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Edible Wounds, Embodied Histories: The Aftertaste of Ancestry in *The Bastard of Istanbul*

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Abstract

This paper explores how the female body, food practices, and trauma are entangled in Elif Shafak's novel *The Bastard of Istanbul*. It claims that the female body is a battleground and an archive where individual pain and history are stored, transmitted, and contested by female characters in the novel. In the home, the culinary labour, recipes, and communal meals are a narrative language where women control silence, sorrow, and inherited traumas. Shafak shows how the food is not just an ornamentation of culture. It is a form of memory, an affectual technology, which transforms the unspeakable into the sensual, into taste, smell, appetite, and disgust. Reading the scenes of cooking, eating, and bodily response and the depictions of gendered shame, family secret, and intergenerational violence, this study demonstrates how the trauma can be made palpable on and through the bodies of women. The discussion also demonstrates how food routines in everyday life may offer precarious repairing practices, which allow women to bargain their place among disjointed lineages and disputed histories. This article has shown through close textual reading that Shafak uses food and culinary space as a gendered location of witnessing, in which embodied experience is filled with the burden of historical discontinuity, and in which women's everyday practices can be both the reproduction and resistance of patriarchal and nationalist discourses.

Key words: Elif Shafak, female body, culinary rituals, trauma, *The Bastard of Istanbul*

1 Introduction

The title "Edible Wounds, Embodied Histories: The Aftertaste of Ancestry" is a provocative instrument through which the main themes of the novel, such as trauma, memory, and identity, can be explored. The term "Edible Wounds" is used to refer to the literal and figurative role of food in the novel, namely, how recipes and food traditions turn into spaces of transferring intergenerational pain. The meals eaten by the characters are marinated in unknown pasts, and it can be concluded that the historical traumas, more so the Armenian Genocide, are not only remembered but also chewed and passed on through the body. "Embodied Histories" builds on this concept, but proposes that the past is not only found in the archives or narratives, but also in posture, appetite, illness, and silence. The characters are keeping the unresolved traumas of their ancestors on their flesh without their knowledge at times. And finally, "The Aftertaste of Ancestry" is the foul flavor of the inheritance, the flavor that is left behind after a meal is eaten or a story is read. It proposes that ancestry is not remote but a living, sensual experience that can be nourishing or poisonous. The title reinforces this by implying that history leaves flavors of loss, loyalty, and love on the tongue even after the table has been cleared.

The female characters in *The Bastard of Istanbul* best exemplify this perception of ancestry. Considering Zeliha, the tattooist and single mother of Asya, who is a fiercely independent woman. In the novel, Zeliha does not want to eat the traditional *ashure***1** (Noah's Pudding), which her family prepares every year, a food that is supposed to be a symbol of community and history. Her rejection is consumable injury brought into reality, as she is unable to swallow a dessert which symbolizes a shared Turkish story that obliterates her own silent trauma (a past rape which led to the birth of Asya).

Likewise, Banu, the sister of Zeliha, transfers her inherited suffering into obsessive food consumption and spiritual fainting, and

([1] *Ashure* (or *aşure*), commonly known as Noah's Pudding, is a traditional Turkish sweet made from boiled wheat, dried fruits, nuts, and sometimes pulses. It is prepared and distributed during the Islamic month of Muharram, particularly on the tenth day, which is called *Ashura*. For many Sunni Muslims in Turkey, ashure symbolizes communal sharing, neighborliness, and festive remembrance of prophetic events (including the landing of Noah's Ark). However, for Shi'a Muslims, the same day commemorates the martyrdom of Imam Husayn at Karbala, and they instead prepare and distribute *halva* (a flour-based sweet) as an expression of mourning. See Stefan Williamson Fa, "Eating Ashure on Ashura: Gastro-Politics and Intra-Muslim Relations in Contemporary Turkey" (2025), particularly pp. 2–5 and 15–22.**)**

her body is transformed into a living history of the violent pasts of the region (the Armenian Genocide, the deportation of Greeks, the oppression of Kurds) in the form of indigestion, cravings, and spiritual visions. Meanwhile, the ancestry is a literal experience to Armanoush (Amy), the Armenian-American stepdaughter who goes to Istanbul to recover her lost identity. By tasting the *lokma* (fried dough) that her great-grandmother used to prepare, she hopes to be able to digest the genocide that her family has suppressed.

The most poignant scene of the novel is when Gulsum, the matriarch of the family, comes to her lifelong silence concerning the past as she stirs a pot of soup, her mouth and her wooden spoon swinging in the same rhythmic, healing rhythm. Cooking and eating are never a domestic affair in such instances. They get weakened into gendered practices in which women enlist pain, negotiate silence, and transmit the wounds that cannot be uttered. The kitchen of the Kazanci family house is therefore a gendered archive of witnessing as the location where individual trauma (rape, abandonment, unwanted pregnancy) is confronted with the histories of the world (genocide, nationalism, diaspora). And yet, there are few chances of repair even in food. When Asya and Armanoush, one Turkish and the other Armenian, finally share a bowl of ashure, the act constitutes a gesture of belonging, however unpalatable the aftertaste of their ancestors remains upon their lips.

The criticism and international acclaim of *The Bastard of Istanbul* in 2006 both came about at the same time, both as a result of transgressive literary intervention by Elif Shafak. On the one hand, Shafak is highly appreciated for the brightness and approachability of her narration and the possibilities to show the textures of modern Turkey with the help of plural voices, minor histories, and marginalized lives. An example is the writing by Pinar Kararti (2010), who identifies the writing of Shafak as "descriptive and entertaining" (p.1) and how her fiction gives a vivid picture of the contemporary Turkish society, with special concerns for the communities that are usually pushed into the background.

