# What remains: Silence, objects, and inherited memory in *The Bastard of Istanbul*

Nicholas BALDWIN[2]

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**ABSTRACT**

This study presents a cross-disciplinary literary analysis of Elif Shafak's *The Bastard of Istanbul*, exploring how the novel stages memory, inheritance, and identity through a visual and phenomenological lens. The study argues that Shafak renders memory as an ephemeral, textured field by interweaving symbolic objects, impressions, and sensory fragments that resist closure. Drawing on John Dewey's Art as Experience, Jane Bennett's Vibrant Matter, Transnational Theory, and Henry Corbin, the study examines how Shafak employs non-linear temporality and material resonances (such as food, weather, film, and painting) explore intergenerational trauma in the aftermath of the Armenian diaspora. Through close readings of visual and spatial settings and motifs, the study suggests that Shafak's narrative form, a mimesis, mirrors the structure of a collage as assemblage of fleeting gestures and recurring shapes that privilege perception over historical fixity. In doing so, the novel performs an ethics of seeing, where silence, ambiguity, and embodied experiences are granted as much narrative weight as documented history. The study situates Shafak's novel within broader debates in trauma studies, ecocriticism, and transgenerational memory, gesturing for a reading practice that foregrounds affect, sensory knowledge, and aesthetic incompletion as means of cultural reckoning.

**Keywords:** Material culture, visual narrative, inherited memory

# Geride kalan: Sessizlik, nesneler ve *Baba ve Piç*'de miras alınan hafıza

**ÖZ**

Bu çalışma, Elif Şafak'ın *Baba ve Piç* romanının hafıza, miras ve kimlik temalarını fenomenolojik perspektiften inceleyerek disiplinlerarası bir yazınsal çözümleme sunmaktadır. Çalışmada Şafak'ın hafızayı sembolik nesneler, izlenimler ve tamamlanmaya direnen duyusal parçalarla iç içe geçmiş geçici ve çok katmanlı bir alan olarak yeniden ele aldığı öne sürülmektedir. John Dewey'in Deneyim Olarak Sanat (Art as Experience), Jane Bennett'in Canlı Madde (Vibrant Matter) ile Ulusötesi Kuramı (Transnational Theory) ve Henry Corbin'in yaklaşımlarından hareketle bu çalışma, Ermeni diasporasının ardından ortaya çıkan kuşaklararası travmayı incelemek üzere Şafak'ın doğrusal olmayan zamansallık ve maddesel yankıları (örneğin yemek, hava durumu, sinema ve resim gibi) nasıl kullandığını ele almaktadır. Bununla birlikte, görsel ve mekansal motiflerin yakından incelenmesiyle Şafak'ın anlatı biçiminin, bir mimesis olarak tarihsel kesinlikten ziyade algının öne çıkarıldığı geçici jestler ve yinelenen biçimleri birleştiren kolaj yapısını yansıttığı öne sürülmektedir. Bu yönüyle roman, sessizlik, belirsizlik ve bedensel deneyimlerin belgelenmiş tarih kadar anlatı ağırlığına sahip olduğu bir görme etiği ortaya koymaktadır. Çalışmada Şafak'ın romanı travma çalışmaları, ekoeleştiri ve kuşaklararası hafıza gibi daha geniş tartışma alanlarına yerleştirilerek kültürel hesaplaşma aracı olarak duygu, duyusal bilgi ve estetik tamamlanmamışlığı ön plana çıkaran bir okuma pratiği önerilmektedir.

**Anahtar sözcükler**: Maddi kültür, görsel anlatı, miras alınan hafıza

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[2] PhD Student in American Literary Studies, University of New Mexico, New Mexico - USA
e-mail: skaldetvind@gmail.com
ORCID: 0009-0008-8146-6502

## 1. Introduction

*The Bastard of Istanbul* by Elif Shafak is a richly layered novel that explores identity and memory, artwork, and history through the intertwined lives of a Turkish family in Istanbul and an Armenian-American family in San Francisco. The novel was originally published in English, "an acquired language" (Shafak, 2010). Shafak chose this language to reach a broader audience. In her own words, "the commute between languages gives me the chance to recreate myself" (2010). The novel navigates complex questions of cultural memory, generational trauma, and the tension between personal and national identities. Set in both Istanbul and the United States of America, it brings together two families connected by the dark history of Turkey's past, shedding light on the ways in which memory is inherited and passed down, even across continents. The book sparked controversy in Turkey, where Shafak was charged with "insulting Turkishness" (Hakim, March 12, 2025) under Article 301.

