

Remembering the Unspoken: Memory, Trauma, and Cultural Identity in Elif Shafak's Fiction

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Abstract—Memory occupies a central position in Elif Shafak's fiction, where individual recollections frequently intersect with collective histories, cultural identities, political violence, displacement, and inherited trauma. Her novels demonstrate that remembering is not merely an act of recovering the past but also a process through which individuals and communities negotiate identity. This article examines the representation of memory, trauma, and cultural identity in Shafak's *The Bastard of Istanbul* (2007), *The Forty Rules of Love* (2009), and *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World* (2019). Drawing upon trauma studies, memory studies, and cultural theories of identity, the article argues that Shafak uses fragmented memories, silenced histories, storytelling, food, objects, family narratives, and marginalized voices to reveal the persistence of the past in the present. Her fiction particularly emphasizes the relationship between personal trauma and cultural memory, demonstrating how experiences that remain unspoken can nevertheless shape subsequent generations. In *The Bastard of Istanbul*, the Armenian-Turkish historical conflict becomes an unresolved memory transmitted through family relationships. *The Forty Rules of Love* connects spiritual transformation with the recovery of suppressed emotional histories, while *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World* presents memory as an act of resistance through which a marginalized woman reconstructs her life after death. Across these works, Shafak challenges official histories and creates alternative spaces where forgotten and silenced experiences can be remembered. Her fiction ultimately suggests that confronting painful memories is essential to constructing a more inclusive cultural identity.

Index Terms—Elif Shafak, Memory, Trauma, Cultural Identity, Collective Memory.

I. INTRODUCTION

Memory is one of the most powerful mechanisms through which individuals understand themselves and

their relationship with the world. It connects the present with the past while simultaneously determining how personal and collective identities are constructed. In literature, memory often becomes particularly significant when characters experience displacement, violence, cultural conflict, or historical trauma. Remembering can then become an act of survival, while forgetting can function as a mechanism of repression. Elif Shafak's fiction repeatedly explores this complex relationship between remembering and forgetting. Her novels move between personal narratives and larger cultural histories, demonstrating that individual lives cannot always be separated from the political and historical experiences of the communities to which they belong.

Shafak is one of the most prominent contemporary Turkish-British writers whose fiction crosses geographical, linguistic, cultural, and historical boundaries. Her works frequently examine questions of belonging, migration, gender, religion, cultural conflict, and historical memory. Rather than presenting identity as stable or singular, Shafak constructs characters whose identities are shaped by multiple cultural inheritances. Her narratives often bring suppressed histories into conversation with contemporary experiences. As a result, the past does not remain confined to historical events; it enters family relationships, personal memories, cultural practices, and everyday life.

This relationship between memory and identity is particularly visible in *The Bastard of Istanbul*, *The Forty Rules of Love*, and *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World*. Although these novels differ in setting, narrative technique, and thematic emphasis, all three demonstrate the persistence of the past within the present. *The Bastard of Istanbul* examines the complicated relationship between Turkish and Armenian histories through two families connected by

secrets and inherited memories. *The Forty Rules of Love* brings together historical and contemporary narratives, using the relationship between Rumi and Shams of Tabriz to examine spiritual transformation, love, and the recovery of suppressed desires. *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World* focuses on Leila, whose memories continue to unfold during the final minutes of her life, allowing her forgotten experiences and relationships to challenge the social invisibility imposed upon her.

The present article argues that Shafak uses memory not simply as a narrative device but as a form of cultural resistance. Her characters remember what official histories, families, societies, and institutions attempt to suppress. Their memories create alternative archives in which marginalized experiences can survive. Trauma in Shafak's fiction is therefore both individual and collective. It can be experienced by one person but transmitted through families, communities, stories, silences, and cultural practices. Through this intersection of personal and collective memory, Shafak demonstrates that cultural identity is continually reconstructed through the negotiation between what is remembered and what is forgotten.

II. MEMORY, TRAUMA, AND CULTURAL IDENTITY: A THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

Trauma studies provides an important theoretical framework for understanding Shafak's treatment of memory. Cathy Caruth explains trauma as an experience that cannot always be completely understood at the moment when it occurs. According to Caruth, trauma involves an encounter with an overwhelming event that returns belatedly through memory and repetition. She describes trauma as an experience that is "not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again" (Caruth 4). This understanding is particularly relevant to Shafak's fiction because traumatic histories frequently return indirectly. Characters may not consciously remember particular events, yet they remain affected by them through family stories, silences, inherited attitudes, and cultural practices.

Marianne Hirsch's concept of "postmemory" is also useful in examining Shafak's representation of inherited trauma. Hirsch explains that postmemory concerns the relationship of the "generation after" to experiences that preceded their birth but nevertheless

became part of their own identities (Hirsch 5). Such memories are not necessarily based on direct experience. Instead, they are transmitted through photographs, stories, family narratives, objects, and emotional relationships. In Shafak's *The Bastard of Istanbul*, younger characters inherit unresolved historical tensions that they did not personally experience. Their identities are therefore shaped by memories belonging partly to previous generations.

