralized and unsettled, poo-scared and exhausted into slow motion by the hyperspeed of that crepuscular hologram called “time.” Anyhow, *what was time?* [...] it wasn’t the definition, and not even time per se that got on his nerves, but what she was supposed to be doing all the time: flow . . . and flow . . . and flow . . . It was precisely this flowing part, and flowing not as in lyrical meandering but as in galloping at full speed, that made him so tense about it. (*The Saint* 75, original emphasis)

Having the feeling that time always needed to be compartmentalized, analyzed, and measured, “and yet never accumulating into a meaningful whole” (*The Saint* 75), made him come to a conclusion how to handle this puzzling phenomenon ‘time.’ Instead of giving in to the purposeful linearity of time as measured through clocks and watches, he chooses to rely on the time’s circular quality measured through yet a very different media: the endless loop of music.

Rather than hours, minutes, and seconds, he used albums, songs and beats. The length of a period between two succeeding things was tantamount to the length of a certain song played over and over again. Basically, it was good to be reminded that unlike time, music could always be rewind, paused, and replayed. [...] It did not glue itself to the one-way current of

time heading toward a phony notion of progress. The circular loop of songs eased the burden of the irreversibility of linear time. (*The Saint* 76-77)

As much as Ömer's habit of measuring time seems to be a product of his exile existence, it actually predates his arrival in Boston and is thus a cultural 'baggage' that he brings along from Turkey. Is it, however, a distinctly personal habit, or rather a cultural distinction pointing towards an East/West-dichotomy? Since Ömer's songs, and overall they are Western, are comments on his current situation, the first conclusion seems quite obvious. Here Ömer could be said to be one of those "personal-stereo users," who according to sound researcher Michael Bull manage time as part of everyday life through the use of technological devices such as the walkman or "personal stereo" as he calls it:

The ritualized journey and the pressing demands of the everyday come with a recognition that the cyclical and linear components of the day constitute either a threat or an unacceptable incursion to their everyday life. Users' experiences are rather understood in terms of their desire to operationalize a 'compensatory metaphysics' in which time is transformed and experience heightened through its technologically mediated management. (161)

Ömer's effort to control and manage his everyday life and thus to keep civilizational fears and threats at bay indeed participates in such "technologically mediated" strategies of urban "lifeworld" partitioning that Bull describes. Taking a side-glance at one of Elif Shafak's essays, however, leads more in the direction of the second conclusion of alluding to a culturally distinct and historically specific context. In "Transgender Bolero," she alludes to yet another "circular loop" that is significant in this context since it attests to Turkey's enforced Western transformation in the early twentieth century.

Shafak first reflects about her debut novel on the hermaphrodite Sufi mystic. Its title *Pinhan* refers to a mystical term meaning "covertness," and she claims to have followed "in the footsteps of a certain tradition of disclosure—the way of telling things without saying them, disclosing without exposing, speaking through silences, just like the Sufis used to do in the past. *When the society is not ready to hear what you have to say, advised the Sufi, say it to no one other than your soul and your soulmates*" ("Transgender Bolero" 27; original emphasis). Within the essay, Shafak then frames this poetological statement with the encounter of a transsexual that she watches on a ferryboat crossing the Bosphorus. This encounter is strikingly "bizarre" due to its transgender im-

plications with the transsexual making visible in broad daylight what usually remains hidden within Istanbulite nightly dark corners. But it is her specific action of putting on a walkman and listening with increased volume to Ravel’s “Bolero” that brings Shafak into her very own cultural loop of time:

As she leaned back listening to the world’s longest crescendo, for a fleeting moment the world’s sexiest smile crossed her lips. All of a sudden, past and present, she and I, the silences within my novel and her clamorous existence on earth got connected to one another, as if everything had fallen neatly in this place, each and every one of us transforming into personal scraps of repetitions along the protracted and yet equally abrupt social transformation that the Turkish state and society has undergone. (“Transgender Bolero” 27)