I suggest the novel transcends its literary boundaries to become both an experimental exploration of non-anthropocentric historical representation and narrative forms using visual artwork techniques, where the visual in question is rendered into a corresponding prose. It is as if Shafak is trying to locate the right language that will best bring this keen observation to light while being careful to forego naming it too heavy-handedly and thereby flattening its nuance. In this study, I under risk doing precisely but have tried to stay faithful to the Shafakian spirit by leaving room for unanswered questions while endeavoring to distill and clarify the nature of the relationship between human beings, identity, and art as envisioned by Shafak.

Drawing a parallel with Aristotle's distinction in *Poetics*, favoring poets for their ability to address the universal *kathólou* while historians navigate the specific *kath'ékaston* (Cohen & Reeve, 2020). Shafak blends history and fiction. As Historian Sarah Maza states, "[...] all forms of action and creation are important to understanding humanity's past and can be studied in illuminating ways" (2017, p. 85). The function as a narrative-archive hybrid reimagines historical representation through the lens of cultural memory and inherited artworks. This intricate tapestry challenges the prevailing emphasis on linear plot progression, shifting the focus to interconnected personal histories while providing elisions in the conventional perception of individuals as isolated architects of cultural continuity. The result of Shafak's creative endeavor is a contemplative narrative that mirrors traditions of ekphrastic reflection, marked by virtues of spareness, humility, and the belief in art as a conduit for collective expression: "not merely for the individual but for man as a species" (White, 1996, p.13).

## 2. Visual Narratives and the Agency of Objects

One insightful way of understanding these interconnections is through non-human narratives and more-than-human storytelling. In the new materialist conception, narrative extends to object-entities, transcending traditional recognition as an exclusively human practice. Narrative now includes the stories of objects, entanglements, and assemblages. Taking up the new materialist assertion that there's a need to tell stories of these assemblages, I aim to cast light on the artful act of noticing the multiple, interconnected worlds comprised of different human lifeways that "co-create stories of resurgence that may help us to live convivially together" (Oppermann, 2021, p. 267). The novelist, through her evocative descriptions of visual art pieces and their interplay with memory, emerges as a modern-day curator of cultural resonance, offering an alternative perspective on history that bridges the personal and the universal through the enduring language of visual and material culture.

The visuals' absorption of storytelling bears a particular significance in the preservation of a culture that has, in measure, resisted assimilation. Departing from Terry Eagleton's

estimation, "art, like language, is not to be seen as the expression of an individual subject: the subject is the place or medium where the truth of the world speaks itself [...] which the reader must attentively *hear*" (2008, p. 56). Despite the esoteric nature of the originals, the visual features are not mere decorative additions but enter into the structure of narration and thus occasion a fuller experience. Readers are invited to react to the opportunities and constraints of historical personages and their agency in the present. In a few pages, Shafak crafts in the language a meaning of the increment of the human experience, uniting one's individuality within communal identity: a reader carries the images' meaning. This political fiction is a poetic process and democratizes the human experience into images in the life-flow of time, becoming no longer discrete and unique, but leading to, while inheriting, depths from other times and places. As long as the meaning of events remains alive, a mastery of the past can take shape. Shafak, with the task of setting this process of ever-recurrent narration in motion, involves the characters and the reader alike in the ekphrasis process.

The novelist as poet destabilizes thought by breaking open language and smuggling in sound, rhythm, and image: a disruptive aesthetic. The condensation and displacement of meaning correspond to two primary operations of language: metaphor (condensing meaning together) and metonymy (displacing one onto another). These objects function as vessels of both rupture and unity as tangible connections to their origins. For characters to ignore the past is to fall victim to its undertow, dooming the living to repeating the past: for those who have suffered irreparable loss, such repetition is unacceptable. Inundated by frightening aspects of his own unrecognized selves as father, son, nephew, Barsam should, like a martyred poet, throw himself into the heart of the mêlée, meaning, to wound those whom he most loves and admires; instead, he cannot put a precise frame around the frightening image of his own meaninglessness in the world of ordinary action.

