

Contesting Spaces and Conflicting Memories: A Reading of Armenian Diaspora in Elif Shafak's 'The Bastard Of Istanbul'

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This article explores how the collective identity of the Armenian diaspora is based on the memory of the 'genocide' which took place in the Ottoman Empire in 1915. The Republic of Turkey's official rejection of the term genocide and its complete denial of the act of violence perpetuated against the Armenians has been the focus of politics for the Armenian diaspora. The paper examines issues of contested memory, fractured identity, home and exile through the lens of Elif Shafak's acclaimed novel *The Bastard of Istanbul*. Shafak's novel enquires into the politics of tenuously holding onto the cultural memory of the genocide by the Armenian refugees in their resettled lives as American diaspora; it simultaneously critiques the collective amnesia of the Armenian massacre by the Turks. This present study complicates concepts of space/ place, history/ memory, home/exile in the context of the Armenian diaspora.

1 Introduction

The state orchestrated genocide of Armenians by the Ottoman Turks in 1915 was part of a jihad against all Christians in a bid to convert a plural Ottoman Empire to an Islamist Turkish Republic.¹ The Armenians were the last major Christian community concentrated mostly in the eastern provinces (now called Eastern Anatolia) in the Ottoman Empire, next to Russia (enemy of Ottomans). The Turks were concerned that the Armenian would join hands with Russia and defeat them in the world war. As a 'preventive measure', the Armenians were starved, massacred or forcibly converted to Islam. The survivors of the atrocity were forced to flee Turkey and seek asylum in various countries, giving rise to a distinct Armenian diaspora community in the World. The Republic of Turkey's official rejection of the term genocide and its complete denial of the act of violence perpetuated against the Armenians has been the focus of politics for the Armenian diasporas

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ever since.

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 till date.² 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.³ Turkey has been lobbying to become a member of the European Union since 1999.⁴ The political distance between Turkey and the European Union has widened recently due to the autocratic government's policy of making Turkey an absolutely Islamist, parochial and unitary state.⁵ The construct of a homogenized ethno-religious Turkish Republic fails to recognize the diversity of other minority ethnic communities. 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.

My paper examines the complex political impasse for Turkey-Armenia relations in the light of the identity politics of the Armenian diaspora from homeland and host lands. The second or third generation Armenian diaspora is well established in various parts of the world. Yet their personal and cultural identity is related to the mental space of a home rather than a geographical location. This present study complicates concepts of space/ place, history/ memory, home/exile in the context of the Armenian diaspora. My entry point to the discussion is through the study of Elif Shafak's controversial novel *The Bastard of Istanbul* (2007). Shafak's novel enquires into the politics of tenuously holding onto the cultural memory of the genocide by the Armenian refugees in their resettled lives as American diaspora; it simultaneously critiques the collective amnesia of the Armenian massacre by the Turks. The purpose of this essay is three-fold: to examine the politics of silenced history or deliberate erasure of the Armenian genocide from Turkish modern history; to elucidate how homeland for the diaspora is not simply a cartographic space but a cognitive conceptual category and a lived

space; to argue how nostalgia for a homeland and the memory of violence constitutes the collective identity of Armenian diasporas.

2. Armenian Genocide

The Armenian genocide was considered a necessary condition for the construction of a monoethnic and monocultural Islamist state from the fabric of a plural Ottoman Empire.⁶ After the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in the Balkan War, 1912-1913, the political authorities felt that the Ottoman Christians posed a threat to the empire's survival. Taner Ackam explains:

Thus the ruling Ottoman-Turkish authorities formed a policy which aimed at homogenizing the population of Anatolia, the territorial heart of the empire. This policy has two main components: the first was to disperse and relocate non-Turkish Muslims, such as Kurds and Arabs, among the Turkish majority with the purpose of their assimilation. The second component involved expelling non-Muslim non-Turkish people from Anatolia...essentially the region's entire Christian population⁷.

It is thus imperative for the Turkish nation to celebrate multiculturalism, acknowledge the past atrocities inflicted upon the minority Armenian community and welcome the Armenian diasporas to their original homeland. Though the Armenian survivors of the genocide have resettled in host countries, the tragedy of such magnitude fractured the identity of the survivors and their next generation diaspora. The annihilation of the Armenians and the resultant forced migration of the survivors from their ancestral homeland was an opportunity for the Turkish authorities to expropriate their "abandoned property" and bring about an ethnic homogenization of Turkey. It is important to understand the difference between the Armenian refugees and the diaspora here. The Armenians who escaped the state orchestrated violence and sought asylum were refugees but the next generation Armenians who grew up in host countries can be termed as the diaspora community. So in a way, the Armenian diasporas were not directly affected by the historical massacre but nonetheless carried the burden of displacement and the feeling of rootlessness. Elif Shafak's novel deals with the diaspora Armenian family which had settled in their host country America.

