



Reconstructing Damaged Identities: Surviving Trauma in Elif Shafak's *The Bastard of Istanbul*

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ABSTRACT

Informed by the neo-Freudian trauma theories of Cathy Caruth, Judith Herman and other scholars, this paper examines the intricate process of reconstructing fractured identities in Elif Shafak's controversial novel *The Bastard of Istanbul* (2007) shedding light on the characters' attempt to survive trauma as a prerequisite to self-restoration. Set at the crossroads of America and Turkey, the past and present and evolving around the dialectic of disclosure and silence, *The Bastard of Istanbul* juxtaposes two terrible traumas: the Armenian collective trauma of the genocide and the Turkish personal trauma of incestuous rape by creating an encounter between two traumatized Istanbulite families the exiled Armenian-Americans, the Tachakhmachians, (the victims) and the cursed Turks, the Kazancis (the perpetrators). While the survivors of the Armenian genocide seek self-healing through remembering, storytelling and collective memory construction, the Turkish characters, particularly Zeliha, a survivor of an incestuous rape whose story is inhabited by the impossibility of telling, opt for silence and memory dissociation to soothe their pain. Though the novel exposes two divergent processes of self-healing, the confrontation with the past is underscored as a crucial step for the oppressor as well as the oppressed to remake their damaged selves. The whole novel can be read as a reflection of guilt and a serious invitation from the empire's own center for a re-narration of its history and reconciliation with its tumultuous past.

Keywords: identity; trauma; exile; Shafak; repetition; dissociation.

1. Introduction

Wounded memory writes itself intermittingly, recurrently and involuntarily often problematizing individuals' and groups' relationships with their present and affecting deeply their sense of self- namely what they are and what they are becoming. Indeed, "[t]he retention of the past is the rule, rather than a surprising exception" (Freud 7). Sigmund Freud (2004) asserts "that in mental life, nothing that has once taken place can be lost; everything is somehow preserved and can be retrieved under the right circumstances" (7). The intrusive past memories are patently the expression of trauma. Elif Shafak's *The Bastard of Istanbul* (2007) is a narrative that depicts its characters' struggle with traumatic pasts and alludes to Turkey's dark national history. In this novel, Shafak creates an encounter between the perpetrators of violence and their victims: the Turks and the Armenians through Asya and Armanoush's friendship. This encounter conjures up their families'

traumatic histories and alludes to their crises of identity. The Armenians' need to disclose their unacknowledged massive trauma of the genocide and search for recognition accidentally leads to uncovering the horrible Turkish matriarch family's secret forcing Zeliha, the survivor of an incestuous rape, to break the silence by the end of the narrative. Reading trauma as "an enigma of survival" (58) and focusing on the dialectic of expressing and repressing, repeating and dissociating, this paper explores the different paths pursued by the traumatized characters in the book in search of self-healing. It attempts to demonstrate that repetition and dissociation, the common clinical symptoms of PTSD are not destructive manifestations of trauma but rather effective survival tools. They function as effective adjustment strategies that the characters deploy to survive their traumas and to restore their damaged selves. Through the Armenian and the Turkish sagas, the novel addresses the question of handling the burden of the past and suggests that coming in terms with one's history is an inevitable step in the recovery process.

2. Literature Review

The *Bastard of Istanbul* was primarily written in English in 2006 by the prominent cosmopolitan Turkish-British writer Elif Shafak and was subsequently translated into Turkish in the same year. Since its publication, the novel has gained acclaim as a prominent identity and trauma narrative which addresses the theme of the Armenian diaspora and conjures up the long-denied gruesome historical event of the Armenian 'genocide'¹ that took place in 1915 within the Ottoman Empire. The novel's release led to its author being put on trial facing the charge of "denigrating Turkishness" (Shafak 359). However, this charge was eventually dropped by the court thanks to the public support Shafak has received from "friends and strangers alike from different nationalities and religion" (356). Numerous works have been dedicated to exploring the issue of identity in this novel. Notably, Lulia Waniek's article (2014) delves into a parallel search for identity among Armenian and Turkish youths in a globalized interconnected world navigating between two culturally-constructed cognitive spaces. Additionally, Nabanita Chakraborty's paper (2019) examines memory as a site of rhetorical contestation for the Armenian victims as well as the Turkish perpetrators of violence" (58) underscoring the role of imagination in memory making and drawing distinction between the institutionalized public memory of the Turks and the culturally traumatic memory of the Armenians. Moreover, Moh Z. Alivin & Mifathul Huda's (2021) coauthored paper explores the theme of identity through Castells' theory of identity construction via the dynamics of power in a heterogeneous society. Their work applies Castells' concepts of 'legitimizing identity', 'resistance identity' and 'project identity' to the characters of the book. All of these works have addressed the destructive impact of trauma in on the characters of the novel, while overlooking its empowering survival aspect. They have failed to explore the enigmatic resilience inherent in the survival mechanisms developed by the characters in response to their traumatic experiences. Informed by Caruth's neo-Freudian conception of traumatic symptoms as an enigmatic parting from the death instinct, Thanatos, into the drive for life, Eros, and conceiving trauma as "incomprehensible imperative to life" (Caruth 23), this manuscript embarks upon the survivors' consciousnesses varied attempts to grasp and master their incomprehensible traumatic pasts and to reconstruct their damaged selves. Hence, repetition and dissociation, the main PTSD symptoms displayed by the surviving characters, are read as enactments of the life drives while underscoring the importance of the past in shaping individual and collective narratives of selfhood.