The overt concern is with the limits of agency before a reproduced artwork by Martiros Saryan, *Still Life with Masks* (Shafak, 2006, p. 53). Memory constitutes a constraint on hubris and yields to intelligent action. This passage explores, in a tension between activity and passivity, a recognition between one's own history and the requirements of the occasion. The silent inner work of perception, of relationships of love and conflict, the dissonance between honor and connection with place, simultaneously evokes the feeling of shame and discord for how it becomes represented. Aristotle says this plainly: "Just as the agent's own decision rests with perception, so too does our decision as to whether he or she has chosen well. The demand to set up exhaustive general criteria for correct perception should be resisted" (Cohen & Reeve, 2020). Barsam's reflective stance encapsulates the tension between agency and historical obligation. The painting serves as a leitmotif, its vibrant masks personifying Barsam's struggles to navigate memory and identity.

> "What can I do?" lamented Barsam Thakhmakchian, turning to his uncle. He moved his eyes to a huge reproduction of Martiros Saaryan's *Still Life with Masks* on the wall, as if the answer he needed was hidden somewhere in the painting. But he must have failed to encounter any solace there because when he spoke again, his voice sounded as inconsolable as before. "I have no right to interfere" (Shafak, 2006, p. 53).

The aesthetic experience of things is the fruit of a new vision, whereas the ghostly traces of the past supply a token presence of those who've been dispersed with and without the core family unit. The answer the masks give Barsam is in a language that escapes him in one moment and haunts him in the next: standing before the painting and locating identity formation in the messiness of living. The masks are charged with portent associations to direct the reader to what the masks may or may not say: Clairaudient to the voice of the masks and then beyond through the characters Barsam and Uncle. Consequently, the reader intuits Barsam in a reflective stance in this lyrical, unbounded moment in his thrum of anxiety. Barsam seizes on the masks as a way of "reading" an exemplar strangeness on the wall in

his own home. August Macke wrote, "Form is a mystery to us, for it is the expression of mysterious powers. Only through it do we sense the secret powers, the 'invisible God,'" (Herbert, 1983). Barsam tries to claim them as guides, attaching the painting's gathered perception to a sense of meaning. Typically, visuals seem to have a more innocent, and therefore, "more accurate relation to visible reality than do other mimetic objects" (Sontag, 1973, p. 12). Barsam's aesthetic experience emerges in "rhythm of loss of integration with the environment and recovery of union," writes John Dewey, these aesthetic moments of "harmonized union" become the [conscious] "material out of which [persons] form purposes" (Dewey, 2005, p. 15). Nevertheless, human contexts are never *sui generis* in all of their elements, nor "divorced from a past full of obligations" (Nussbaum, 1987, p. 95). Hesiod tells that the Muses said, "We know how to speak false things as though they were true; but we know how to utter true things" (Vaughan, n.d.). Uncle and nephew, like the Muses, occupy the space as the masks, are serious spirits that exhibit a manly strength evoked from shared weakness and sorrow. They have humanity, at times harder and richer than what is needed to be a father, uncle, and dispersed in a social world where these roles are foreign. Barsam has a sympathy for the inner Muse of the paintings, whose vital guidance of the past sustains.

With its crisp prose, compassionate eye, and emotional precision, Shafak's excerpt pays tribute to the interconnectedness of the generations and cultural artifacts, including artworks and everyday objects. This artwork, rich in emotional resonance, serves as a leitmotif throughout the novel. Painter Saryan uses color blocking, contrast, and gradation to create rhythm and movement within the painting, while poet Shafak guides Barsam to his revelation "in motion." The painting transitions from vibrant exuberance to muted contrasts with its colorful masks personifying Barsam: the father seeking guidance from his uncle as the archetypal "man-in-charge." Through mimetic language, the passage reflects familial love's limitations, mirroring Barsam's questioning. His ethics emphasize that all objects leave traces to be remembered, which he accepts with methodical consideration and naivete. A genealogical link emerges: Barsam receives the masks' message and actively participates in shaping what is given.