Maurice Ravel’s “Bolero” of 1928, a “piece lasting 17 minutes and consisting wholly of one long, unbroken crescendo” (Ravel, qtd. in Shafak 27), nevertheless was structured as a seemingly repetition of a single melody—actually two alternating melodies—, culminating in a tremendous climax that many took to resemble a sexual orgasm. As Shafak asserts, along with the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire and the fabrication of the Turkish Republic as a modern and secular nation-state came the attempt in discouraging the practice of traditional Anatolian folk music and the encouragement to rather listen to Western music. As one of the controlled incentives, Ravel’s “Bolero” was played on the public ferryboats travelling along the Bosphorus in an endless loop. Not only does this radically disregard the composer’s musical intentions, turning the climactic experience in its ironic opposite with the repetitive melodic structure now meaning nothing but boring, annoying repetition instead of the ultimate and ecstatic crescendo. This practice also attests to the official cutting-off of local traditions in favor of Westernized modernization, whereas unofficially these very traditions have continued till today. Shafak here claims that “perhaps it can be plausibly argued that the story of state, sexuality and modernization in Turkey resembles a song in a repeat track mode, or else, a melody full of repetitions” (“Transgender Bolero” 28).

Like the transsexual listening to the “Bolero,” in yet another cross-cultural appropriation Asya’s habit in *The Bastard of Istanbul* to constantly—endlessly one might say—listen to Johnny Cash’s aggressive-mournful tunes paradoxically reflects Asya’s own dissociate mental state (“Asya had decided she too was born in the soul of misery” [*The Bastard* 63]) as well as the city’s explosive influence on its inhabitants. But I believe that especially Ömer’s habit of measuring time in endless repetition rather than progressive linearity demon-

strates Shafak's idea of a "deluge of perpetual repetition alongside underlying transformation, a long, drawn-out melody of modernization" ("Transgender Bolero" 47) that characterizes Turkey's difficult stance as intermediary between East and West. The novel's ending with newly-wed American Gail jumping the Turkish bridge and exiled, visiting-home Ömer once again listening—repeat track—to one of his American songs, ironically, but in its prolepsis appropriately titled "Gimme Danger"—by punk rocker Iggy Pop, although not mentioned in the text—turns the endless repetition into a drastic and highly explosive full stop: Gail's death.

Elegiac Metropolis or "A Bridge in Between"

The novel's tangled mosaic plot builds up to an astounding climax. The last pages can truly be called a crescendo as well as accelerando in musical terms. This *stretto* connects and interweaves all the novel's motifs. While the first chapter with Ömer's bemoaning his difficult lot as a forlorn foreigner and desperate husband embarked on the topic of cultural misunderstandings due to migratory processes, the overlapping synchronicity of the novel's ending points towards a contrary direction: no matter where you are or whom you are with, a feeling of belonging, sharing, and intimacy is fluctuating and temporary at best. The three roommates all embark on revelatory intimate experiences at the exact same time, two of them in Boston and Ömer in Istanbul. And while Piyu finds out about Allegra's secret bulimia and Abed finally gives in to his sexual needs, Ömer must face Gail's suicide. The novel of immigration that starts out as a cultural critique of America's global imperialism filtered through Ömer's—but not only his—sense of loss of identity ends with a huge step towards the claim of cultural relativism: individual estrangement and suffering supersedes collective or national dilemmas.

Ömer, while listening—repeat track—to "Gimme Danger," once again has the feeling of "lagging behind the speed of time, unable to catch the cadence of life, except that this time it is the cadence of death he is running after" (*The Saint* 349). As much as "the cadence of life" seems like an oxymoron, since in musical terms it comprises a harmonized ending and thus "cadence of life" metaphorically would come to signify life's opposite, namely death, Ömer's feeling of "lagging behind the speed of time" actually equals that musical motion of *ritardando* with which a piece slows down towards its finale. Whereas, therefore, Ömer's habit of listening repeat track can be seen as a defiance of

an untimely ending, his wish to be in accord with the “cadence of life” can also be read as the equivalent to a latent death wish or as “incipient insanity” in allusion to the novel’s enigmatic title. In any case, this incongruity there and then coalesces to make perfect, if tragic sense. Belatedly running after Gail, he has one last—and fatally false—consolation: “She won’t die. No, she’ll not. People do not commit suicide on other people’s soil, and this is not her homeland” (350). Departing from Ömer’s fallacious belief in survival and in a sudden shift of focalization, the omniscient narrator takes over and brings the reader to acknowledge the transcultural tragedy within repeatedly failed comic survival efforts: “But did she ever have one [i.e. homeland]? Who is the real stranger—the one who lives in a foreign land and knows he belongs elsewhere or the one who lives the life of a foreigner in her native land and has no place else to belong?” (350-351). Thus, while Ömer until the end remains stuck in his lack of understanding the complexity of cultural crosscurrents, the reader may capture the tragic sense of such dissonant chords. Ultimately, the novel ends in a bleak juxtaposition of untimely time sequences:

The bridge is sixty-four meters above sea level. A song plays on Ömer’s Walkman. The song lasts three minutes, twenty seconds, but if you keep repeating the track it can last an eternity.

Gail’s fall lasts only 2.7 seconds. (351)

Everlasting suspension—the illusion of eternal life—and sudden closure—the reality of imminent death—meet producing an explosively discordant finale instead of an elaborately expanded harmonious cadence. Shafak here recalls Georg Simmel’s idea of the separateness *and* connectedness that meet in the bridge, since walking on the bridge, “before we have become inured to it through daily habit, [...] must have provided the wonderful feeling of floating for a moment between heaven and earth” (“Bridge and Door” 173). Shafak refrains from glossing over the eccentric vagaries of the lives of her transculturally migrating characters, highlighting instead the eccentricities of their idiosyncratic choices. This last chapter, appropriately called “A Bridge in Between” draws on a transnational poetics that on the one hand ‘bridges’ cultures, but on the other hand leaves people homeless for no “apparent reason” as Gail’s suicide symbolizes: “Once again in her life, she started watching herself falling down, and the falling down accelerate at a bewildering pace, eroding her desire to live bit by bit, like blood oozing from a wound inside, except

that there was no apparent wound, and, therefore, no apparent reason why" (346) *Apparent* being the key word here.

In a diary entry of 1925, Virginia Woolf asks herself whether a novel could be an elegy: "I have an idea that I will invent a new name for my books to supplant 'novel.' A new—by Virginia Woolf. But what? Elegy?" (qtd. in Kennedy 1). In a sense, I believe Shafak's novel to be such an elegy, here on an idealized vision of transculturation within a global sphere. Even though the novel is set directly following the fatal 9/11 incidents and features Muslim characters, it makes no particular references to any specific cultural war being waged against Islamic immigrants in the United States. Her elegiac approach is not so much political here than personal: it is the intimacy between people that has been corrupted and lost in this time and age. This links her to urban theorists who claim that the modern Western city has become a "world of strangers" with a logic of sexuality of its own that depends upon the "large, dense and permanent cluster of heterogeneous human beings in circulation" (Bech, qtd. in Knopp 151). Shafak's notion, however, includes Istanbul and thus a metropolis located between East and West in her depiction of the idiosyncrasies of exiled identities.

Even though her characters are not so much forced into exile, their migrating across the globe as well as their stubbornly remaining at an allotted spot is a sign of their internal state of exile. And consequently, not only are evolving intimate relations prone to be transitory at best, fatal at worst; intimacy as such seems to be bound to the fundamental dread of loss—personally *and* culturally. As Abed, the Moroccan who steadfastly believed in the truth of his love only to be betrayed by his far-away beloved Safiya, ruminates when in the end he negates all that he has believed so far and gives in to a fleeting moment of anonymous intimacy with an older woman at the laundromat. Feeling "as if pulled by an invisible rope," he comes to realize that he has deserted Safiya long before she has:

He sensed but could never explain to anyone, no less to himself, that his loyalty for Safiya had been abstrusely interwoven with his devotion not only to their common past, but also to their country. The effect of losing bit by bit his connection to Safiya was a subtle loosening of the moorings that tied him to his homeland. Not that he felt less connected to Morocco now. But he somehow felt more connected to his life in the United States. (*The Saint* 348)