3. Elif Shafak

ElifShafak is an author of Turkish origin born in 1971 France and lives her life as an expatriate in Europe and USA. Shafak has published thirteen books, both fictions and non-fictions, in English and Turkish language. *The Bastard of Istanbul* is driven by a dominant discourse of the Armenian genocide by the Turkish Republic from 1915-1923. Shafak's novel delves into the discursive strategy of Turkey to obliterate from public memory a state orchestrated genocide against a Christian Armenian community from Turkey.⁸ After the Turkish edition of the novel was published in 2006, Shafak was put on trial for 'denigrating Turkishness' under article 301 of the Turkish Penal Code. Later the charges were dropped and she was acquitted. An article in *The Guardian* notes:

The case brought against Elif Shafak for references made...to the large scale massacre of Armenians by "Turkish butchers" during the Armenian genocide of 1915 – the government continues to insist that these killings occurred in the context of equivalent factional violence against Muslim Turks – was finally dismissed in September 2006...⁹

3.1 *The Bastard Of Istanbul*

The Bastard of Istanbul is 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 deterritorialisation, alienation and 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 acknowledgement of their guilt and retrieve the memories of her ancestors in exile. 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. Shafak's book focuses on multiple women's voices and how Turkish women and Armenian diaspora women share a lot of

commonalities.

Shafak's narrative underlines the several points of convergence and divergence between the two communities rooted to the same land of origin. Both communities link the family name with the professions by attaching a suffix. The Turkish women and the Armenian women of both families show rhetorical agency to persuade, negotiate and assert in the absence of the men of the family (the men of both of the families having died or shifted base). Yet they share traits of anxiety, indecisiveness and eccentricity, having been victimized and left alone by the male family members. The women of different ethnic and religious identities also resemble each other in their elaborate trappings of culinary habits.

4. Memory and History

Memory is a site of rhetorical contestation for the Armenian victims as well as the Turkish perpetrators of violence. Interestingly, memory of a historical event like the genocide is not singular but divergent and complex. Individual memory (the act of remembering as a subjective process for a victim and forced migrant) is different from cultural memory (memory as a product of interaction among members of the diaspora community). Concomitantly, public memory is the product of political institutions or state maneuvered practices, sometimes completely different from cultural memory. I wish to distinguish between the traumatic memory of the Armenian survivors and witnesses of the calamity with the cultural memory of the second generation well-established Armenian-American diaspora who carry a psychological burden of displacement and shame. The individual memory and cultural memory have to be distinguished from the public memory or rather the loss of memory of Turkey. Secondly, I examine the rhetorical tropes of memory and silence to develop an interpretive methodological tool to read such literature of trauma.

My intervention into the issues of memory and history is through the lens of rhetoric. To understand the act of remembering as a rhetorical process, we need to register not simply the facts which are remembered but enquire into the process of remembrance (how), the agency (by whom), the purpose (why) and its effect on the audience. The act of recounting one's traumatic past is meant to persuade the listeners and construct a shared history of trauma. In the novel, a chat group of anonymous Armenian –

American intellectuals by the name of Anoush Tree frequently meets in the cyberworld and discusses shared memory, common history and culture of the refugee community. However, their intellectual discussions construct a cultural memory where their sense of frustration, anger, fear, alienation and trauma are all directed against their common enemy in absentia - 'the Turks'. Most of these members belong to an elite intellectual class of Armenian diaspora whose lives have not been directly affected by the genocide. Yet the camaraderie of these individuals with different nicknames helps in political affiliation. The narrator claims 'Nothing brought people together more swiftly and strongly – though transiently and shakily – than a shared enemy" (p 113). Armanoush (a child of Armenian-American father, American mother and Turkish Stepfather) constructs her Armenian identity and her affiliation to the ethnic diaspora in the process of communication with members of this chat group. Thus the shared memory of pain, trauma and alienation as well as the anger and resentment against the perpetrator Turk is a consequence of a rhetorical act of persuasion and identification. The intellectual stimulation of this chat group is derived from their inability to both forget the trauma of their ancestors and forgive the perpetrators of the massacre. Though the motive of hatred against the perpetrators of genocide is shared by the Armenians, there is no concerted political action proposed by any member to resolve the differences. The Armenian diaspora seems to be at stasis since it are caught up in the memory of the past and cannot look towards a new future.