Shafak's textual performance directs sensorial and imaginative focus toward materialism in human participation within a shared vitality, using a progression of techniques, from general to all-encompassing imagery, to navigate the paradox of freedom and limits. The density of time is changed by the performance of Barsam standing before the reproduction of the artwork. The role of the visual, and its absorption of storytelling, bears a particular significance in the preservation of a culture that has, in measure, resisted assimilation. In *Man of Light*, Henry Corbin writes about the importance of orientation, directing us towards the "cosmic north." He makes clear again and again that this journey is not horizontal, linear, or temporal, but instead vertical. It is realized not through the effort of surmounting time and space, but through the embodiment of a particular "mode of presence" (Corbin, 1994, p. 2). In other words, the way forward is actually towards the center of one's innermost being.

Characters imagine a life as passionate, as full of depths and heightened colors as found in works of art. By emphasizing an imagery of emptiness is conveyed through phrases like "lamented" and "as before," while dynamic verbs such as "turning," "moved," "hidden," and "encounter" suggest continuous movement; "He moved his eyes to a huge reproduction" captures the liminal space of closure and non-closure, evoking the paradox of circular motion by seeking answers outwardly versus inwardly, and forming a thematic mandala of Barsam and his uncle in the circular narration. The path is decidedly not linear. The image that surfaces is more like a mandala of outward observation contracting an inward association as Barsam moves from observation to reverie, culminating in his declarative statement, "I have no right." Through crisp and evocative language, Shafak achieves literary mimesis, imbuing the narrative surface with the complexity of the observed. Mark Doty notes that such music-

making, "lends the surface of language the complexity and interest of the surface that's being observed" (Doty, 2014, p. 25). The masks are charged with the drama of this arrested time, with portent associations to come, leading the reader to what the masks may or may not say: Clairaudient to the voice of the masks and then beyond through the characters Barsam and Uncle Dikran.

When Uncle Dikran addresses Barsam, it is in reproach: "Here you are doing nothing about it" (Shafak, 2006, p. 56). Barsam's improvisation informs readers that he's doing what the situation demands, that excellent choices "cannot be captured as a general rule because it is a matter of fitting one's choice to the complex requirements of the situation," (Nussbaum, 1987, p. 71). The resentments and questions associated with loss remain unresolved. In other words, the spiral of progression provides a matrix of rhetorical tropes as the reader sees Barsam responding in ekphrasis to the painting *Still Life with Masks*. The dynamic relationship between visual culture in Shafak's novel and the role of artifacts in diaspora highlights a shared narrative of resilience and the preservation of identity through material culture. Shafak's narrative adopts the perspective of a disembodied observer overlooking a world of materiality within a fictionalized, hyper-realistic setting. Cara Blue Adams describes such settings as "a place self-willed, a separate, self-sustaining narrative ecosystem with its own imperatives independent of ours" (Adams, 2023). In a similar vein, Shafak revives the medieval scholastic concept of *natura naturans*, or, "the permanent genesis of things, nature as a process, as productivity" (Neyrat, 2019, p. 135), situating the nurturing effects of localized settings on characters within her transdisciplinary and materially grounded approach to fiction. The last it-cleft sentence: "But he must have failed to encounter any solace there because when he spoke again his voice sounded as inconsolable as before" contrasts the previous events with an emotional reaction that produces a change in the desires and determination of the character, an (in)action that progresses the story's narrative. Shafak elevates artworks to become centrifugal, their own landscape, a testament to the resilience of people in the face of adversity. This complex exists in a language that gestures readers towards a need in our own beseeching to restore the passage of time.

The film *The Color of Pomegranates* by Sergei Parajanov emanates a story of an 18th-century Armenian troubadour. "I don't try to tell the life of a poet, but to recreate the inner world of a poet" ("Review: The color of pomegranates (1969)," 2022). Trobaire means to invent, and the movie is a paean, an image-moving-poem inspired by the written words of the late-Armenian martyr Sayat Nova. Shafak brings together people who possibly never spoke to each other in real life, and these interactions colonize readers' present judgment and rob it of one-dimensional certainties and complacency by revealing new spaces. The hagiographic film is punctuated by spoken poetry to rationalize the film's character movements, which are shown in myopic acts of daily activities: bathing, reading, acts of tenderness, baptism, slaughter, prayer, and death. While the film's lack of dialogue and reliance on visual symbolism parallels how diasporic communities preserve cultural memory through artifacts, it creates a formal stage where meaning is displaced and can be recontextualized.