3. Methodology

This study is an analytical study of Shafak's novel. It aims to explore the underexplored survival aspect of collective and individual traumas under the light of Caruth and Herman's theories. The foundation of this study rests on Caruth's conception of trauma as not "simply an effect of destruction but also fundamentally an enigma of survival" (158). Within this framework, the study examines the divergent paths the Armenian and Turkish characters carve for healing and self-restoration—these paths encompass repetition and dissociation, the compelling need to resurrect and narrate the past and the inclination to suppress it. It also relies on Barbara Miztal's theories of collective memory making and its role in shaping and preserving the marginalized identity

of oppressed groups. Hence, it provides an overview of trauma and its interconnectedness with memory. Trauma and memory are intrinsically linked for trauma is fundamentally mnemonic. While memory refers to "the process of remembering" (Misztal 1) or recalling past incidents, trauma can be conceived as "an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs often in the delayed, uncontrolled appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena" (Caruth 11). The development of trauma studies owes a great deal to the father of modern psychology Sigmund Freud, particularly to his book *Studies on Hysteria* (1895) published in collaboration with his colleague Joseph Breuer. Freud linked hysteria to the inedible "infantile sexual traumas" (134) and sought to cure his patients via "pathogenic recollection" (268) to make them recover the traumatic memories that reside in their subconscious. He noticed that the process of recollecting traumatic memories leads to a state of neurosis since these memories exert a disintegrating effect on their egos. Later, Freud decided to retreat from his own horrific discoveries and repudiated this theory arguing that "women imagined and longed for the abusive sexual encounters of which they complained" (Herman 13). In his late works, particularly in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) where he examined the effect of the First World War on the surviving veterans, Freud linked 'traumatic neurosis' to other shocking events mainly wars, deaths, "railway disasters and other accidents involving a risk to life" (6). He argued that the remembering of traumatic events is an effect of "the instinct for mastery" (16) and that the mind is subjected to "the compulsion to repeat" (14) the repressed memories of the past. Yet, "the patient cannot remember the whole of what is repressed in him" (12) and the retrieved past memories often take the shape of dreams and "not the form of fresh experiences" (15).

Trauma has a profound disintegrative impact on the individual; it dramatically alters the psyche engendering a fragmented self. It inflicts a profound damage upon the foundational structure of one's identity, rendering the restoration of the pre-trauma self nearly irretrievable. Nonetheless, the intensity of the psychological harm varies, contingent upon factors such as the nature, brutality, and duration of the traumatic event as well as "the individual personality characteristics" (Herman 41) of the survivor. Though trauma is often stimulated by a physical or a sexual abuse, some other forms of violence like harassment, accidents, wars and natural disasters, it remains a wound of the mind rather than the body leading to a severe "breach in the mind's experience of time, self and the world" (Caruth 4). A few years after the Second World War, the investigation of trauma was abandoned since the whole world wanted to forget those atrocious brutalities committed by humanity to be revived during the anti-Vietnam war decade. In 1980, Caruth (1996) argues, psychiatry and psychoanalysis as well as neurology have shifted their focus from the phenomenon of trauma itself to the direct link between external violence and psychological disorders people are likely to suffer from after undergoing a traumatic experience or witnessing a traumatic event. "This trend has culminated in the shift of study of post-traumatic stress disorder or (PTSD)"² (57). Caruth asserts that this shift does not imply a break between the contemporary studies of trauma and early psychoanalysis diagnosis of the phenomenon since the positive symptoms like flashbacks and hallucinations and the negative ones namely, numbing and amnesia identified by Freud in his clinical treatment of trauma are associated with PTSD.

Evolving in the liminal space between the past and the present, expressing and repressing, denying and admitting "the once there was, the once there wasn't" (Shafak 132) the once it happened, once it did not happen, *The Bastard of Istanbul* is a narrative of trauma that interweaves the individual trauma of the Turkish matriarchal family the cursed Kazancis and the collective cultural trauma of the Armenian-Americans, the exiled Tachakhmachians, the survivors of the 1915 massacres who succeed in reaching America to remain haunted by the uncanny memories of the genocide. To survive their trauma, the Tachakhmachians inadvertently find themselves reenacting the tragic stories of the past. These narratives form their collective memory within which their present is negotiated and their identity is constructed. They commit themselves to pass their traumatic stories down to their grandchildren particularly to their eldest one Armanoush. Armanoush, who leads a spectral exilic life torn between the western identity her American mother, Rose, wants her to adopt and the eastern Armenian identity her father and grandparents urge her to adhere to, becomes obsessed with these stories and with her ancestors' tragic past. Armanoush's