Similar views of numerous critics involve the expansiveness of Shafak's themes and genres to her ability to treat complex social issues without losing narrative flow, which is often interpreted as inseparable from her transnational origins. Shafak herself has associated her literary imagination with a history of movement that she has experienced, as she wrote in an interview that "migrations, ruptures, and displacements" have been very important to my personal history (cited in Chancy, p. 56). This self-definition aids in understanding her

frequent fascination with border-crossing characters, and with areas where cultures,

memories, and languages intersect, a tendency that *The Sunday Times* describes in the statement that she is passionately interested in breaking down boundaries, whether of race, nationality, culture, gender, geography, or some more mystical variety (cited in Mustapha, p. 36).

Also associated with the international recognition, though, has been a long history of criticism of Shafak. Much of the criticism related to the political sensitivity of the topics she describes, as well as to the cultural significance of her decision to write in many different languages. Her fiction again and again seeks controversial ground in Turkey and in transnational debates, such as sexual taboo, gendered violence, and unresolved historical violence. One of the most obvious ones, which is discussed by Louisa Ermelino in *East Meets West* (2024), is the 2006 prosecution where Shafak was accused of "offending Turkishness" (p. 29) since *The Bastard of Istanbul* mentions the mass killings of Armenians during the First World War genocide. According to Ermelino, the case attracted human rights advocates in Turkey and other countries, who packaged the trial as a free speech case, and the controversy enhanced the global presence of Shafak as a Muslim woman author with a transnational biography who wrote about contentious topics in politics and sexuality (p. 29). In this respect, the hostility, which is concentrated on Shafak, is not incidental to her work but structurally interrelated to it due to the fact that her stories defy official amnesia and patriarchal respectability simultaneously.

It is against this critical framework that the current study seeks to understand the application of food as an embodied language of memory, trauma, and gendered experience as used in *The Bastard of Istanbul*. It poses the question of how food customs: cooking, serving, sharing, and eating, get connected to the female body and the passing of cultural memory through generations. It also looks at the approach of appetite, disgust, sensuality, and domestic ritual in revealing trauma in the daily life of women. The paper also poses the question of how the kitchen and other domestic spaces are employed as locations where silence is practiced, history is re-enacted, and repressed violence is enacted in intimate forms. These questions help the research to demonstrate that food in the novel is not simply a cultural identification signifier, but a channel through which women bear, bargain, and at times defy historical anguish.

1.1 Theoretical Framework and Critical Review of Scholarship

This paper builds its arguments based on feminist food studies alongside the memory and trauma studies to explore how food mediates history through the female body in *The Bastard of Istanbul* by Elif Shafak. Food in this context is not a decorative element or a cultural decoration. It is perceived as a social and symbolic practice that produces and controls gender, power, intimacy and memory. The argument presented by Sarah Sceats, who claims that the meaning of eating goes beyond biology and enters the sphere of selfhood, desire, and cultural identity, and insists that the questions that food and embodiment pose are gendered (p. 1), is thus an indispensable point of departure. She also demonstrates that women are historically burdened with "cooking for and nourishing others," a role tied to both "power and service," while at the same time "women eat as well as cook, starve as well as serve" (p. 2). Sceats holds significance to the current research paper as she makes food to be understood as a gendered language that enslaves women into domestic labour, as well as a language that keeps women disciplined.

Deborah Lupton's *Food, the Body and the Self* (1996) further develops this line of

inquiry by treating "food, eating and embodiment" as central to the "production and reproduction of meaning" (13). For Lupton, food is one of the key means through which the boundary between inside and outside, self and society, is negotiated. Eating is therefore not simply a biological act, but a cultural process through which the body takes in memory, emotion, value, and social meaning. This point of view is particularly helpful in the given study since it puts the body at the center of food discourse and explains why the notions of appetite, disgust, pleasure, and restraint cannot be perceived as strictly personal reactions. Rather, they are constructed within broader systems of meaning and by cultural regulations that control what gets into the body, what must be kept out, and what types of selves these incarnated practices bring into being. The fact that, according to Lupton, food is a kind of a liminal substance that moves between the world and the self (p. 17) is especially important in this case as it aids in understanding that food in the novel by Shafak is not only a subject of thought, but it is also a material experience through the body, habits, and intimate spaces of women.

Additionally, Carole Counihan also gives the most precise explanation of the way food defines gendered power in her book, *Food and Gender: Identity and Power* (2005). She states the gender issues in food-related events since food access and control of food preparation and the ability to share or consume food determine social value and status (p. 1). In the case of Counihan, the production, provision, distribution, and consumption of food by men and women are one of the primary indicators of their power (1-2). At the same time, she warns that in domestic settings "responsibility is not equivalent of control" (p. 3). Women might seem to have a mastery of the domestic food domain, yet the task is usually tied to the obligation to serve, to please, to submit, and to be submissive to others (p. 3). This is the main argument in this study since it allows the kitchen not to be romanticized as a mere place of warmth or as a place of tradition. Instead, it becomes a contested space in which care, service, hierarchy, and subtle agency coexist. Counihan also leaves room for food work as a source of female authority, since the one who prepares and serves food may regulate status, intimacy, and inclusion through the act of feeding itself.