Shafak's depiction of a familial gathering draws attention to how objects like the chiffonier, rugs, the film, and the samovar serve as vessels tied to rituals of community, conveying their own story of cultural memory and historical entanglement. The samovar, in the household, symbolizes a traditional way of life of communal rituals, whereas, placed in its current context, it functions as a silent witness to the family's displacement. The film's placement in the room and interaction with the characters evoke what Christopher Manes describes as "ontological humility," challenging the anthropocentric assumption that humans are the sole architects of meaning (Manes, 1996, p. 24). The objects bridge the temporal gaps between generations, enabling an exchange that resonates with the evolutionary and material interconnectedness generally and specifically discussed in postmodern thought.

Aristotle says that the two things that make people care for something is the conviction that it is all their own, the thought that it's the only one they have, "so our most intense feelings of love and fear and grief are likely to be directed at objects […] irreducibly particular in their relationship to us," (Nussbaum, 1987, p. 83). In this sense, Shafak uses the film as an entry point into more-than-human storytelling, where objects participate in shaping identity and place as much as the characters themselves.

> A silence ensued. Everyone and everything - the three men, the three generations of women, the myriad rugs decorating the floor, the antique silver in the cupboard, the samovar on the chiffonier, the videocassette in the VCR (*The Color of Pomegranates*), as well as the multiple paintings [...] fell silent for a brief moment as the room acquired a rare luminosity under the drowsy light of a streetlamp just lit outside. The ghosts of the past were with them. [...] Another trolley passed by chiming its bells, transporting noisy children and tourists from Russian Hill to Aquatic Park, the Maritime Museum, and Fisherman's Wharf. The rush-hour sounds of San Francisco poured into the room, pulling them out of their reverie. (p. 57).

The film, as an illocutionary act, carries meaning beyond simple descriptions of the objects. Shafak uses silence to narrate the unspeakability of trauma, suggesting that identity is shaped as much by what is left unsaid as by what is expressed. It's only natural that she chooses to set the scene of silence with a film that contains nearly no spoken dialogue. The vibrant matter forms a contingent tableau with each other: the weather and the dusk with the characters. Jane Bennett opines, "In nonlinear assemblages, effects resonate with and against their causes, such that the impact of any added element or set of elements […] cannot be grasped at a glance" (Bennett, 2010, p. 42). Turning to the text, the bright ideals of the past were with the generations in the form of physical freedom, religious power, the training of the mind, and the training of hands, as enacted by the film. Through these fissures, "The common world is what we have in common not only with those who live with us, but also with those who were here before and with those who will come after us. But such a common world can survive . . . only to the extent that it appears in public," (Arendt, 1968, pp. ix-x) It is as if the historical personages of the film and the novel's ancestors are precipitated out of the object and return to the living room to protect the family-sources of tradition from running dry, while the "three generations" call to mind Sayat Nova's verse, "We were searching for ourselves in each other" (Parajanov, 1969) as depicted in the film *The Color of Pomegranates* lifting the abstract concept out of an unbounded, lyrical moment and transplanting it into Shafak's fictionalized account of a present-day American household. Indeed, the past has a pervasive power in the phenomenon of understanding, and this power is not completely missed by Shafak's characters in the living room. The space establishes mysterious interconnections of non-plausibility, drawing them out of passive reception by encouraging the reader's participation in what is described to shape meaning.