compelling need to understand the past in order to reconstruct her identity as an American of an Armenian legacy makes her venture on a trip to Istanbul to track down her family's history. She stays with her Turkish stepfather's family, the Kazancis, while trying desperately to find her grandma's house or any trace of her intellectual family the Stamboulians. Armanoush's search into her roots leads to an encounter with the Kazanci's unclaimed trauma and the two families' stories intertwine in a perplexing way. Unlike the Armenians, the Turkish characters, particularly Zeliha and her illegitimate daughter, Asya, attempt to distance themselves from their past; they rely on dissociation to banish traumatic memories from their consciousness. Nevertheless, as Aunt Banu the soothsayer uses her enslaved jinn, Mr. Bitter, to check the authenticity of the Armanoush's saga, she finds out about her own family's horrible secret: basically, that her brother Mustapha is the father of her bastard niece Asya. Aunt Banu also discovers that their Armenian guest is their relative since Armanoush's grandma Shushan Stamboulian is indeed, Shirmin their long-lost grandmother, who after her forced conversion to Islam has managed to reach her siblings in America leaving her husband, Riza Selim Kacanzi, and her young son, Levent, grappling with their irrecoverable loss. Armanoush's discovery of her kinship with her figurative enemy the Turks and her encounter with Zeliha's Armenian boyfriend, Aram, whose five-hundred year family's history in Istanbul functions as antithesis to her family's saga make her realize that not only official national histories but also counter histories may fail to account for truth and that the Turkish and the Armenian identity are by no means dichotomous.

4. Findings and Discussions

As an 'enigma of survival' marked by its fundamental belatedness, trauma, though disrupts the linear progression of time, it highlights the interconnectedness of past, present and future underscores the ongoing impact of the past on contemporary identities and experiences. This interconnectedness becomes crucial to the surviving individuals and communities, who employ adaptive strategies to confront the legacies of the past, heal its wounds and reclaim agency. Thus, trauma, while inherently disruptive, also becomes a catalyst for resilience and transformation. It illuminates the indomitable desire for life inherent in the human psyche and hence the human capacity to survive and thrive amidst adversity.

Building upon the notion of trauma as a riddle of survival, this work demonstrates that Shafak's politically-engaged narrative serves as a poignant illustration of the enduring impact of historical traumas on individual and collective identities. In this narrative, Shafak writes against the tyranny of borders blurring the boundaries between time and space self and other, history and fiction, memory and imagination by interweaving two traumatic tales of two figuratively antagonistic Istanbulite families, the exiled Armenians and the cursed Turks, to bravely write back to the Ottoman Empire forcing her own people to an encounter with a substantial part of their censored national history. Within the multicultural atmosphere of the novel, readers make an encounter with the Armenian-Americans, the Tachakhmachians, the survivors of the 1915 genocide, and the Turkish Kazancis, the victims of male violence, particularly Zeliha the resilient survivor of an incestuous rape and her bastard daughter Asya. To survive their traumas and to reconstruct their damaged selves, the Armenians and the Turks who have different attitudes to the past opt for divergent healing processes relying on repetition and dissociation, telling and silencing. While the Armenian characters struggle to survive with the heavy burden of the collective memories of the past through which they attempt to relate to the present, figure out the future and construct their identity, the Turkish endeavor to live with a cleansed version of the past or rather pastless. Though Shafak skillfully eludes taking sides between the Armenians and the Turks who share a common history of persecution under their respective governments - the Ottoman Empire that has committed atrocious crimes against the Armenians and the Republic State of Turkey that has suppressed that tragic episode of its own national history- she attempts to establish justice by defeating silence and impunity. Shafak, who presents both the Turks and the Armenians as victims of the hegemonic discourses of nationalism and patriarchy names the unnamable by making a Turkish supernatural character, the jinn Mr. Bitter, speak up for the silenced Armenians and the mute rape survivor. Moreover, the novel strives for retributive justices through Mr. Bitter's influence

on Aunt Banu, who confronts her ancestors' crimes and poisons her rapist brother. This does not only raise moral questions about recognition, retribution, and equity when legal avenues fail, but also suggests that repression and denial may not be the right answer to cultural and individual traumas. The confrontation with one's history is thus a crucial step to heal the wounds of the past.