The recent feminist food scholarship reinforces this framework by demonstrating that contemporary femininity is structured by the food discourse and bodily surveillance. In an essay reviewing the work of Natalie Jovanovski, Nick Jensen explains that the modern food culture continually informs women that their bodies are incompetent and that their dietary choices are ethically questionable. He mentions that the connection of women to food and cooking is frequently represented through a discourse in which women are also represented as predisposed "to look after, cook, and serve others" (p. 64). Julie Parsons, while discussing *Food and Femininity* by Kate Cairns and Josée Johnston, demonstrates that food is still a critical way of doing and or performing gender (p. 273). The good mother in her summary is supposed to offer healthy meals, shield the family against danger, and also take care of things with the help of food, and everyday cooking remains an assumed part of the daily work of women (274-275). Collectively, all these critics illustrate that food is not merely something that nourishes someone or a source of enjoyment. It is also a field by which femininity is gauged, assessed, and revealed in the body. This point is significant in the interpretation of the female characters of Shafak, whose domestic and culinary life cannot be decontextualized in the larger context of gendered demands.

Under this theoretical basis, the study of *The Bastard of Istanbul* has already

contributed greatly to memory, silence, trauma, and identity issues. In an article, "Affiliations, Aversions and Assertions: Memory, Identity and Amnesia in Elif Shafak, *The Bastard of Istanbul*" (2024), Farhan Ahmad predicts the nexus of memory, identity, and amnesia in the novel. Ahmad is of the view that collective amnesia is a politically manufactured phenomenon, and it may undermine the ability of a community to grapple with past violence. His reading is useful in that it links national forgetting with intimate and embodied life, in that what is remembered and what is suppressed defines the identity of the generations. It is specifically pertinent to the current research in that it provides an avenue of interpreting domestic routines as places where history is hidden or maintained.

Continuing on this issue of memory as a contentious area, the article by Tajamul Islam (2022) analyses the novel through the conflict between the individual and the political memory. Islam emphasizes such characters as Asya and Armanoush, who are characterized by rootlessness and a crisis of identity, and the significance of alternative spaces like Cafe Kundera and Cafe Constantia in breaking the state-created silence in the context of the Armenian genocide. The usefulness of this argument is that it demonstrates the way in which the public trauma manifests itself in everyday life and becomes readable through the bodies of young women, through their friends, movements, and emotional lives. It also helps to sustain the larger argument that memory in the novel does not exist as an official discourse only, but is circulated in the lived spaces and intimate relations.

An even more explicitly gendered narrative is found in the dissertation chapter by Gulers Ugur (2020), which no longer focuses on the history of the population in general, but on the issue of sexual trauma management in the privacy of the home. Ugur provides one of the most comprehensive trauma-based readings of the novel as he explores the theme of rape, silence, recovery, and the family and culturally imposed norms. Her point that the home turns out to be the worst place that the violated woman can be is particularly significant to this research since it demonstrates that the concept of domesticity is not about protection but rather about forced isolation. Ugur manages to capture this secretive logic in the quote, "Every family has sins that should be kept secret" (52). She also approaches the symbolic field, which is the focus of the current research, when she interprets the pomegranate mentioned in the novel *BOI*, as meaning as a metaphor of a vagina (60). Such an association of food and sexuality with violence is very suggestive since it puts the symbolism of the female body and food in the same grammar of trauma.

Regarding the aspects of diaspora and recognition, the article by Nabanita Chakraborty (2019) focuses on the idea of the Armenian diasporic memory and the destructive power of denial and silence. This is because Shafak's readings reveal that recognition is not merely political but also ethical and that denial inflicts a second wound through daily interactions. Diasporic memory, in this perspective, is not only transported by documents or archives but also by affect, ritual, and family transmission. Elena Furlanetto (2014) also explores the ideological production of forgetting in the Turkish nation and interprets the novel by Shafak as a critique of Kemalist amnesia and an attempt to envision a more plural and hybrid identity. The difference between the Armenian remembering and Turkish forgetting is also emphasized by Dilek Tufekci Can (2011), especially regarding the concept of diaspora, belonging, and unresolved violence of 1915. Collectively, these critics argue that memory in this novel is never innocent and that nothing is ever forgotten without consequence. It is socially prepared,

politically convenient, and profoundly unbalanced in its outcomes.

2 Data Analysis and Interpretation

Food in literature is rarely confined to nourishment alone, as in *BOI,* it carries immense symbolic weight. Culver sees "food is a common theme in the cultures of human beings, and it cannot be lived without" (cited in Anwer, p. 248). Food, besides being seen as the common theme in culture and consumed for survival, also represents "history, traditions, and…connect us to our forebears" (Sokol, p.161). The range of Turkish foods offered in the novel is not just a momentary decoration, but, on the contrary, the taste, making, and eating of Turkish dishes are deeply connected with scenes of emotional volatility, family conflict, and the secrets they hide. Certain meals are shown at key points in the story, like during revelations, confrontations, and confessions, to make food impossible to forget and unrelated to trauma. The honeyed candor of "baklava", the stratified richness of dolma, or the sharing of a meal by the entire community of ashure does not exist in isolation from the life that is going on around it. Rather, they are silent observers of harsh realities and bequeathed silences.