Shafak's metropolitan elegy is not one that bemoans nostalgic notions of 'homeland,' but that calls forth a sense of loss and suffering as a world-wide ailment, beyond national borders. The synchronicity at the end of her tale of two cities stages the coincidental acts of Gayle's suicide, Allegra's ferocious eating binge, and Abed's sexual hysteria as temporally, but not logically interconnected. And while Shafak calls upon Istanbul's bridge as literally connecting the two halves of the city, but above all symbolically connecting East and West, the synchronic actions of those various individuals in different parts of the world also create cross-cultural lineages way beyond geopolitical log(ist)ics. Shafak in this joins critics like Leslie Adelson, who in writing on the trope of "betweenness" in relation to Turkey's location on the cultural map of our time forcefully argues "against between" claiming that this "discursive model that repeatedly situates Turks and other migrants 'between two worlds' relies too schematically and too rigidly on territorial concepts of 'home' (*Heimat*)" (23). Accordingly, we need to read Shafak's effort in balancing the gains and losses of transnational migrants not as a nostalgic yearning for the "tired bridge 'between two worlds,'" but as beckoning of transitional spaces, an invitation to cross transnational thresholds as sites "where consciousness of something new flashes into view" (Adelson 24). Here the image of the door supersedes that of the bridge, because "the door represents in a more decisive manner how separating and connecting are only two sides of precisely the same act. [...] Thus the door becomes the image of the boundary point at which human beings actually always stand or can stand" (Simmel, "Bridge and Door" 172).

The Saint of Insipient Insanities is Elif Shafak's first novel written in English. Before making this linguistic move towards the *lingua franca* of world languages, she already has been, as an extensive, thirty-page interview in the American academic journal *Meridians* of 2003 announced, "an accomplished and award-winning novelist in her home country of Turkey" ("Migrations" 55). Although *Meridians* introduces Shafak to the American audience as somewhat of a surprise novelist, she proves to have actually been a successful and versatile writer for some time with novels dealing with hermaphrodite mystics (*Pinhan [The Sufi]*, 1997), estranged and deterritorialized Sephardic Jews (*Şehrin Aynaları [The Mirrors of the City]*, 1999), traumatized obese women (*Mahrem [The Gaze]*, 2000), and degraded apartment buildings (*Bit Palas [The Flea Palace]*, 2002).

All of these novels in one way or another focus on Turkish nationality, history, and sexuality, mostly highlighting the cultural history of Istanbul, which

might account for the lack of interest in her novels outside of Turkey. With her fifth novel of 2004, *The Saint of Insipient Insanities*, however, Elif Shafak has entered a different plane, namely that of transnational literature, since not only this novel originally is written in English, it also is set mainly in east-coast metropolitan North America. She has continued writing in English with her highly disputed sixth novel of 2007, *The Bastard of Istanbul*, which with its predominantly urban setting of Istanbul but also of Tucson, Arizona, and San Francisco could be said to be a counter piece to *The Saint* in its Turkish-American connection. In both of her English-language novels, Shafak deals with the questioning of ethnicity and nationality from postcolonial and global perspectives, and thus on the one hand departing from her narrower focus on Turkish cultural history of her earlier novels, but on the other hand suggesting to read post-Ottoman Turkey's national setting against the backdrop of postcolonial national histories across the world.

To be sure, the Turkish republic of today cannot easily be integrated within a postcolonial discourse, but a set of developments makes this feasible, after all. For once, as Ismael Talib in his study on the language of postcolonial literatures asserts, the association of the introduction of writing with the colonial power may open up the discussion in the case of Turkey "which was not colonized by a Western European power, but which also introduced the romanized script for the writing of Turkish, because of the belief that it was more efficient for writing the language" (72). This already shows the influence of the West on the shaping of the Turkish nation-state, a process that Shafak likens to disenchantment: "The Turkish language has been cleansed, Turkified—the reformists got rid of Persian words, Arabic words, Sufi expressions. The language has been disenchanted. [...] When you try to limit language, you limit your own imagination" ("Crossover Artists" 25-26). Deniz Kandiyoti and Ayşe Saktanber further claim in their introduction to *Fragments of Culture*, even in countries such as Ottoman Turkey "that did not experience direct colonial rule, European hegemony and the perceived 'backwardness' of their [...] societies created a terrain for ideological contest in which notions of 'catching up,' imitation of the West, cultural corruption and authenticity continued to have purchase on political discourse" (3). Instead of relying on the traditional East/West binaries, postcolonial scholarship especially in the aftermath of Edward Said's *Orientalism* has successfully dismantled such cultural clichés pointing toward "the processes of cultural hybridization that characterize alternative modernities" (Kandiyoti and Saktanber 3) such as Turkey's. And above all, literature has taken on a pivotal role to reflect these cultural transitions as

Shafak herself claims: “In Turkey, the novel especially served this end because it was a new genre. It was the voice of Westernization when the Turkish reformers were trying to accelerate the process of Westernization” (“Crossover Artists” 24).