4.1. The Armenian Healing Approach: Remembering, Storytelling and Repetition

Memory plays a crucial role in the process of individual and group identity construction because "the core meaning of any individual and a group identity is [...] sustained by remembering" (Miztal 133). Traumatized subjects often develop a highly problematic relationship with past memories. They are often caught up between the will to remember and report the traumatic incidents they have gone through and the will to banish them from their consciousness. Indeed, "the conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud is the central dialectic of psychological trauma" (Herman 1). This dialectic between remembering and forgetting, denying and admitting, is the main theme of Elif Shafak's novel *The Bastard of Istanbul* (2007) whose traumatized characters the Armenians and the Turkish carve out different ways to survival. Shafak (2007) concedes that "[while] the oppressor has no use for the past, [t]he oppressed has nothing but the past" (261). Discredited from their past and history and banished from home the Armenian-Americans, the Tachakhmachians- the victims of political terror- resort to remembering and storytelling to survive their trauma, create their own collective memory and reconstruct their damaged identities. Their healing process follows the three stages identified by Herman (1992) "establishing safety, reconstructing the trauma story and restoring connection between survivors and their community" (2). Hence, the Tachakhmachians retreat to a safe environment reinventing their lost home, engage in remembrance and mourning and attempt to reconnect with their peers to share the distress that holds a firm grip on their tormented minds and souls and to remake their damaged selves.

Having arrived to America, the exiled Tachakhmachians "who carry the ghosts of the past [...] with them" (Shafak 57) and "the burden of unexpressed rage" (Herman 69) have settled in Russian Hills, San Francisco. "Like too many Armenian families in the diaspora, safe and sound here but never truly at ease", (Shafak 96) the Tachakhmachians attempt to construct a collective identity via crafting their idiosyncratic physical surrounding and recollecting the past stories. Hence, Armenian Turkey is being recreated via different techniques, namely the Armenian vernacular, newspapers, songs, food and religious celebrations and the surviving artifacts that decorate their house, namely

the myriad rugs decorating the floor, the antique silver in the cupboard, the samovar on the chiffoinier, the videocassette in the VCR [...] as well as the multiple paintings and the icon of prayer of Saint Anna and the poster of Mount Ararat canopied under pure white snow" (57).

These items which are "overlain with symbolic associations with past events play an important role to preserve group memory" (Miztal 28). "A huge family with a very traumatic past" (Shafak 58), the Tachakhmachians who fail to forgive their Turkish brothers' betrayal seek group therapy through solidarity. Indeed, group solidarity is highly important for this "well-knit Armenian Catholic family in diaspora" (53) who is often compared to a pomegranate to highlight their firm unanimity. Solidarity, we are told, has allowed the Armenians to elude the ethnic cleansing in the past since "[i]t is because of this collective spirit that the Armenian people have managed to survive" (56) in the past and to create a sense of identity in the present. In this vein Herman asserts:

[t]he solidarity of a group provides the strongest protection against terror and despair and the strongest antidote to traumatic experience. Trauma isolates, the group recreates a sense of belonging, trauma shames and stigmatizes, the group bears witness and affirms, trauma degrades the victim, the group exalts her, trauma dehumanizes, the group restores her to humanity (Herman 154).

The Armenian solidarity that has manifested itself during the Ottoman massacres has been

fortified by diaspora. Nevertheless, the trauma they have gone through has engendered a trust crisis for the Armenians. Similar to their oppressors, they have developed an obstinate intolerance to difference. Although America has granted them everything Turkey has already denied to them, “the Tachakhmachian gang” (Shafak 40) opted for disconnection and withdrawal from the American society leading a life of alienation and estrangement. The common denominator between all their acquaintances whose lengthy names end with the suffix “an” is Armenia. As noted by Herman (1992), “trauma has disrupted [their] sense of connection to others” (40). Suffering from a severe trust crisis, they could not tolerate their unique son’s marriage to an American woman. Perceived as a potential threat to their union, Rose was unwelcome. Despite her deep love to Barsam and her commitment to her daughter, she was rejected by the whole family particularly by her undefeatable mother in-law Shushan who considered this match a sacrilege and nicknamed her “Thorn”. Quite significantly “*odar*” which translates into ‘outsider’ was the first Armenian word Rose learned; that “gluey word had stuck on her from the first day” (Shafak 38). After her divorce, coincidence has helped Rose to enact her scheme of “sweet vengeance” (47). To retaliate, Rose, who grew resentful towards Armenians, decided to marry a Turkish man, Mustapha Kanzaci, to make the Tachakhmachians’ unique granddaughter live with her ancestors’ archenemy. Indeed, Shafak uses Rose to orchestrate an encounter between the Armenians and their Turkish kin and to force them to face their national and personal past.

Overwhelmed by mixed emotions of shame, humiliation, anger and fear and suffering from an intense feeling of guilt, “the survivors’ guilt” (Herman 38) over their lost peers, the wounded Tachakhmachians engage in a sort of “pathological grief” (40), a mourning that does not seem to end. Hence, they often return to those past traumatic experiences in “an attempt to master what was never fully grasped in the first place” (Caruth 7). Indeed, “the return to the traumatic experience is the outcome of the survival strategy” (62). As noted by Jennie Edkins “it is not so much death that is traumatic as survival, or at least survival in the face of particularly brutal or incomprehensible deaths” (99). To survive their trauma, they relive it frequently by recalling and telling those tragic stories of arrest, deportation, death marches and massive killing of their relatives, neighbors and friends. In telling of these traumatic stories, the characters “oscillat[e] between a crisis of death and the correlative crisis of life: between the story of the unbearable nature of the event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival” (Caruth 7). Reliving the past is definitely painful for the Armenians, but it is crucial for them as survivors because “repetition [...] is not simply the attempt to grasp that one has almost died but, more fundamentally and enigmatically the very attempt to claim one’s survival” (64). For instance, Armanoush’s uncle Yervant remains haunted by the uncanny memory of the agonizing bleeding kitten he has encountered aftermath his father’s arrest in his way to his to uncle’s house because it was his first encounter with death.