Shafak's thought-images transcend the textual reality of the novel: Ancestors, the filmmaker, and martyr/poet appear in the living room, a room that lives and becomes a stage. It's a reliable place to which the novel's characters can turn. There arises an aesthetic experience by Shafak, making her text a stage upon which readers can disentangle themselves, to make their own appearance in synchronicity when the 20$^{th}$-century film was made, as well as the period it depicts. The reader can think about this liminal space by using the words of someone else. The voices undergird trust and guidance in the connecting fabric of human affairs. Writing and reading become modes of interpreting the world constructed by humans, which can also be changed by them. Shafak stages the wealth of what Armenians have created through the creation of a polyphonic text, in that others become both thinkable and audible by entering the living room with their ideas. As the three generations in the novel stand among

each other in silence, imaginative projection comes to play in the reader, negating the temporal distance that separates them from the characters/objects/scene and therefore becomes contemporaneous with it. Additionally, close material attention invites readers to engage with the artwork. By foregrounding the materiality of the art piece, Shafak prompts readers to recognize the moment that serves as a catalyst for questioning a past identity. H.G. Gadamer asserts that Shafak's acting as "historical […] means that one is not absorbed into self-knowledge" (Gadamer, 1960, p. 285). In this scene, silence plays a critical role in how characters deal with the trauma of their ancestors.

Jacques Lacan's concept of the "mimetic lure" (Eagleton, 2008, p. 133) illuminates the family's dynamic in Shafak's living room scene as an art piece. The characters' mimesis, rendered by Shafak as ekphrasis, allows the author to explore themes of perception, interpretation, and the relationship between art and characters' reality with aesthetics. By intertwining ekphrasis with Erwin Panofsky's "pseudomorphosis" (Jay, 2021, p. 54) through a transnational theoretical framework, Shafak illustrates how objects from the past continue to shape contemporary identities where personal and historical memory intersect. The duality of "being seen but not truly recognized" (p. 54) parallels the cityscape's simultaneous acknowledgment and erasure of individual presences. Similarly, viewing the scene through Bennett's reinterpretation of "adsorption" (pp. 20-25) shows a relational dynamic that forms a coalition while preserving the agency of its individual elements, reflecting how familial relationships and urban spaces intertwine the narrative(s). For Dewey, experience is not merely stuff presented to or witnessed by consciousness; rather, it is activity and engagement with a life lived. Dewey's "vine of pendant theory" (pp. 1-29), as he writes about the denotative method, "is attached at both ends to the pillars of observed subject-matter" (pp. 6-10). Marek Tamm and Zoltán Boldizsár Simon further contextualize this perspective by arguing that "the Anthropocene has opened a new situation for humanity," creating a new human condition that "forces a radical shift in how we understand" and reconsider "our past relationship to the more-than-human world" (69). In Shafak's novel, vibrant matter and the role of history contribute to form identity: from household objects to urban sounds, identity is imbued with value and agency, underscoring their centrality in domestic and emotional life.

### 3. Performing Identity in Transnational Spaces

The worn felicities of friendship and agency require recognition of plurality and the possibility of a change of mind. These characteristics guarantee freedom from being ruled by the past. Shafak's story situates its critical difference neither within nor between, but in the reaction between the two sides as the fundamental political question. The author problematizes the possibility of a situation wherein the differences between plaintiff and defendant reconcile the truth. The character Asya displaces subjectivity from a presumed single consciousness and relocates it for Armanoush in a dynamic intersubjective space that exists between her embodied self and the other. In Historian Pierre-Yves Saunier's Transnational History, Correspondence, Dedication, Mobilization, Alignment (Relations), and questions of Self (Circulations) arise within the transnational context of this scene. It is in this post-Hegelian space that mutual constitution operates according to its laws of mutuality. The girls' conversation highlights the dichotomy between abstract ideals of reckoning pre-modern tragedies and the concrete realities of not acknowledging previous discrimination faced by ethnic Armenians in the Ottoman Empire.

Shafak paints the image of Armanoush seeking an identity where plurality is accepted. Armanoush is reaching endlessly towards the personality and provocative demeanor she acquired in online chatrooms, as embodied in the café by Asya. The collective figure of the Intellectuals serves as witness to this dynamic unfolding. We have in this image a triad: self, projected self, witness. As Shafak describes it, the intellectuals are not just passive and arbitrary spectators; rather, Asya's *sympathy* for Armanoush invests her with a