Armanoush, self-named 'Madame My-Exiled Soul' decides to return to the land of origin of her father's family to discover her roots. 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. Armanoush visits her stepfather's family in Turkey and finds a different ground reality of modern day Turkey which exposes the faultlines and fissures of the dominant discourse of the Armenian-American virtual chat group. The diaspora group members feel disturbed and refuse to be persuaded by Armanoush's perception. In a way, the community members, in the act of remembering the trauma and persuading others to acknowledge the past injustices, construct their own "imaginary homeland".¹⁰ Armanoush's subjective experience of her visit to the original homeland reveals gaps in the collective memory of the past

violence.

4.1 Rhetorical Agency

While reclaiming memory is problematic, denial of memory creates further challenges in the lives of the perpetrators of violence. The young-generation Turks are caught in ennui, unable to move forward, having erased the past from their public memory. Shafak constructs a parallel narrative concerning a group of young artists and intellectuals of Istanbul who gather at a coffee shop named Café Kundera. The group members do not carry any memory or responsibility of past injustices unlike the chat group Anoush Tree. They only share a sense of nihilism and world-weariness. They live only in the present having succeeded in obliterating the memory of the Armenian genocide and denial of their culpability for the violence of such magnitude. Yet they suffer from a sense of ennui, caught between the East and the West¹¹ : The Exceptionally Untalented Poet, a stock character frequenting Café Kundera, moans in despair:

We are stuck. We are stuck between the East and the West. Between the past and the future. On the one hand here are the secular modernists, so proud of the regime they constructed, you cannot breathe a critical word. They've got the army and half of the state on their side. On the other hand there are the conventional traditionalists, so infatuated with the Ottoman past, you cannot breathe a critical word. They've got the general public and the remaining half of the state on their side. (p 81).

It is thus important to notice that the ennui or despondency of the Turkish intelligentsia is caused by their loss of freedom to engage in a debate. The despotic regime of Turkey does not allow dissident voices to exist. There is no space for deliberative rhetoric based on debates and discussions. 'Symbolic action' or rhetoric is replaced by 'military intervention'. The only rhetoric allowed to thrive in the state is epideictic rhetoric which is the rhetoric of praise for the past glory of the Ottoman Empire. Deliberative rhetoric that is argumentative and free speech has always been a characteristic of a republic.¹² Though modern Turkey is called The Turkish Republic, the state controlled machinery stifle political debate and champion one-sided praise or epideictic rhetoric. In 2006, Stephen Pound MP initiated an ad-

jourment debate on the issue of genocide. The briefing read:

Turkey is neuralgic and defensive about the charge of genocide despite the fact that the events occurred at the time of the Ottoman Empire as opposed to modern day Turkey...this defensiveness has meant that Turkey has historically stifled debate at home and devoted considerable diplomatic effort to dissuading any further.¹³

Thus it is evident that constructedness of political identity and rhetorical agency is a result of a particular form of polity.

4.2. Individual and Cultural Memory

It is not simply the educated elite males of Turkey who feel the brunt of the repressive regime. The women in the household also feel tortured and suffocated living in a stasis. Shafak shifts the focus to the Turkish women who live in a dissociated world. Petite –Ma, the grandmother of Asya, has drifted to a clinical realm of amnesia and can be the only happy person in the family. Her clinical amnesia is symbolic of the forced state of amnesia inflicted by the Turkish government upon its citizens. For Aunt Cevriye, a Turkish national history teacher, facts about the Armenian massacre seem to be a “grim story of a distant land”.

The new state in Turkey had been established in 1923 and that was as far as the genesis of this regime could extend. Whatever might or might not have happened preceding this commencement date was the issue of another era – and another people (p 164).

The women in the Kazanci household are the worst sufferers of the forced amnesia imposed by the state and also erasing the violence of the male members of the family. Asya ironically states:

My family is a bunch of clean freaks. Brushing away the dirt and dust of the memories! They always talk about the past, but it is a cleaned version of the past. That’s the Kazanci’s technique of coping with problems; if something’s nagging you, well, close your eyes, count to ten, wish it never happened, and the next thing you know, it has never happened, hurray! Every day we swallow yet another capsule of mendacity (p 147).

But this dishonesty and forgetfulness does not bring bliss in the lives of the Turkish women in particular since the past is too burdensome and painful to be ignored or hidden.