Years later when he thought about his father, Yervant would remember that kitten all alone in the dark, empty street. Even in Sivas in the small Catholic Armenian village of Pirkinik where they went next to grandpa and grandma, only to be expelled one night by soldiers breaking into the house, even when he found himself walking amid thousands of drained famished beaten Armenians [...] ;even when he trudged through a long thick carpet of mud, vomit, blood and excrement; even when he didn’t know how to stop the cries of his little sister Shushan and then one day amid an ensuing turmoil let go of her hand for a split second and lost sight of her; even when he watched his mother feet swell into blue pillows of pain covered with purple veins and blood, even when she died; [...] even after many happy suppers surrounded by children and grand children that kitten remained ingrained in his mind. (Shafak 240)

Faced with “the possibility of its death, [uncle Yervant’s] consciousness can do nothing but repeat the event over and over again” (Caruth .62) in a series of repetitive flashbacks. This repetition is nothing but an endeavor to fathom “the very incomprehensibility of [his] own survival” (62).

“[A]s a historical experience of survival exceeding the grasp of the one who survives, trauma engages a notion of history exceeding individual bounds” (66). The individual history of the survivors is the foundational premise of the oppressed group’s history. Blaming her brother Barsam for allowing his daughter to be raised by a Turkish stepfather Aunt Surpun affirms: “if you have

no appreciation of history and ancestry, no memory and responsibility, and if you live solely in the present, you can certainly claim that. But the past lives within the present and our ancestors breathe through our children" (Shafak 55). Thus, resuscitating their personal traumatic stories is an established ritual for the Armenian survivors because "individual trauma contains within it the core of the trauma of a larger history" (Caruth 71); a transgenerational history of a whole community. That silenced history which persists vividly in their minds is transmitted orally to the younger generation who in turn uses the new means of communication to preserve it. The second generation has created its own digital mnemonic space, Café Constantinople, a cybercafé named after the city of Constantinople, Istanbul's former name, "before the abandoning of multinational Ottomanism for Turkism" (Shafak 323). In that cyberspace which functions like "a sanctuary where you could forgo your true humdrum self at the entrance" (112), the diasporic youth of the Armenian communities gather to share and exchange memories and negotiate their identity in between the past and the present. For them "memory establishes itself as not only a source of a sense of lineage and inheritance but also as identities' sole justification and legitimization" (Miztal 47). It functions like "a surrogate religion" (47) that binds them together and that ensures the production of their own episodic version of truth that challenges "the dominant cultural representation of reality" (47) by undermining the official "master narratives" (48) of the Turkish nation. "[D]espite all the grief it embodies, history is what keeps [them] alive and united" (Shafak 174). It grants them "a sense of continuity" (174) with their ancestors and functions as a resistance site against silencing and exclusion.

Physically and psychologically displaced, the members of the Armenian Café Constantinople use virtual hyphenated nicknames that patently bespeak their precarity and loss. Among the most prominent members, we can cite Miserable- Coexistence and Anti-Khavurma (Khavurma is a Turkish meal). What unites them together is not only their common history but also their "common enemy: the Turks, [for] [n]othing brings people together more swiftly and strongly than a shared enemy" (Shafak 113). Armanoush's login identity Madame My- Exiled -Soul bespeaks her dilemma as an Armenian raised by a "hysterically anti-Armenian mom" (119) and a Turkish stepfather. Both Mustapha and her mother have cramped her 'Armenianness' which she experiences only part-time during her visits to her grandparents. Hence, to recover that part of her identity, and driven by "the fantasy of compensation" (Herman 136) Armanoush, who needs a listener to her trauma, decides to take a trip into the past by travelling to Istanbul expecting an apology from her 'enemies'.