In order to get to the deeper meaning of culinary symbolism, the spatial aspect of food is important to understand. The kitchen in Shafak's novel is not merely a domestic location; it is a gendered space in which cultural continuity and female labor come together. It is the place of traditions, recipes, and family identity that is practiced every day. Concurrently, it is the place where the roles of women get naturalized and limited to domesticity. As Manchusha Madhusudanan (2019) remarks, the kitchen serves as a symbol of the main female character being in a trap as well as a crucial place where she experiences "oppression, isolation, entrapment, and, eventually, empowerment" (p. 209). The place of cooking also becomes the physical site where the cooking rituals hide the emotional traumas. It is an area of repetition, like rolling grape leaves, stirring soup, and kneading the dough, and a symptom of the cyclical incarceration of female pain. This deception is not just a diversion, but a kind of home policy. In this respect, the culinary work could be regarded as a powerful technology as it regulates the mood, calms down conflict, and changes the focus to what cannot be said. The repetitive beats of the kitchen are also representative of the repetitive shapes of patriarchy, where the same household motions, the same requirements of obedience, and the same inherited silence are droned out day after day. In the case of Zeliha, there is no discussion of the trauma, yet the food is cooked, and the domestic life continues. This continuation gives an impression that food is ambivalent in the novel; it is a giver of life, and simultaneously a shroud of violence threatening life.

The culinary environment of the novel represents the cultural fusion between the Turkish and the Armenian people. The traditional Turkish food is presented quite often in the Kazanci family, and the Armenian cuisine is manifested in the diasporic memory. The introduction of these foods is not just purely ornamental, but in fact, the foods are identity markers. In *Physiologie du goût*, Brillat-Savarin already realized, long before the emergence of cultural theory in the modern era, that food is not a minor concern in human existence but an indicator of group identity. By intimating that national cuisine is a mechanism by which people identify themselves, he is referring to the close connection between taste and belonging (p. 19).

Furthering on the theme of food, eating, and its relation to the female body, the observation, which Watson and Caldwell make in *The Cultural Politics of Food and Eating: A Reader* (2004), is important, as they disclose the concept of food and its

connection with collective identity (p. 116-117). As a case in point, in *Honour*, Shafak describes the kitchen of Pembe as a place of cultural transmission and a place of gendered isolation in the diaspora. The novel emphasizes that Pembe insists on the Turkish culinary culture to keep her children up to their identity despite the restrictive gender roles they experience. Pembe, imagining a man cooking, depicts the relationship between the kitchen, her domain, and the place of expectations that influence the way she brings up her sons. She finds comfort in cooking traditional Turkish food for her family to have a physical connection with home and the past. At one point, when one of her male friends, Elias, who is a professional chef, makes a jab that he could cook like her, Pembe envisions him chopping onions or stabbing some courgettes in a pantry "Pembe imagined him dicing onions or poking at some courgettes in a frying pan. The idea was so odd that she let out a giggle…" (p. 105).

The response also represents the fact that the role of cooking belongs to a woman in the world of Pembe. She laughs instantly and goes quiet, not comfortable with a man in her vicinity. The story goes on, saying that "The men she knew would barely enter the kitchen to get a glass of water for themselves, which, now that she thought about it, was also how she had been raising her two sons, especially Iskender." (p. 105). These lines highlight the generation conflict and help Pembe understand that she has conditioned her sons to maintain the traditions of gender roles and essentially imprisons herself in the kitchen work, even in the diaspora. Nevertheless, the kitchen also enables Pembe to transmit cultural values. She cooks ancestral meals by doing this, making her home Turkish and resisting the erasure of culture. Food is made into a movable archive in exile, a means of preserving memory and belonging through the outside world that requires assimilation. That is also why the kitchen of Pembe is like a living homeland, where identity is not only remembered but also practiced, repeated, and taught in the daily routine. The material reality of this diasporic continuity is captured by Anita Mannur in her work *Culinary Nostalgia* (2010) when she writes that diasporics "make do with what was available" (p. 1) and that it is often "our mothers" who "longed for the tastes of home" while "creating new recipes along the way" (p. 2).

Together with *Honour*, this assists in understanding why Pembe maintains tradition by adapting to the culinary world, in that the kitchen serves as a cultural memory, but also holds the pain of loss. It has the ability to make or dislocate a sense of place and identity, (Mannur, p. 4) because belonging is most keenly experienced through taste, smell, and touch, and Mannur talks of an uncanny sense of belonging when the smells, tastes, and sounds of home were activated by the senses (p. 5). Meanwhile, this cultural power is not free, as the labour which maintains tradition is gendered and is usually assumed to be free. The same space she uses to pass heritage, also subjects her to service, where she must take care of the family and manage its emotions. Through this, the kitchen represents the space of cultural preservation of women and the women being locked in by the patriarchal structures, a conflict that Pembe faces with a sense of humor and determination. Her humor is a survival mechanism that makes the everyday pressures softer without giving in to them, but her determination is an indication of some silent agency. She makes the kitchen her space, but also exposes the fact that the space is socially ascribed, not an individual choice. The kitchen does not merely serve as a setting for Shafak's novel. It is the level at which patriarchal demands are replicated, bargained, and sometimes challenged by bringing the female body into the workplace.

The "Golden Raisins" and "Ashure" are the most important food items mentioned in the novel *The Bastard of Istanbul*. Both are associated with the brutal truth and the

death of Mustapha, a son who was loved and valued the most by Gulsum. Gulsum, upon learning that her son is returning from Arizona after twenty years, "she incarcerated herself in the kitchen amid the dishware, cutlery, and ingredients, cooking the favorite dishes of her favorite child" (p. 277). Gulsum's behavior reflects the deep-seated cultural preference for sons: in her household, as in many traditional families, a boy is valued above a girl. As Bourdieu notes, such domestic rituals reproduce the gendered social order, effectively casting the mother as "Other" in the service of male authority (cited in McCall, p. 848).