transnational energy of identity, emboldening her to continue turning towards the Intellectuals, from whom she seeks recognition for what happened to the Armenian minorities. What do the Intellectuals, the witnesses, represent in this scenario? Shafak has a tendency to sometimes use words in contradictory ways, but something grave is at stake in this tableau: their roles as spectators highlight the tension between private identity and public perception, forcing Armanoush to perform and defend her identity in a space laden with stereotypes and cultural prejudice. As the placeholder for pathos, it seems as though the Intellectuals, in their dismissive behaviors, occupy the intermediary position of the "Pathetic" who sit at the meeting place of two longings: internalized angst, either rendered in silence (Armanoush) or in provocative tirades (Asya). Between the reciprocal love of the two is not an object but an ontology: an infinite, ever-expanding *pathos*. Shafak's language in the excerpt suggests a kinship between the Eternal Feminine and the Pathetic, about whom she also writes passionately. The Pathetic, like the Eternal Feminine, has a twofold function: the Intellectuals receive the love of their divine (though ironic) names, and through their sympathy, free themselves from expounding progressive, pseudo-intellectual rhetoric, thereby becoming beloved themselves from obscurity. Eventually, they are touched by the beauty of Armanoush's and Asya's relationship and, in a divine breath of compassion, offer an apology.

Dewey's claim that "friendship becomes an integral part of sympathy through the imagination" (2005, p. 276) raises questions about how embodied ideals add thematic depth to the narrative. Each Armanoush has a unique function, yet simultaneously each of them actualizes the totality of the relations common to the others: her family in America, new family, and the Intellectuals in Istanbul. In other words, each Armanoush contains all the others, including Asya. And Asya, as the agent of the *unio mystica* occurring between them, is the One who invests this totalizing function into each Armanoush for admonishing both family members and her friends in the Café Kundera scene. The language Shafak chooses for Asya influences symbolic orders and desires that shape characters' behavior. Lacan asserts, "[…] the subjects, grasped in their intersubjectivity, who line up […] more docile than sheep, model their very being on the moment of the signifying chain which traverses them" (Eagleton, 2008, p. 43). In these complexities, readers become engaged by a dual relationship in which we find all the traits of a mimetic lure: we read how Armanoush is "trapped in the typically imaginary situation of seeing that she is not seen, misconstrue the real situation in which he is seen not seeing" (2008, p. 44). Therefore, each Armanoush is also a *henophany*, and Asya is described as an instigator who "turns to face." There is no position for readers with which to judge that is outside the divides that the characters erect:

> Now the word Armenian wouldn't surprise anyone at Café Kundera, but Armenian American was a different story. *Armenian Armenian* was no problem—similar culture, similar problems—but Armenian *American* meant someone who despised the Turks. All heads turned toward Armanoush now. Their stares revealed interest tainted with alarm, as if she were a flamboyant gift box with unknown content. Inside the box there could be a present as exquisite as the outside, or there could be a bomb. Armanoush squared her shoulders as if steeling herself against a blow, but, being regulars at Café Kundera for so many years, the group had too deeply absorbed the sluggish characteristic of the place to get excited for long. (Shafak, 2006, p. 214).

Here, Shafak underscores the complexities of ethnic oppression and resistance, shedding light on the nuanced interplay within the localized scene. The passage underscores the tension between personal identity and collective perception, mediated through W.E.B. Du Bois' concept of double consciousness, "A world which yields no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world" (Bois, 2007, p. 2). In this specific exchange, there are moments of Saunier's Reciprocity, albeit subtle. The character named The Nonnationalist Scenarist of Ultranationalist Moves, does not have a

relation to the young women, "shook his head vigorously" (Shafak, 2006, p. 215), avoiding the possibility of reconciliation despite prevailing power differentials. While Armanoush will pause, it is Asya who "turns to face" (p. 215); "sipped her wine slowly" (p. 215); "Asya's interruption" (p. 215) that propels the confrontation. The world, in Shafak's localized setting, is therefore seen as "a cosmopolitanism mediated through goods and performances" (Saunier, 2013, p. 89). Balancing Armanoush's capacity to perform as a silent self and intermediary in-between societies: cosmopolitan San Francisco through her family and in Istanbul through Asya, represents her newfound family.