4.2. The Turkish Dissociative State

The Armenians' attachment to the past is clearly contrasted with the Turks' withdrawal from their personal and national history and dissociation of their traumatic memories. Nevertheless, "trauma may lead to an encounter with another [...], through the very possibility and surprise or listening to another wound" (Caruth 8). The listener, who becomes a witness to the victim's tragedy, "comes to feel the bewilderment, injury, confusion, dread and conflict that the trauma victim feels" (Laub 58) and attempts to share her struggle with the memories of the past. In *The Bastard of Istanbul*, the encounter between Armanoush and the Kazancis conjures up their unclaimed trauma. While listening to Armanoush, Aunt Banu uses her clairvoyance technique to finish Armanoush's elliptical stories of the genocide and as such she becomes her "companion in a journey to an uncharted land" (Laub 59). Unwittingly, Aunt Banu the silent but most committed listener to Armanoush, discovers her family's dark secret. Though the Kazancis' cryptic secret is only revealed by the end of the narrative, allusions to their traumatic family history are quite palpable as most of them display signs of eccentricity and detachment. The Kazanci is a matriarchal family with "too many women and too many secrets about men who disappeared too early and too peculiarly" (Shafak 62). A curse "like an evil spell put on the whole lineage" (24) wipes out males whose different ends are equally tragic. Consisting of seven women, the grandmother Petite Ma, Mother Gulsum, her four daughters Aunt Banu, Cevriye, Ferida, Zeliha and her bastard daughter Asya, they all live together in their old dilapidated Ottoman mansion. Apart from Zeliha and her bastard daughter Asya, they are all diagnosed with some stress-related disease. Petite Ma, the grandmother "suffer[s] from an early stage of dementia" (24). Her ever-worsening Alzheimer has allowed her to lead a blissful life

“far in a better land” (28) with a selective memory. Grandma Gulsum, the mother leads a depressive life after the migration of her unique son Mustapha to Arizona, America. Likewise, her eldest daughter Aunt Banu who has lost her twin sons is an unreachable mystic; she lives in her own peculiar world talking only to her “two invisible djinns” (69) Mr. Sweet on her right shoulder and Mr. Bitter on her left one. Similarly, Aunt Feride lives in her own fantasyland “travelling nonstop from one stress-related illness to another” (26). She has been diagnosed with stress ulcer, schizophrenia, “obsessive compulsive disorder, dissociative amnesia, psychotic depression [...] and] Bittersweet Nightshade” (26). Aunt Cevriye, has suffered from a severe depression after the sudden death of her husband just a month before his release from jail. Even their cat Pasha the Third, the only male in the house displays “a plentiful of social-stress symptoms” (32) like “insatiable hunger” and “an unusual fondness for water” (32).

The suffering of the Kazanci women is engendered by the unacknowledged male violence enacted upon them. For instance, Petite Ma has always been saddened by her beloved stepson's rejection and “intimidated and beaten” (45) by her oppressive and narcissistic husband Riza Selim who could never overcome “the trauma of his first marriage” (138), basically his being abandoned by his beloved first wife Shushan Stamboulian. Both Riza Selim and his son Levent have rewarded Petite Ma's affection with ingratitude. Mother Gulsum, her unique son Mustapha and four daughters have always been terrorized by the unloving and harsh Patriarch Daddy Levent. They have always felt threatened by his presence to the point that even after his death “his ghost still haunted them” (308). Nevertheless, these stories of family inconveniences are never mentioned; as Asya puts it “the Kazancis were a family inclined to never forget other people's stories but to blank when it comes to their own” (60). They are good at “[b]rushing the way the dust and the dirt of memories. They always talk about the past but it is a cleansed version of the past” (147).

Dissociation or “the splitting of the traumatic memory from the rest of consciousness” (Caruth 141) is a common feature of PTSD. It is an adaptation strategy, a defense mechanism developed by the victims of trauma to survive and heal their wounds. “Through the practice of dissociation, voluntary thought suppression, minimization and sometimes outright denial, they learn to alter an unbearable reality” (Herman 63). This technique is used by all the Kazancis, for instance unable to hold the bitter truth of having a granddaughter outside the wedlock, and to attune the shame her young daughter Zeliha has incurred to the family, Mother Gulsum keeps referring to her as a divorcée. Zeliha herself who is depicted as a rebellious woman relies on dissociation to alter her own sense of reality and to hypnotize the unbearable pain of having been raped by her brother. Indeed, Zeliha practices what George Orwell calls ‘doublethink’³. “[She] exist[s] simultaneously in two realities, two points in time. The experience of the present which is hazy and dulled, while the intrusive memories of the past are intense and clear” (Herman 65). Zeliha's first reality is that of revolutionary promiscuous woman who despite her attractiveness has a strange “proclivity to violence” (Shafak 6). Challenging the Turkish patriarchal order, she breaks all unbreakable rules of “female prudence for an Istanbulite woman” (5). She is a creative tattoo artist who devises the most flamboyant and outlandish designs “inspired by one basic principle contradiction” (72) which is the ruling principle of her own existence. She thwarts the Turkish dressing code refusing to show modesty in her manners. Roaming the city, in “outrageously short skirts” (154) that lay bare her long beautiful legs and colorful blouses which barely cover “her ample breasts” (221), she is often taken as a foreigner. Zeliha, we are told, is an iron-willed woman who “harbors[s] a profound contempt for weepy women” (15) and thus, she has promised herself not to cry no matter what miseries would be inflicted on her. Even when she has been laying half-conscious in the gynecologist clinic and moved by the mellow-voiced Friday call for prayers which has made her change her mind about aborting her baby in the last minute, she has succeeded in stifling her tears while asking God's forgiveness. Holding firmly to the reality of the uncontrollable rebel or rather the sinner, Zeliha often opts for defenselessness and speechlessness to her mother's frequent castigating blames for bringing disgrace to the family. Irritated by her daughter's unruliness and oblivious to her pampered son's horrible crime, mother Gulsum scolds:

[i]t is not enough that you always bring disgrace to this family! Look at that skirt you are wearing. The dish towels in the kitchen are longer than your skirts! You are a

mother, a divorcée. Hear me well! I have never a divorcée with a ring in her nose. You should be ashamed of yourself Zeliha! (258)

Breaking the readers' expectations, Zeliha reacts cold bloodily and asks her mother not to "distort the facts" reminding her that she cannot be called a divorcée or a widow. She asserts firmly: "[t]his daughter of yours is a sinner who wears miniskirts and she loves her nostril ring and she loves the child she gave birth out of wedlock. Like it or not" (259). By clinging to this alternative reality, Zeliha succeeds in dissociating a subpart of her identity which belongs to her second reality; particularly that of the disempowered female whose defiance of patriarchy legitimizes her rape. In *Trauma and Recovery* (1992), Judith Herman argues that incest survivors often develop "a stigmatized identity" (76) in which they internalize the evil of their abusers so, they "continue to view themselves with contempt and to take upon themselves the shame and guilt of their abusers" (76). In Zeliha's case, the stigmatized identity of the sinner turns out to be empowering. It functions as a resistance identity since it is a bold token of her declared war against her andocentric masculine society.

Zeliha's second reality which she silences or numbs is that of the compelling past memory of the mortified woman whose 'whore-like' dressing style entices "the precious phallus" (Shafak 45) of the Kazancis, her brother 'Sultan Mustapha' to brutally rape her after her botched self-defense attempt. Though Shafak immunizes her female protagonist against the haunting of the past portraying her as "resistant to the malignant psychological effect of trauma" (Herman 43), Zeliha's unclaimed traumatic memory survives as vividly in her mind as "the Kodak balloons in the clear sky" (Shafak 316) she has surveyed while being raped to detach herself from that horrible reality and to exempt her visual memory from grabbing hold of the details of that hideous act of violence. However, Zeliha has opted for silence because her secret is unspeakable, "too terrible to utter aloud" (Herman 1). As noted by Herman, survivors of sexual violence are often silenced by fear and shame. Furthermore, "[t]hey often hesitate to disclose to family members, not only because they fear they will not be understood but also because they fear that [their] will overshadow their own" (47). In Zeliha's case, when her eldest sister, the devoted Muslim Aunt Banu, finds out about her secret, she decides to take action and to establish celestial justice by poisoning Mustapha, compelling Zeliha to reveal the identity of Asya's father during her brother's funeral, thus informing Asya that her uncle is her deceased father.

Reminiscent of her mother and her aunties, Asya attempts to detach herself from the past. Despite her infuriation by the Kazancis' mendacity, she joins them in their amnesia. Yet, if the Kazancis cling to a clean version of the past, Asya prefers to live with no history for she has nothing to cling to. Denied the identity of her father and called bastard at school, Asya has grown up as a pastless and a nihilist being. Elucidating her own conception of history to Armanoush she affirms:

Yours is a crusade for remembrance, whereas if it were I'd rather be just like Petite Ma with no capacity for reminiscence whatsoever [...]. For me, history starts today; [...]. There is no continuity in time. You can't feel attached to ancestors you can't even trace your own father (Shafak 180-181).

Unlike Armanoush who sees history as a progressive continuity between the past, the present and the future for she cannot conceptualize herself in isolation from her community collective past, Asya sees it as a series of interruptions and a plethora of unanswered questions. For Asya who "has never felt part of a collectivity" (199), the past is "a vicious circle" (180) that blocks people's lives catching them in a desperate loop of self-repetition. Searching for her identity, Asya, a super fan of Jonny Cash, and an avid reader of Gramsci and Žižek, frequents the Kundera, "a comfy dreary intellectual café" (213), where the non-conformist youth gather to discuss existentialist issues. Their encounter with Armanoush who brings to discussion the Armenian genocide exposes their ignorance of their national history. To her deception, Armanoush who expects an apology from the young Turks for their ancestors' crimes is surprised by their complete unawareness of that fundamental part of their own history. The Turkish intelligentsia that impresses her with its mastery of the English language and philosophy turns out unfamiliar with its own history. The first answer that she gets from the nicknamed Ultrationalist Movie Scenarist: "That didn't happen" (209).

Even, worse he accuses the Armenians of “collective hysteria” (211) and attempts to undermine the credibility of Armanoush’s saga, relying on the conception of history as an effect of narrativity and subjectivity. He ends up concluding that Armanoush’s tale is just her own reality: “you keep hearing the same story over and over again, and the next thing you know you have internalized the narrative. From that moment on you internalize it ceases to be someone else’s story. It is not even a story any more, but reality, your reality” (211, emphasis in original).