In preparing Mustafa's feast, Gulsum both expresses tender love and unwittingly upholds the patriarchal norm that the mother's role is to sacrifice herself for her son. The image of her surrounded by kitchenware is thus at once warm and tragic. She is invisible in her own rite of caring, confirming Mustafa's position as the family's privileged child even as she pours all her being into the ritual of his welcome. She prepares "borek-spinach and feta cheese-and simmered lentil soup, stewed lamb chops..." (p. 277) for him to comfort him with Turkish cuisine. Food as the language of love and care also indicates towards the memory that flashed in Gulsum's mind while preparing dessert as "Mustafa Kazanci had relished ashure more than any other sweet…" (p. 277).

The scene is an enactment of patriarchal preference. Mustafa is not just a returning child, but he is "the favorite child." The repetition underscores a hierarchy within the family structure. In many patriarchal societies, sons are valued as carriers of lineage, honor, and social continuity, while daughters are positioned as temporary members destined to marry. The gendered hierarchy within the Kazancı household becomes even clearer when one juxtaposes Mustafa's emotional grooming with Zeliha's emotional deprivation. Zeliha's early understanding of fatherhood is framed through absence rather than presence. The narrator mentions, "There was no father. Instead of a BA-BA there was only a VO-ID" (p. 14). The fragmentation of the word itself, BA-BA dissolving into VO-ID, reveals how language collapses under emotional lack. For Zeliha, fatherhood is not protection, authority, or affection; it is emptiness. Later, the novel ironizes the paternal figure through the acronym "DAD": not "Daddy," but "DAD—Deliberate Ache Deferment" (p. 315).

The redefinition transforms fatherhood into the postponement of pain rather than its alleviation. This irony does not merely rename the father; it exposes a paternal economy in which suffering is administered, postponed, and redistributed. "Deliberate Ache Deferment" suggests that fatherhood is no longer imagined as care, protection, or accountability, but as a calculated management of pain, delaying its arrival rather than undoing its cause. In that system, ache becomes something to be scheduled and transferred, buffered for some, and absorbed by others. The very logic of deferment implies that the pain still exists, only displaced, and the novel makes clear who bears it. While Mustafa is emotionally groomed and shielded, Zeliha grows up with "VO-ID" where "BA-BA" should be, so paternal absence and paternal strategy converge into the same outcome, a daughter forced to live the hurt that fatherhood claims to defer.

In stark contrast stands Mustafa's formative exchange with his father. When Levent Kazancı asks, "Did you ever see me cry, my son?" Mustafa shakes his head. The father continues, "Did you ever see your mom cry, my son?" Mustafa nods enthusiastically. The father smiles gently and concludes: "Now that you are a man, behave like a man" (p. 320). This brief dialogue encapsulates the transmission of patriarchal masculinity. Emotional restraint becomes the defining feature of manhood. The father saw tears as

feminized and the control as masculinized, and Mustafa is instructed to internalize silence as strength. Here, the masculinity is equated with emotional invulnerability, and femininity with visible fragility. Mustafa learns early that power lies in containment, and Zeliha learns that pain lies in silence.

Besides the void Zeliha bears in her due to less father attention, she also carries a secret in her heart. Her pain and secret, which are temporarily buried as "wounded memory writes itself intermittingly, recurrently and involuntarily often problematizing…relationships with their present and affecting deeply their sense of self-…" (Zouari, p. 22). The announcement of her brother's coming back from Arizona somehow made Zeliha devastated and helpless. It was her personal trauma and collective history intertwined through the lives of two women, her and her daughter, Asya. On "that rainless day twenty years ago" (p. 316), Mustafa enters Zeliha's room and, seeing her dressed in a miniskirt and shaved legs, fumes with anger. With the father's death, Mustafa assumes a position he believes rightfully belongs to him. He declares that, "Now that Dad is dead… I am in charge of this family" (p. 322). In this moment, brotherhood gives way to patriarchal succession.

Mustafa intrudes into Zeliha's room and questions her attire and behavior with moralistic indignation, asking her, "You have no shame… You don't know how to talk to your elders. You don't care when men whistle at you on the streets. You dress like a whore and then expect respect?" (p. 321). Zeliha, instead of remaining silent, argues back, and the argument escalates. Her refusal to lower her gaze or soften her speech destabilizes Mustafa's fragile claim to authority. His sense of masculinity is challenged when Zeliha decides not to listen to him. Michael J. Diamond, in his work *Masculinity Unraveled: The Roots of Male Gender Identity and the Shifting of Male Ego Ideals Throughout Life* (2006), unravels the "factors shaping the boy's sense of masculinity early on," is based on the parents' relationship, the father's role in the home and "the mother's recognition and affirmation of her son's maleness" (p. 1099). Diamond's emphasis on the parents' relationship and the father's position in the home means that masculinity is not formed in isolation within the boy. It is organized through a family structure that gives the boy a model of male authority and also teaches him what kind of masculinity will be recognized and rewarded. When the father is absent or emotionally unavailable, the household can quietly reinstall the son as a substitute male presence, and the mother's recognition becomes tied to his performance of male responsibility. In that case, affirmation is not simply love. It becomes a conditional approval that trains the boy to link maleness with control, entitlement, and the ability to occupy space that should not be his.