The young women presented as opposites serve in shaping a nuanced individual before the collective identities of the established intelligentsia of Istanbul. The image of squaring her shoulders is performative self-defense, a corporeal stance exemplifying the double consciousness: Armanoush must physically brace herself, aware that her identity as an Armenian American is being scrutinized and perceived through a lens shaped by Empire's violent history and its reverberations in the diaspora abroad. Power dynamics elicit distance in understanding. Saunier's concept of "asymmetry and reciprocity," (2013, p. 90) wherein interpersonal relationships are not oppositional but mutually constitutive can be found in phrases like: "They were made to suffer all sorts of pain"; "That didn't happen"; "Did you ever think about the other side of the story?" (Shafak, 2006, p. 216) and "She had so many counterarguments, she didn't quite know where to begin," conveys a familiarity tinged with uncertainty. The tension between personal identity and collective perception is mediated through Armanoush as a foreigner, manifesting in the difference between being "Armenian Armenian" and "Armenian American," at once, with the latter invoking the specter of imperial conflict. She takes three conflicting identities: American, Armenian, and Turkish, which Asya braids together into a character at one with itself. The intellectuals' response to Armanoush, particularly the way they interpret her American identity as a potential threat with "bomb," underscores the bodily performance of identity in this site of tension. At Café Kundera, Armanoush must publicly defend her identity against dismissive intellectuals who reduce her experience to stereotypes. The café, a seemingly "sluggish" space, becomes a crucible for cultural tension, forcing Armanoush to confront the lingering injustices faced by Armenians. It also indicates that Shafak is asking readers to judge. The intellectuals attempt to persuade Armanoush and Asya to see their viewpoint that it happened "generations ago," while Asya remains focused on her plans for confrontation and reconciliation by berating her intellectual friends on behalf of her new friend and cousin.

Between Armanoush and Asya and the intellectuals, there exists a gaping cognitive elision. This image of crossing reads as an ironic prefiguration of the atrocities Armanoush's family deals with that Asya goes on to name. It is by means of a chiasmus that the space of recognition is crossed. The space stands as a limit of comprehension, an inherent feature of the attempt to describe the atrocities. Therefore, it can be said that the atrocious space, the event of the past that runs through the novel, can only be located between the characters' cognition and their performance. Under the shelter of a European cafe, the characters embody philosophies with their physicality, "[...] their contribution to the crystallization of the transnational perspective" (Saunier, 2013, p. 87), insomuch as Asya does not let the excitement of the revelation of Armanoush's identity wane with the dismissive intellectuals. The tension forces Armanoush to remain silent. This performance mirrors the way the living room's artifacts "speak" for the family's shared past, but here, the focus is on how identity is publicly contested. Asya, "pulled the strings a bit together under the concerned gaze of the Dipsomaniac Cartoonist" stating, "the Armenian intelligentsia were the first to be executed so that the community would be left without its leading brains" which drives an ethereal divide: the young women "joined" on one side, who are unknowingly relatives, and the group of intellectuals on the other. Armanoush "pressed her lips together so hard that they paled." The silence becomes a ritualistic practice in the striving for redefinition of self, as Asya

embodies both offense and defense while volleying accusations and historical facts at the intellectuals in an accusatory tone, the same tone Armanoush has dreamt of executing.

## Conclusion

There is so much more that could be mined in Shafak's rich exploration of the Divine Feminine, identity, and mimetic ekphrasis, and it's deserving of a full inquiry. But for the purposes of this investigation, I finally circle back to its initial departure point, to show how Shafak imbues her scenes wherein the characters perform the language. By using material and visual culture to mediate domestic life, the author redefines how transnational belonging negotiates silence, history, and cultural resilience. By juxtaposing the private, introspective space of the living room with the public and performative sphere of the café, she illustrates how material culture and interpersonal dialogue mediate identity and memory. Objects anchor characters' sense of self in a shared past. These artifacts, charged with emotional resonance, allow the novel's readers to grapple with the characters' inherited histories in silence: they are invited to experience a contemplative space where memory unfolds through materiality. Conversely, the café transforms these private reveries into a public performance, as Armanoush's identity as an Armenian American comes under scrutiny, showing how identity is both shaped by and enacted through art. Shafak weaves these spaces together for readers to experience the dynamic role of material culture in personal and communal histories. Her critical practice recognizes that literature is never a completely denatured aesthetic object and is always both art and artifact.

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