Cultural memory further expands the understanding of Shafak's fiction. Jan Assmann distinguishes between individual memory and cultural forms of remembrance through which societies preserve particular versions of their past. Cultural memory is maintained through texts, rituals, symbols, traditions, monuments, and narratives. Shafak's novels similarly demonstrate that memory is preserved not only in individual consciousness but also through everyday cultural practices. Food, music, names, family traditions, religious stories, and urban spaces become repositories of cultural memory.

The relationship between memory and identity is also central to Stuart Hall's conception of cultural identity. Hall argues that cultural identity is not a fixed essence but a process of becoming shaped by historical positioning and representation. He writes that cultural identities are formed through "the points of identification" available within historical and cultural narratives (Hall 226). Shafak's characters inhabit precisely such spaces of negotiation. They are often positioned between different cultures, generations, religions, languages, or national histories. Their identities emerge through their attempts to reconcile these competing memories.

III. MEMORY AND INHERITED TRAUMA IN *THE BASTARD OF ISTANBUL*

The Bastard of Istanbul is perhaps Shafak's most direct engagement with historical memory and inherited trauma. The novel revolves around the Kazancı family in Istanbul and the Armenian-American Tchakhmakhchian family. The relationship between Asya Kazancı and Armanoush Tchakhmakhchian gradually reveals the hidden connections between the two families. Through this narrative structure, Shafak demonstrates how political histories enter private family life.

One of the most significant aspects of the novel is its treatment of silence. The history separating Turks and Armenians is not simply presented as a historical subject; it becomes a presence within family relationships. The characters inherit a history that has not been adequately articulated. This silence creates a form of cultural trauma because the past continues to influence the present even when it remains unspoken. The novel's title itself is significant. The word "bastard" refers not only to Asya's uncertain parentage but also metaphorically to histories and identities that are considered illegitimate or inconvenient. Asya's identity is initially structured around uncertainty, while the historical identity of the community is similarly fragmented. Her personal search for belonging therefore parallels a broader cultural struggle over historical recognition. Armanoush's journey to Istanbul represents a search for cultural memory. Although she has not personally experienced the historical violence that shaped her Armenian family, she carries its emotional consequences. Her understanding of Armenian identity is constructed through stories inherited from older generations. This is an example of Hirsch's postmemory because the past becomes emotionally present even though it was not directly experienced.

Shafak also uses food as a medium of memory. The novel's frequent attention to Turkish and Armenian food traditions illustrates how cultural memories can survive through ordinary practices. Food becomes an alternative archive, preserving connections that official histories may attempt to separate. The kitchen, therefore, functions as a cultural space where memory is transmitted from one generation to another. The novel's emphasis on women is equally important. Much of the family history is preserved through female characters who transmit stories, recipes, beliefs, secrets, and memories. The women's domestic spaces become repositories of cultural knowledge. In this sense, Shafak challenges traditional historical narratives that privilege political leaders and public events. She instead presents the private lives of women as important sites of historical memory.

The relationship between Asya and Armanoush demonstrates the possibility of confronting inherited trauma through dialogue. Their friendship creates a space in which different memories can encounter one another. Neither character possesses a complete understanding of history, but their relationship allows

them to recognize that identity is shaped by stories inherited from others. Thus, *The Bastard of Istanbul* presents memory as both a burden and a possibility. Inherited trauma can create division, but remembering and communicating across cultural boundaries can also create new forms of understanding.

IV. SPIRITUAL MEMORY AND THE RECOVERY OF THE SELF IN *THE FORTY RULES OF LOVE*

While *The Bastard of Istanbul* concentrates on historical and cultural trauma, *The Forty Rules of Love* approaches memory through spirituality, love, and transformation. The novel contains two interconnected narratives: the contemporary story of Ella Rubinstein and the historical story of Jalaluddin Rumi and Shams of Tabriz. By placing these narratives alongside one another, Shafak demonstrates how memories and stories from the past can transform individuals in the present.

Ella begins the novel as a woman trapped within the routines of marriage, motherhood, and domestic expectation. Her life appears stable, but internally she experiences emotional dissatisfaction. Her encounter with Aziz Zahara's manuscript, *Sweet Blasphemy*, initiates a process of self-discovery. Through the story of Rumi and Shams, Ella begins to reconsider the assumptions that have governed her life. The novel therefore presents reading itself as an encounter with memory. Ella does not merely read a historical narrative; she allows the past to enter her consciousness and transform her understanding of the present. Rumi and Shams become figures through whom she recognizes possibilities that had been suppressed in her own life.

Shams's spiritual philosophy challenges rigid divisions between religious, cultural, and social identities. One of the novel's recurring principles is that love can become a force capable of transforming the self. The famous rule associated with Shams states, "The words we speak are not important. What matters is the intention behind them" (Shafak, *Forty Rules*). The statement emphasizes the importance of inner meaning rather than external appearances. The novel also demonstrates that memory can operate beyond historical accuracy. Shafak's recreation of Rumi and Shams is not simply an attempt to reproduce the past. Instead, the historical narrative becomes a creative space through which contemporary characters

interpret their own experiences. Memory therefore becomes dialogic: the past changes the present, but the present also changes how the past is understood.