Read through Diamond, Mustafa is not just a boy growing up without a father. He is made the man of the house, and his status gives him an ego ideal which is based on dominance and not nurture. Given that his power is vested in the house, he learns that maleness is determined by commands and boundary crossing and that the acceptance of the mother may be the stamp of approval to the command. What emerges out of this is a masculinity that has to be asserted, that has to be defended through the help of power, and more so over women, and Zeliha becomes the closest body upon which this power can be exercised. The assault of Mustafa is therefore not a random act of defiance against the domestic state of affairs. It is a drastic response to a gendered script, in which the role of the father is confirmed by assuming the role of the father and making the female bodies subordinate to the male body in the family system.

Even the description of the assault is told in the form of imagery, which highlights

cruelty and alienation. Zeliha hears a voice, a shriek, "Stop!,…shrill and inhuman, like an animal in the slaughterhouse" (p. 323). The metaphor is intentional and destructive. The analogy with a slaughterhouse implies the violence and the powerlessness that are mechanical. Her scream has been said to be like it is not her own voice as she hears it outside of herself. Here, the trauma fractures subjectivity, and the body is enduring instead of an agentic site. It is even more intimate as the narration talks about Mustafa penetrating her body "as if it were an alien territory" (p. 323). At the time of her being raped by her brother, Zeliha was "nineteen years old" (p. 325). Nineteen is a border between being an adolescent and being an adult, a time of self-identification. The attack disrupts such a process. It is a physical violation, but also a discontinuity in the formation of identity. The independence that she demonstrates in the way she dresses and talks is brutally suppressed, and her newly formed vision of herself is disciplined through force.

Fletcher's *Freud and the Scene of Trauma* (2013) provides a crucial framework for understanding the structure of sexual trauma in Zeliha's life. Fletcher revisits Freud's early seduction theory and its later revisions to argue that trauma is not simply an overwhelming event fixed in the past, but a psychic structure that unfolds over time. Trauma, he explains, is organized around a "scene, the elaboration of a scenography of trauma" (p. 3), a moment that disrupts psychic continuity and resists immediate integration into consciousness. This formulation becomes especially illuminating for reading Zeliha's rape by her brother Mustafa, not only as a narrative revelation, but as a structural rupture within kinship, memory, and identity. The description of the assault bears the marks of traumatic dissociation and a splitting of subjectivity. Zeliha hears someone scream, "Stop!"—"shrill and inhuman, like an animal in a slaughterhouse" (p. 323), as though the voice were not entirely her own. Trauma fragments the subject and destabilizes the boundaries that normally guarantee psychic coherence. Fletcher describes trauma as an "alien or foreign body" (p. 127), something that interrupts the distinction between inside and outside, self and other. Shafak's language literalizes this collapse when Mustafa enters Zeliha's body "as though it were alien territory" (p. 323). The familial line between brother and sister disintegrates, and the home, supposedly a protected interior, becomes a "slaughterhouse." Incest, in this sense, is not only violence against the body but an attack on the very prohibition that structures social life, collapsing the distinction between protector and violator and puncturing the symbolic order (Stella et al., p. 68).

Zeliha's life after the assault is not a stable "aftermath" but an ongoing psychic structure organized by repeated scenes, a pattern Fletcher reads through repetition and the uncanny. In this context, Freud's intervention becomes relevant because he shifted his emphasis from establishing the reality of sexual trauma to the question of trauma's inscription. How such events become lodged in psychic life and return in displaced forms. This shift is essential for reading Zeliha's rape not as a past episode but as an ongoing structure of silence, denial, and repetition. The incest is not erased, but repressed and displaced. Zeliha is asked to "say nothing, remember nothing, reveal nothing, not to them, not to yourself…." (p. 287). The Kazancı family enacts what Fletcher describes as defensive mechanisms that attempt to contain trauma through denial and displacement (p. 67–68). Gulsum (Zeliha's mother) redirects shame onto Zeliha and labels her a "whore," and Asya (Zeliha's daughter) is labeled a "bastard," while Mustafa is protected and exempt from the stigma. These labels operate as mechanisms of symbolic reorganization: by attributing shame to the female body, the

family preserves patriarchal coherence and keeps the traumatic structure from being acknowledged as what it is. In Fletcher's terms, this is precisely how trauma returns "in disguised or displaced form" (p. 212–213). The displaced form that the novel foregrounds is Asya's illegitimacy. Asya grows up under the weight of a secret and is labeled a "bastard"; she inhabits a stigma detached from its origin. This is where trauma becomes intergenerational, transmitted not through open narration but through silence, repetition, and the emotional atmosphere of the household. Fletcher notes that Freud's thinking is reformulated first through "the return of the repressed" and later through "repetition-compulsion" (p. 22), because trauma persists not because it is consciously remembered, but because it organizes psychic life in indirect ways.

Asya's identity crisis is shaped by this structure. Her "fatherlessness" is not only a biological absence; it is the symptom of repressed incest. Asya called her mother "aunt" and never knew about her father until her aunt (Zeliha) disclosed to her that the person lying dead in front of her was her father, whom she knew as her uncle. Asya goes into denial, "I don't believe you" (p. 360), and her whole life splashes in front of her as she sits thinking, "Her uncle … her father … her uncle … her father…. Her aunt … her mother … her aunt … her mother…." (p. 361). The trauma Zeliha went through now becomes Asya's nightmare: it does not remain confined to Zeliha's body, but circulates through domestic space and kinship arrangements.