Shafak on various levels has taken up the lastingly problematic center-periphery model of power to disclose how Western perceptions of Turkey, but also Turkish self-perceptions at times easily position Turkey within the culturally less privileged peripheral location. Ömer’s awareness of how Americans might perceive him is mirrored by Asya’s self-deprecatory statements that she turns into her “Personal Manifesto of Nihilism:”

Back in Turkey, he used to be ÖMER ÖZSİPAHİOĞLU.

Here in America, he had become an OMAR OZSIPAHIOGLU.

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 another. Yet, few nations could perhaps be as self-assured as the Americans in reprocessing the names and surnames of foreigners. (*The Saint* 5)

Asya Kazancı was still lying in bed under a goose-feather quilt, listening to the myriad sounds only Istanbul is capable of producing while her mind meticulously composed a Personal Manifesto of Nihilism:

Article One: If you cannot find a reason to love the life you are living, do not pretend to love the life you are living. (*The Bastard* 121)

But besides letting her characters take on opposing cultural standpoints, Shafak herself is keenly aware of her own cultural position as Turkish author aspiring to ‘conquer’ the American literary market including the linguistic adaptation of her own name from Turkish “Şafak” to Americanized “Shafak.” Additionally, she is forced to think of herself as an ethnicized woman, because in the United States she is being perceived as “colored” due to her cultural background. While most Turks would consider themselves as “white” or “Caucasian,” she refers to this dubious category of “skin color” within the context of “deterritorialization, non-belonging, and the constant feeling of being an ‘outsider,’ in addition to outside perceptions of what it means to be from an Islamic country, Muslim or Turkish, even though I am not a practitioner of Islamic religions, that makes me a ‘woman of color’” (“Migrations” 61). In this awareness of cultural double-standards, Shafak’s

transnational poetics and above all ethics become apparent as a field of experimentation that reconsiders established cultural premises and literary canons. She therefore projects and delineates, as Jahan Ramazani suggests, “models of transnational imaginative citizenship that are mobile, ambivalent, and multifaceted” (354). In this sense, Shafak’s poetics of transnationalism can help us

both understand and imagine a world in which cultural boundaries are fluid, transient, and permeable, and thus read ourselves as imaginative citizens not of one or another hermetically sealed national or civilizational block, but of intercultural worlds that ceaselessly overlap, intersect, and converge. (Ramazani 355)

In her English language novels, Shafak participates in that shift towards opening up the fixed boundaries of a nationalist literature to embrace a transnational poetics of overlapping, intersecting, and converging qualities, which here also includes envisioning herself as a “woman of color” for strategic reasons. As Diana Fuss succinctly reminds us there are times and places, where “strategic essentialism” can be employed as powerful tool to dismantle fixed either/or constructions, if one keeps in mind that there is difference between “deploying” or “activating” essentialism and “falling into” or “lapsing into” essentialism:

“Falling into” or “lapsing into” implies that essentialism is inherently reactionary—inevitably and inescapably a problem or a mistake. “Deploying” or “activating,” on the other hand, implies that essentialism may have some strategic or interventionary value. (20)

Shafak in this sense politically invests her marginal position as a female writer from a Muslim country to address issues relevant not only for her own ‘homeland,’ but for her targeted American audience as well. She uses the “soft-power” of literature to recall Turkey’s historical investment of such power as means of cultural homogenizing “to promote the establishment of a nation-state and the Turkification of language,” and calls for a strategic use of such power once again, but to different, namely transnationally oriented ends. Remembering the multicultural Ottoman past, she makes strategic use of the relinquished and forgotten merits of a Turkish heritage without falling back to a proto-colonial attitude of dominance and hierarchy: “Now, it is time to use soft power in the opposite direction. This time, through words and stories, newspapers and novels, we Turkish writers can uphold the cultural, eth-

nic, and religious diversity that was dismantled but never completely lost” (“Accelerating the Flow of Time” 26).