Aunt Banu resorts to clairvoyance and spiritual exercises to exonerate her from guilt of her predecessors. She depends on two djinnis to tell her the dark secrets of history. Here images of dreams and voices of the djinns become the key vehicles of memory. Interestingly Aunt Banu uses relics for soothsaying starting with coffee cups and then resorting to tarot cards, silver coins, rosary beads, and pearls and finally ending with roasted hazelnuts. Francis Yates had explained how material artifacts facilitated memory since they were seen as synecdochic representation of larger events.¹⁴ Aunt Banu is often seen in deep conversation with two invisible djinns on her shoulders that recalled the unknown past rather than predicted the future. The visuals offered by the djinns or the material objects used as relics constitute a cogent means of unearthing the past and linking it to the present. But Aunt Banu realizes that it is easier to know about the past about her clients than to seek knowledge about her own family's past. In the absence of memory, the visuals offered by the djinns narrate a story by placing it without a beginning and an end. When Aunt Banu gathers the knowledge about Armanoush's past, she realizes that it is linked with a violent history of incest in her own family, the knowledge of which leaves her completely devastated. She learns the bitter truth that Armanoush's step-father is the actual father of Asya. Retrieving the past is no longer a pastime or a spiritual exercise since the knowledge of the sexual violence committed in the past by Mustafa, Aunt Banu's only brother to his younger sister Zeliha, drives Aunt Banu to retributive justice. She decides to poison her brother as a punitive action of the past misdeed. The Turkish women are forced to come to terms with the family's collective shame of forced incest.

Memory is thus Janus faced – retaining or reclaiming memory results in pain and stasis; loss or denial of memory causes distress and guilt. The two communities in the text have different ways of constructing history based upon their engagement with memory. Shafak says that while the Turkish intellectuals wish to look at history as a linear trajectory of progress of human civilization, the Armenian diaspora view it as repetitive and circular where the past always seems to provide a lens to view the present and future. Moreover, Armenian women seem to be the bearers of oral memory where grandmothers transfer historical facts to younger members of the

family. A dialogue between the nineteen year old Turkish girl Asya with the same age Armenian girl Armanoush on the subject of history is fascinating.¹⁵ Armanoush explains that history, however painful keeps us “alive and united”. For Asya, history is a privilege which makes Armanoush a part of a group with whom she can show solidarity. Asya explains to Armanoush:

Yours is a crusade for remembrance, whereas if it were me, I’d rather be just like Petite- Ma with no capacity for reminiscence whatsoever...For me, history starts today, you see? There is no continuity in time. You can’t feel attached to ancestors if you can’t even trace your own father (p 179).

Asya is the bastard of Istanbul whose mother Zeliha has denied her the name of her father since it involved the dark shameful act of forced incest by her brother Mustafa. For Asya, the present is without a past. Her personal history is as silenced as the history of her nation. Her individual memory does not coalesce with collective memory; rather the absence of any subjective, collective and public memory has made her a Nihilist. She is in conflict with herself and the rest of the world.

5. Home And Collective Identity

Multiple displacements for the Armenians refugees have ruptured the sense of a linear understanding of space and place resulting in a constant creation and recreation of spatial identities like home or nation. The Armenian diasporas have been able to assert their territorial claim over the geographical space of a host nation. Their lived experience and everyday performativity in the hostland has made it a place of habitat for them. Habitation is an act of spatialization where a social relationship is forged between the self and the city. The question, however, remains whether the place of habitation can be construed as home for the victims of forced displacement. Gaston Bachelard equates home as an idealized protective place without hierarchies of power. It is a singular place of shared values with freedom of signification.¹⁶ However, Bachelard’s conception of home has not been able to explain the deep sense of fear and anxiety experienced by social groups like the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire during a political crisis of 1915. Subsequently, the Armenian diasporas have been living in the host countries with their families and community members in a protected place and yet do not consider these places as their homes. In Shafak’s text, the Armenian - Americans raise issues of belonging, legitimacy, claims to sover-

eignty in relation to the homeland. For Armanoush, homeland is attached to expectations of justice to her predecessors. The richness of the Ottoman Empire lay in its pluralistic values. The impregnation of Turkey with Islamic values and expulsion of Armenian Christians has turned the space into a hostile place for the diaspora. Thus the conception of a home for the people estranged from homeland is complex and fraught with tensions and contrapuntal impulses. The Armenian diaspora show “a desire to transcend both the structures of the nation state and the constraints of ethnicity and national particularity and yet, at times, insist upon these structures and constraints as well, creating boundaries in an attempt to more clearly delineate and articulate the self”¹⁷ Home is a site of cultural knowledge, memories and political desire for the Armenian diaspora. Yet the actual physical and cartographic space of the home is imbued with fear and hostility. Given the trauma of the past and the continuous contention over what constitutes their home, the Armenian diasporas have been forced to reconstitute their identities continuously. Razmik Panossian rightly argues that Armenian collective identity was for a long time religious but was replaced largely by national identity in the nineteenth century.¹⁸ The national identity of Armenians has thus changed over time in the context of the homeland and different hostlands. Home cannot be a singular cartographic bounded space; it is an emotional attachment, a longing for oneness, a desire for ideal.