In the 1895-97 texts of Freud, the traumatic causality is further complicated with *Nachtraglichkeit*, which can be translated as deferred action/afterwardsness or belatedness (p. 4). The main thing is that trauma is not felt in the initial shock, but it becomes traumatic over time, in the successive moment, which retroactively reconfigures the previous scene. This is the reason why Fletcher keeps on insisting that a trauma is usually accompanied by more than two scenes in order to constitute a trauma, and the time interval between these scenes (not the sheer force of one event) (p. 126). In *BOI*, the rape during a rainless day twenty years ago is the first scene. The second scene comes when Mustafa comes back from America after twenty years. His reappearance is a reinstatement of the repressed, and the past, pushed deep down, is reinstated. The return does not merely revive a memory, but it also opens up the wound and restructures meaning in the present.

Mustafa's return also crystallizes the novel's portrayal of incest as a corruption of patriarchal authority. His declaration, "now that Dad is dead… I am in charge of this family" (p. 322), signals an attempted transfer of the father's symbolic position to the son, but that transfer is contaminated by the very violence it conceals. The brother becomes a rapist, the uncle becomes a father, and authority becomes abusive. The abusive use of power breaks down the cycle of social order: "Trauma becomes not just a memory of a past event but a structural hole in the symbolic order" (Stella et al., p. 68). Zeliha's life after the assault is not a stable aftermath but an ongoing psychic structure, shaped by repetition and the uncanny, where experience returns in recurring scenes rather than resolving into closure. As Masson puts it, "everything goes back to the reproduction of scenes" (cited in Fletcher, p. 1). This insistence on scenic return links to Freud's early etiological thinking, where hysteria is understood through an "etiological formula of traumatic scene plus auxiliary scenes (+) [that] analyzes the hysteria into the original traumatic scene…" (p. 46). The original scene is not self-contained, but it remains active through the auxiliary scenes that follow, later moments that echo, reactivate, and translate the first shock into lived psychic patterns.

As Freud puts it, "[t]he retention of the past is the rule, rather than a surprising

exception" (p. 7). In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, he 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" (p. 7). This is also where the Freudian logic of two scenes becomes more than a general concept and begins to map directly onto Shafak's plot. Zeliha first passes through the traumatic scene itself, the rape, but the trauma does not end with that event. It persists because it is forced into silence and therefore returns indirectly, structured by auxiliary repetitions. The first auxiliary scene is not a single dramatic episode but the daily presence of Asya. The child born of incest becomes a living, unavoidable remainder of what cannot be spoken. Each day, Zeliha confronts a material trace of the traumatic scene without being allowed to name it.

Fletcher's emphasis on repetition-compulsion sharpens the mechanism here. Hertz, as Fletcher cites him, stresses that Freud shifts attention away from what is being repeated to the sheer fact of repetition itself, an "autonomous… daemonic inner compulsion-to-repeat" operating independently of content (cited in Fletcher, p. 319). Hertz's longer formulation makes the point even more explicitly:

Freud's conclusion… shifts the emphasis away from the content that is being repeated, with its combination of the alien and the déjà vu, to the sheer fact of repetition itself. The uncanny feeling proceeds not from the return of the once familiar but no longer recognized in itself but from what that repetition testifies to: the activity of an autonomous— daemonic inner compulsion- to- repeat independent of the content of what is repeated. (p. 319)

In Zeliha's case, this "daemonic" autonomy appears in how she organizes intimacy. To protect Asya from the horrific truth of her paternity, she maintains emotional distance. She refuses to let Asya get too close, to know her father, or even to accompany the family to the airport, because closeness threatens disclosure. The harder Zeliha tries to assert control as a strong, independent woman, the more her life is structured by repetition, as though the past were directing her from within. This paradox is also visible in how the novel encodes her emotional style, as in, "Zeliha's chaotic universe, there might be dead birds, but certainly not tenderness and despondency" (p. 8). A second auxiliary scene arrives in concentrated form when Mustafa returns after twenty years. If Asya is the everyday, prolonged auxiliary repetition of the traumatic scene, Mustafa's reappearance is the sudden, belated trigger that intensifies it. His return does not merely "bring back" memory, but it forces the past into the present and compels a retroactive reorganization of meaning. The brother's body returning to the domestic space makes the trauma structurally unavoidable, revealing how the "original scene" has never stopped operating, only changed its form: first through the living remainder of Asya, and later through the return of the perpetrator who embodies the repressed truth.

Viewed through the prism of Fletcher, the incest plot of Shafak, consequently, does not fit into one episode or one confession. It is performed as an event and structure: a preliminary scene which splintered subjectivity and kinship, a long period of repression and displacement, and a delayed second scene which reinstates meaning and reinstates repetition to visibility. The novel shows that trauma does not fade away due to the fact that it is vividly remembered, but rather it is not adequately addressed, and it is redirected, renounced, and set to flow through stigmas that are placed on the bodies of women. The theoretical insights given by Fletcher are useful in explaining how the rape of Zeliha is transformed into a scenography, which is resonant across generations and disrupts kinship and identity in a manner that is not fully legible until retrospectively.

"Is it ever going to come to an end?" (p. 287). Zeliha's question shows the slow endurance of trauma in a life structured by silence. Her suffering is not confined to the original assault, but extends across years in which the family refuses to acknowledge what happened and instead demands forgetting. In such a context, pain cannot be resolved because it is never permitted a truthful language. Shafak answers Zeliha's question with harsh irony. The "end" arrives, not through recognition or repair, but through Mustafa's death, and it arrives through an object that ought to signify comfort and continuity: ashure.