She therefore imagines through her novels the particularities and histories of a nation-state like Turkey as well as the globalized phenomenon of world travelling and urban migration, and she excels, I think, especially when being most ironic. Humor is a trait that Shafak expressly values in the English language, because of its possibility of relinquishing the “either/or framework,” whereas Turkish humor for her is direct, “political humor, but not irony. [...] In English, I found more gates for that humor, additional doors” (“Crossover Artists” 26). And so, instead of peacefully affirming or adamantly renouncing the metaphor of the “tired bridge ‘between two worlds,’” she lets an angry, young girl like Asya sardonically smirk at such an overwrought allusion when her aunt suggests acting as translator for her American visitor Armanoush:

Therefore, dear, you will be her translator. You will ferry her words to us and our words to her. [...] Like a bridge extending over cultures, you will connect the East and the West.

Asya crinkled her nose, as if she had just detected an awful stink in the house that was apparent only to her, and screwed up her lips, as if to say, “You wish!” (*The Bastard* 134)

Edible City, or the Etho-Poetics of Food and Sex

Much like the tragic-comically overlapping synchronicity that characterized the climax of *The Saint of Insipient Insanities* and was acted out on the Bosphorus Bridge as well as in Boston’s urban center, Shafak’s later novel *The Bastard of Istanbul* reinforces the notion of the idiosyncrasies of exiled identities. Here, the sole male heir of an old Istanbulite family hides in Tucson, Arizona, only to return to Istanbul after twenty years to face his past trauma and follow the fate of every single male in the family, i.e. a sudden early death:

Like an evil spell put on the whole lineage, generations after generations of Kazancı men had died young and unexpectedly. [...] Yet it was one thing to move away from the city where he was born, and another to be so far removed from his own flesh and blood. Mustafa Kazancı did not so much mind taking refuge in America forever as if he had no native soil to return to, or even living life always forward with no memories to recall, but to turn

into a foreigner with no ancestors, a man with no boyhood, troubled him.
(*The Bastard* 29, 285)

Returning to Istanbul to recapture his run-away stepdaughter Armanoush, he has to face his “cultivated denial,” fully aware that “if he stayed here any longer, he would start to remember” (335). Mustafa has manufactured amnesia for good reasons: his flight to America years ago was brought on as aftermath of raping his sister and in turn fathering Asya unbeknownst to everyone else in the family. His involuntary return home not only brings him back to a household of women of three generations he had escaped from, but to a trip down memory lane: “The moment he had stepped into his childhood home, the spell that had shielded him all these years against his own memory had been shattered” (335).

Through Mustafa's guilt, shame, and denial that in turn caused Asya's mother's—his sister's—hard-edged, cynical behavior as the family's “black sheep” (174), Asya herself lacks a stable sense of identity and home. She is the victim of a family secret that not only socially stigmatizes her as “bastard,” but psychologically forces a dark past upon her own young life. And while she wishes to “have no past,” to be “a nobody” with “[n]o family, no memories and all that shit” (148), she is painfully aware of her status as “outcast in that house, eternally exiled from dreadful family secrets. In the name of protecting me, they have separated me from them” (175). Calling her own mother “aunt” and having no father that she knows of, her familial identity is suspended in a space of non-being, a last “bastard” in a long chain of fatefully forsaken ancestors, which due to historical and political circumstances has continuously been disrupted leaving its members scattered all over the world.

While metropolis, translated from the Greek, literally means mother-city and thus etymologically links the urban space to motherhood, Shafak makes it very clear that whatever haven these large mega-cities may offer, they have certainly lost their quality of a safe motherly home. In her novel, she delicately interweaves the story of two very different and culturally very distinct Ottoman families: one Armenian and diasporic, living in San Francisco, and the other Turkish and remaining in Istanbul. And yet, as the novel's ending suggests, these families' histories have connecting points both in the distant past and the immediate present as do many others: “Family stories intermingle in such ways that what happened generations ago can have an impact on seemingly irrelevant developments of the present day. The past is anything but bygone” (*The Bastard* 356). Through the lens of mostly female characters of mul-

tiple generations, the novel recounts the interconnected fate of these women and links them to a common history that was cut off through the demise of the Ottoman Empire in general and the injustices committed against Ottoman Armenians in 1915 in particular. Several passages clearly stake out this volatile political terrain, for example when Armanoush refers to herself as part of “a diaspora people” (178) being “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!” (53–54). While ironically, Armanoush and her step-father have common ancestors and therefore, Mustafa actually is part of several relatives of Armanoush’s that she believes to lack, Asya’s mother has a lover who is also Armenian, but who does not want to be assigned to a diasporic fate claiming instead a multicultural and -ethnic urban heritage as his own:

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. (*The Bastard* 254)

This Armenian’s account refers to the radical urban changes that affected Istanbul’s ethnic, non-Muslim inhabitants during the transition from the Ottoman Empire to the Turkish Republic, drastically decimating the Christian population who made up a large part of the Istanbul’s intelligentsia, a fact Shafak mentions several times in her novel: “Writers, poets, artists, intellectuals were the first ones within the Armenian *millet* to be eliminated by the late Ottoman government” (*The Bastard* 96). Sociologist Çağlar Keyder also asserts: “Between 1915 and 1925, a total of more than two million Armenians and Greeks were killed, expelled, exchanged, or departed of their own will. This Christian population had constituted a disproportionate portion of the wealthier urban dwellers of the late empire” (145). Shafak, who in the historical Armenian Conference on the events of 1915, which after being postponed due to nationalist political pressure but was finally held in September 2005 in Istanbul, presented a paper on the only female Armenian intellectual Zabel Esayan, stresses the importance that against a “nationalist smear campaign” a growing “network of intellectual solidarity between Turkish and Armenian intellectuals” has joined forces in collective efforts to improve Turkey’s human-rights record. She herself quotes from Marc Nichanian’s *Writers of Disaster*:

Armenian Literature in the Twentieth Century (2002), a quote that might as well stand for her own effort in *The Bastard of Istanbul*:

The years will pass, the political enmities and hatred will fall into oblivion, the new humanity, beguiled with new hopes and new desires, will forget today's mourning and misery, but one thing will remain, which cannot be healed or forgotten, that is the protracted agony of a whole people under torture, of which you will find but a pale image in the following pages. (Nichanian, qtd. in Shafak, "Accelerating the Flow of Time" 25)

For this effort, Shafak was put on trial for "denigrating Turkishness" under the Turkish Penal Code, because some of the Armenian characters spoke of the "Armenian genocide" in the novel. Even though the charges were dropped—after PEN International organized a campaign of appeals on her behalf—ruling that she could not be prosecuted for something said by a fictional character, the novel does hit a sore spot. As much as the novel's title refers to the youngest daughter of the Istanbulite family literally being a 'bastard,' the overall concern of the novel hints at a larger meaning of the term 'bastard.' The mysterious death premise of all male family members leaves this particular family not only without a proper patriarch, it also makes perfectly clear that it is the weakness and failure of the fathers as leading figures that has led to this state of cultural, ethnic and historical bastardization, the anomaly of rupturing a wholesome multiethnic society, breaking its structure and dispelling its units.

Shafak brutally dismisses the last male descendant through murder. And it is food that plays the crucial role in both executing the murder and reuniting all others. The novel abounds in food and food metaphors. All chapters are titled with food names from "Cinnamon" to "White Rice," and some include elaborate recipes. In one particularly striking scene, Armanoush experiences her step-father's Turkish family as they wish to excel in their famous Turkish hospitality only to be taken aback and then rejoicing in the fact that this girl knows all those meals and their names, because they remained the same in Turkish and Armenian cuisines. It is here that Shafak makes a strong argument in favor of cultural understanding across historical divides, namely that food as cultural phenomenon mirrors and transcends cultural processes at large. Especially when looking at diasporic situations, the editors of *Eating Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Food* argue that "cooking performs memory: food and recipes are links to cultural 'roots' and are, at the same time, testifying on the contact zones and 'routes' which their producers and consumers

have gone through” (Döring, Heide, and Mühleisen 7). This certainly attests to the effort of Armanoush’s diasporic Armenian family in San Francisco to uphold the culinary tradition of Armenian cooking at every family gathering. As Armanoush’s uncle remarks on one such occasion:

Dikran Stamboulian gazed longingly at the food set out on the table, and reached for a jar of yogurt drink, Americanized with too many ice cubes. In multihued clay bowls of different sizes were many of his favorite dishes: *fassoulye pilaki*, *kadın budu köfte*, *karniyarik*, newly made *churek*, and to Uncle Dikran’s delight *bastırma*. [...] his heart warmed at the sight of *bastırma* and entirely melted when he saw his favorite dish next to it: *burma*. (*The Bastard* 51)

This heart-warming and communal culinary experience—even when ‘watered down’ as partially Americanized—links its exiled participants to their lost home. It also captures the diasporic community’s struggle to maintain what Roger Bromley has termed “a critically imagined collective community” (9), critically here in the sense, as Peter Brooker explains, that although the diasporic experience “can invite nostalgia for an ‘authentic’ homeland,” as a critical concept it is reflexive and politicized, “always in a dialogic relation with the dominant and with the past, drawing upon both for its critical resources in the present” (20–21). Armanoush’s Armenian family takes part in this retelling and reworking of a collective historical sense, and especially Armanoush herself is not only a cultural hybrid, but also takes on the role of transcultural mediator literally migrating across the globe and thus opening up spatio-temporal possibilities of reimagining a “hetero-cultural present” (Brooker 23) where much may seem unassimilable at first.

However, stretching the argument beyond the diasporic, Elspeth Probyn in her study on *Carnal Appetites: Foodsexidentities* goes on to claim that “eating reconfigures us in local, global and sexual ways” (145). It is through food and eating that love and shame, virtue and vice, passion and poison may all be mixed up together. This claim of an “etho-poetics” of food and sex (75) is not as far-fetched as it might seem, even within the diaspora. It is certainly not meant in a way that one may supersede the other: food instead of sex or vice versa. Rather, this is a claim to combine cultures and histories of our lives, “the pasts and present within which we live” (146). And it is food and eating that “can foreground the sense and sensuality of the timing and touch of precise combinations.” As Probyn remarks: “The imperative to bring together different elements, and at the same time to not lose sight of their individual

flavors, textures, and inherent possibilities, extends across a wide range of sites" (146). It was Georg Simmel who made two famous, seemingly contradictory statements: eating and drinking "is the most egotistical thing, indeed the one most absolutely and immediately confined to the individual" ("Sociology of the Meal" 130). But this strict individuality of the eating act may be overcome in the temporal and special experience of community: "The shared nature of the meal, however, brings about temporal regularity, for only at a predetermined time can a circle of people assemble together—the first triumph over the naturalism of eating" (131).

This captures the turning of the natural into the social, the elemental into the alimentary. Shafak's novel indeed revels in the celebration of the culinary community. It is at the table where the daughters—one Turkish, one Armenian-American—unite in a feast of making up bastardized histories. But food is also the site, and maybe Simmel here was right after all, where one eats utterly alone, when passion and poison clash fatally. The last chapter is entitled "Potassium Cyanide" and it refers to the poisonous ingredient, tasting like almonds, which is mixed up in the dessert of Mustafa, the family's last male heir. He eats it, fully knowing, and also fully aware of his shame, namely of raping his sister and fathering a bastard. This most private incident, however, is encompassed by a collectivized and naturalized metropolis that is aligned with the etho-poetics of food. Through the eyes and the nose of the Armenian-American girl Armanoush we sense the olfactory quality of the sexiness of an edible city:

The breeze shifted direction just then, and Armanoush caught a pungent whiff of the sea. This city was a jumble of aromas, some of them strong and rancid, others sweet and stimulating. Almost every smell made Armanoush recall some sort of food, so much so that she had started to perceive Istanbul as something edible. (*The Bastard* 246)

The city has metamorphosed into a communal feast to be relished beyond a cursed history. Like Ömer who craves for Turkish raki in Boston only to find Greek ouzo, Armanoush will remain a stranger in a strangeland, whether in Istanbul, Tucson, or some other city. And yet, even strangers may mysteriously fall for such strangelands. "Life is coincidence," Shafak's narrator claims in the end, "though sometimes it takes a *djinni* [i.e. a ghost or demon] to fathom that" (*The Bastard* 356). Whether this is meant to be taken as witty irony or at face value is for the reader to decide.

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