6. Conclusion

Khachig Tölölyan opines that the diasporic nationalism is ‘exilic’ because there is a lamentation of exile present in the consciousness of the diaspora. In Armenian, the term is *azkabahbanoum*, nation preservation, for the effort to sustain national identity in exile. The central feature of exilic nationalism, according to Tölölyan, is “not the physical return, the literal reversal of exile, but the maintenance of the centre as the ideal space of belonging and as the font of the material and symbolic features that anchor national identity in both homeland and diaspora.”¹⁹ Tölölyan argues that the younger generation Armenian diaspora variously territorialized should move beyond the concept of exilic nationalism to an ‘Armenian transnation’ (the decentred and nonuniform network nationalisms). While the way forward for Tölölyan is to think beyond the exilic nation, Elif Shafak proposes forgetfulness and unburdening of the trauma as an ethical imperative for the Armenians. In an interview, Elif Shafak explains that Turkey is “a society of amnesia, with a poor memory and a limited sense of historical continu-

ity. The historiography of Turkey is full of ruptures.”²⁰ For Armenian diaspora, memory is an important part of their identity since it is concerned with their roots. Shafak however opines that in the long run, forgetting is also required to move forward in the future.

Turkey’s sustained policy of denial of the Armenian massacre of 1915 has problematized the foreign relations between Turkey and Armenia. The 2009 agreement between Turkish and Armenian government through Swiss mediation has failed to prosper. The rapprochement between 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 to forge closer ties with the European Union.²¹

Endnotes

¹TanerAckam, 1999.

²<http://carnegieendowment.org/2009/10/13/small-step-on-road-to-reconciliation-between-turkey-and-armenia-pub-23992>, accession date 3/3/2017.

³Dan Miodownic: 121

⁴At the Helsinki Summit of the European Council in 1999, Turkish Republic was granted candidate status for membership in the European Union. The Europeanization of Turkey however had a setback in December, 2016 when the European Union refused to entertain Turkey’s membership to EU due to its autocratic rule as evident in the coup d etat on 15th July 2016 in Turkey when the Turkish Armed Forces revolted against the government accusing it of erosion of secularism and democracy.

⁵Aydin-Duzgit, 2012.

⁶The destruction of the Armenians was followed by the expulsion of the Greeks from Asia Minor and suppression of non-Turkish Muslim elements to form a homogenous Turkish society.

⁷TanerAckam,A Shameful Act: The Armenian Genocide and the Question of Turkish Responsibility. p 9

⁸An UCLA conference in April 2005 titled “After Nine Decades: The Enduring Legacy of the Armenian Genocide” was a first concerted effort to discuss the Armenian Genocide by scholars.

⁹Cited in <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2007/aug/04/society1>

¹⁰Borrowing Salman Rushdie’s term in a book titled Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991.

¹¹Turkey has always been seen as a bridge between Middle East and Europe. In 2005, Turkey was considering becoming a part of EU.

¹²Aristotle distinguishes between three kinds of rhetoric: Judicial, Epideictic, Deliberative Rhetoric in Art of Rhetoric.

¹³Briefing Note, 2006. Referred to in Armenian Genocide Legacy by Alexis Demirdjian

¹⁴Francis Yates, The Art of Memory.

¹⁵Asya and Armanoush are in reality step sisters although they had no knowledge of it for nineteen years.

¹⁶Bachelard, Gaston. La poetique de l’espace(1961)

¹⁷Paul Gilroy, 1993:19

¹⁸RazmikPanossian,The Armenians: From Kings and Priests to Merchants and Commissars, 2006.

¹⁹Tölölyan, Khachig. ‘ Beyond the Homeland: From Exilic Nationalism to Diasporic Transnationalism’.

²⁰Dld Women 14 – Sense and Sensibility – A conversation beyond Borders (Viviane Reding, ElifShafak)<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bX-pIJ5JjYug>.

²¹Armenia –EU enhanced partnership agreement has been announced in

February 2017.

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