Conspicuously, though Shafak exposes the Turks’ ignorance, she represents them as victims of their country’s proud nationalist regime that has cut them from their own collective Ottoman past. Their ignorance is imposed by the republican state that opted for a clean version of history. Both the Kazancis and the members of the Kundera café feel no responsibility towards what happened before the establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923. Yet, if the Kazanci women, including aunt Cevriye, the Turkish national history teacher, identify themselves as modern Turks distanced from the heritage of the Ottoman Empire and aligned with Father Ataturk’s secularism and modernism “drawing an impermeable boundary between the past and the present” (123), the young intellectual Turks, feel

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 have 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 world. They have got the general public and the remaining half of the state (81).

Nevertheless, while the Turks’ vehement denial of their ancestors’ atrocities shocks Armanoush, her encounter with Aram, Zeliha’s Armenian boyfriend, makes a pivotal moment in her search for truth, equity and identity, since it leaves her not only puzzled but profoundly unsettled challenging her own conception of Armenian identity and history. The complexity of Aram’s identity, straddling two worlds and two conflicting narratives, compels Armanoush to confront the nuances of her own heritage and the intricate web of historical truths and half-truths that have shaped her worldview. Aram’s refusal of her request to leave Istanbul and to join the diasporic Armenians in America, which he justifies by his umbilical attachment to the city, his half-century family roots and his “Turkish friends who are closer to [him] than to his blood and flesh brother” (254) leads to a communicative impasse between them. As they both fall “into an awkward silence” (254), Armanoush begins to feel as distant from ‘Turkified’ Aram as from the Turks themselves. Quite skillfully, Shafak uses the literary device of the supernatural to reconcile dichotomies of self and other, history and fiction, past and present. Through this device, she eliminates borders between the perpetrators of violence and their victims. Shafak takes Aunt Banu and her enslaved jinn, Mr. Bitter, on journey from 2005 to 1915 allowing them to relive the past atrocities. This journey provides the perplexed reader with a detailed account of Armanoush’s family history whose traces in Istanbul have been completely eradicated. By making a Turkish character speak up for the traumatized and silenced Armenians, Shafak does not only empathize with them but also she audaciously acknowledges her ancestors’ crime. This acknowledgement bespeaks itself clearly though Aunt’s Banu’ remorseful state of mind, her repeated pleas for her jinn Mr. Bitter to cease reporting the Armenian saga and her prayers to God to grant her the strength to bear the burden of that knowledge.

5. Conclusion

This study has delved into the process of surviving trauma in Elif Shafak’s *The Bastard of Istanbul* (2007) focusing on the characters’ post-traumatic struggles to heal their wounds and remake their damaged selves. While the past-haunted Armenians attempt to survive their cultural trauma of the genocide through memory preservation, repetition, expression and storytelling to master what their consciousness have failed to grasp, the Turks Kazancis, particularly Zeliha and her illegitimate daughter Asya, opt for repression and memory dissociation. This divergence illustrates the complex ways individuals and communities navigate the aftermath of a profound pain. However, by breaking the chains of silence giving voice to the silenced Armenians and by condemning the rapist to death, Shafak’s novel repudiates repression, denounces impunity and

emphasizes the inevitability of confronting one's past as a prerequisite for a genuine healing. In this narrative, Shafak exposes the shared suffering of both the Armenians and the Turks under oppressive regimes making a forceful appeal for collective recognition and action against historical erasure. *The Bastard of Istanbul* stands out as a resounding testament to the power of literature to excavate buried histories and to heal wounds. Through its nuanced characters and their diverse responses to trauma, the novel weaves a tapestry of human experience that resonates far beyond the pages.

Endnotes

¹The Armenian genocide refers to the systematic mass killing and deportation of over one million Armenians by the Ottoman Empire between 1915 and 1923, during and after World War I. Armenians were arrested in Istanbul and assassinated and every symbol of their culture was eradicated. "Most of the survivors would die of hunger or exhaustion during forced marches to exile". (De Zayas, 2010, p.3). As a Christian minority living within a predominantly Islamic empire, the Armenians' religious difference raised concerns, particularly during war time and political instability. "Of 2,100,000 Armenians [...] only 77,435 remained in 1927" (as cited in De Zayas, pp.3-4).

²PTSD is the name used by the American Psychiatric Association in 1980 in the third edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder as alternative to early psychoanalytic expressions namely the now-discarded 'shell shock', traumatic neurosis and other terms (Caruth, 1996, p.130). It refers to "the taking over of the mind physically and neurobiologically by an event it cannot control" (p.58).

³George Orwell's concept of doublethink refers to "the power of holding two contradictory beliefs in one's mind simultaneously and accepting both of them" (as cited in Herman, 1992, p.63). In the dystopian world of 1984, doublethink represents a form of mental manipulation and control by the authoritarian government of "The Party", led by Big brother, where the citizens accept contradictory ideas and statements quite unquestionably.

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