The novel establishes ashure as a deeply symbolic food long before it becomes connected to death. We are told that "Mustafa Kazanci had relished ashure more than any other sweet" (p. 277). In the same passage, ashure is described as "the symbol of continuity and stability, the epitome of the good days to come after each storm, no matter how frightening the storm had been" (p. 277). Ashure, therefore, represents more than taste or habit. It becomes a condensed sign of familial reassurance, a reminder that life can return to order after chaos. It is associated with endurance, domestic ritual, and the promise that stormy times do not last forever. Within this symbolic register, ashure functions as an edible metaphor for recovery and future calm.

Shafak turns a symbol of stability into the vehicle of catastrophe. The intimacy of the setting intensifies the reversal. "Beside his side of the bed there was a bowl of ashure waiting for him" (p. 343). The scene is quiet and domestic, offering the impression of care. A bowl placed near the bed suggests nourishment, attention, and the ordinary kindness of family life. Yet when Mustafa eats ashure laced with potassium cyanide, the familiar comfort of the dessert becomes lethal. The symbolic promise that ashure carries is inverted. The food that was meant to embody continuity becomes the means by which continuity is violently interrupted. After Mustafa's death, the novel draws attention to the grim transformation of domestic labour into a morning ritual. "Poor Mama is devastated. Who would have thought all the ashure she had cooked for Mustafa would be served to his mourners?" Auntie Cevriye said, standing near the stove (p. 355). The line exposes the cruel circularity of the household. Ashure, once cooked to please Mustafa, becomes what is distributed to those who gather because Mustafa is gone.

Shafak explicitly reveals the logic of the whole narrative when she observes that "family stories intermingle in such ways that what happened generations ago can have an impact on seemingly irrelevant developments of the present day. The past is anything but bygone" (p. 364). The fact that Mustafa likes dessert may not seem to be relevant on the moral or psychological front, but the narrative avers that there is really nothing in the family life that is not connected to what has been repressed. The history is not imprinted in the secret memory. It passes through the objects, rituals, and gestures. Ashure is the most vivid example of this mixing up since it contains innocence of childhood, continuation of culture, and nurturing in the house, yet it also turns out to be the channel where the repressed violence of incest is finally yielded with a conclusive result.

In this light, Zeliha's question is answered in a way that is both ironic and unsettling. The pain "ends" when Mustafa dies, but that ending does not provide healing or symbolic repair. It offers closure only in the narrow sense that the perpetrator is removed from the domestic space. Shafak's use of ashure intensifies the ethical complexity of that closure. A dessert associated with "the good days to come after each storm" (p. 277) becomes the scene through which the storm is revealed as still present.

The past is not bygone (p. 364). It survives inside the ordinary sweetness of family ritual, and it can transform continuity itself into an instrument of finality.

Although the gendered stigma that the Kazanci family deals with is transferred onto Zeliha and Asya, as they are the ones who become whores, bastards, and fatherless children, Shafak also extends the question of identity that the novel raises by bringing in another character of estrangement, Armanoush. When the crisis of Asya is created by some hidden genealogy and domestic regime of silence, the crisis of Armanoush is created by another but similar framework, the instability of belonging in a multicultural life. Being the Armenian- American cousin that comes to Istanbul already with the inherited histories, she finds herself in the liminal realm where identity is perceived as torn between the nations, languages, and shared memories.

Conclusion

In this paper, it has been contended that in *The Bastard of Istanbul,* the food, the female body, and trauma are closely interwoven registers in which the individual pain connects with the disputed collective histories. Throughout the novel, the bodies of women become living archives in which silence, shame, and inherited injury are stored and passed down, and the culinary practices are viewed as a parallel language of memory, which functions through the senses, repetition, and domestic rite. Through foregrounding kitchens, tables, recipes, and mundane feeding practices, Shafak transforms the everyday food work into a cultural memory space and a gendered battlefield, showing that ancestry is transmitted not just through the story but also through taste, appetite, and bodily feelings. At the same time, the narrative exposes the violence that structures domestic space, particularly through sexual trauma managed by secrecy and social regulation, thereby showing how patriarchal power polices women's bodies by controlling what can be spoken and what must remain hidden. Read together, the novel's politics of remembrance and its portrayal of gendered violence demonstrate that trauma is never purely individual, and that denial produces further harm by interrupting acknowledgment and repair. Ultimately, Shafak's text suggests that survival is negotiated in the smallest rituals as much as in public declarations. Food can reproduce cultural scripts and silence, but it can also become testimony, offering fragile possibilities of connection, recognition, and resistance. Through this lens, *The Bastard of Istanbul* reveals the kitchen as a crucial site where embodied histories persist, where intergenerational wounds surface, and where women continuously renegotiate belonging in the aftertaste of ancestry.

More specifically, Shafak distributes this struggle for identity across Zeliha, Asya, and Armanoush, showing how each carries trauma differently and searches for a livable story of self. Zeliha's identity is forged in open defiance of respectability, yet her body remains the primary surface on which family honor is inscribed and policed, making her agency inseparable from social punishment and enforced silence. Asya inhabits a more intimate, interior uncertainty, raised within a household saturated with unnamed histories; she experiences identity as a void structured by what cannot be spoken, and her restlessness reflects the psychic cost of inherited secrecy. Armanoush, by contrast, arrives in Istanbul with a diasporic consciousness shaped by the afterlife of 1915, and her search for roots reveals how cultural belonging can be both urgent and unstable when the past is denied or contested. Together, these women dramatize three interlinked modes of bearing trauma: the embodied stigma attached to female autonomy, the domestic amnesia that produces hollow belonging, and the diasporic inheritance of

collective catastrophe. Their encounters, often mediated through food and family space, show that identity is not discovered as an origin but negotiated through conflict, memory work, and the difficult labor of naming what has been suppressed.

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