Ella's transformation illustrates this process. Through the historical narrative, she discovers suppressed aspects of herself. Her memories of marriage, motherhood, loneliness, and emotional disappointment acquire new meaning. What previously appeared to be an ordinary domestic life becomes evidence of a self that has been gradually silenced. The novel consequently connects cultural memory with personal emancipation. The recovery of forgotten or suppressed desires becomes part of the recovery of identity. Shafak suggests that individuals can inherit cultural narratives but can also reinterpret them. Memory does not necessarily imprison the individual; when critically examined, it can become a source of liberation.

V. MEMORY AS RESISTANCE IN *10 MINUTES 38 SECONDS IN THIS STRANGE WORLD*

In *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World*, Shafak develops an innovative narrative structure based entirely on memory. The protagonist, Tequila Leila, is murdered at the beginning of the novel. Yet her brain continues to function for a short period after her death. During these final minutes, memories from her life return to consciousness. This structure transforms memory into a form of resistance against erasure. Leila has been marginalized during her lifetime, and even in death society risks reducing her existence to the circumstances of her murder. Her memories challenge this reduction by reconstructing the complex person behind the label of a murdered woman.

The opening of the novel immediately establishes the relationship between death and memory: "Leila's heart stopped beating at 10:28 a.m." (Shafak, *10 Minutes*). Although her physical life has ended, her consciousness continues to revisit the experiences that shaped her identity. The narrative thus reverses the conventional relationship between life and memory. Instead of memory merely preserving the past for the living, memory becomes the means through which the dead speak. Leila's memories are sensory and fragmented. Taste, smell, sound, touch, and bodily experience trigger recollections of her childhood, migration, violence, friendship, love, and loss. These

sensory memories demonstrate the embodied nature of trauma. Her past is not organized as a simple chronological history but returns through emotional and sensory associations.

The novel also challenges the invisibility of marginalized women. Leila's life involves experiences of gender violence, displacement, poverty, and social exclusion. Yet Shafak refuses to define her solely through victimhood. Her memories reveal humor, desire, friendship, intelligence, and emotional complexity. Memory therefore becomes a mechanism through which the subjectivity of a marginalized woman is restored. The five friends who remain connected to Leila after her death further demonstrate the relationship between memory and community. Their friendship creates an alternative family based not on biological inheritance but on shared experience. Their memories of Leila preserve her existence beyond institutional recognition.

The novel's treatment of Istanbul is also important. The city functions as a cultural archive. Its streets, food, neighborhoods, sounds, and social spaces become intertwined with Leila's memories. Istanbul is not merely a geographical setting; it becomes part of the protagonist's identity. The novel therefore suggests that cultural identity is constructed through accumulated experiences of place. To remember Istanbul is, for Leila, to remember herself. The city becomes a repository of both personal and collective memory.

VI. SILENCE, FORGETTING, AND THE POLITICS OF MEMORY

A recurring concern in Shafak's fiction is the politics of forgetting. Forgetting is not always natural or accidental. Sometimes it is produced by social institutions, families, governments, and cultural conventions. What a society remembers often determines which identities and experiences are considered legitimate. In *The Bastard of Istanbul*, historical silence creates tension between generations. The younger characters must negotiate memories they did not personally experience but cannot escape. The novel suggests that silence does not eliminate trauma. Instead, it transfers trauma into other forms.

In *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World*, social marginalization produces another form of forgetting. Leila's life could easily disappear from public memory

because she belongs to a socially excluded community. Shafak counters this erasure by giving her an extensive interior life. Similarly, *The Forty Rules of Love* challenges restrictive cultural and social assumptions by presenting alternative understandings of spirituality, love, and identity. The historical narrative becomes a means of remembering possibilities that dominant social structures have suppressed. Shafak's fiction consequently distinguishes between forgetting and healing. Forgetting painful history may appear to offer relief, but it can also reproduce injustice. Healing requires confronting what has been suppressed. This does not mean remaining permanently trapped in the past. Instead, remembering allows individuals and communities to reinterpret the past and construct new relationships with it.

VII. WOMEN AS CUSTODIANS OF CULTURAL MEMORY

Gender is central to Shafak's representation of memory. Her women characters frequently become custodians of memories that official historical narratives ignore. Through mothers, grandmothers, daughters, friends, and storytellers, cultural knowledge travels between generations. This emphasis challenges conventional historical discourse. Traditional histories often privilege wars, political leaders, treaties, and institutions. Shafak's fiction instead demonstrates that history also survives through domestic and emotional spaces.

Women preserve cultural memory through recipes, stories, names, photographs, rituals, and interpersonal relationships. These practices may appear insignificant from the perspective of official history, but they become crucial to the preservation of identity. In *The Bastard of Istanbul*, family memory is transmitted largely through women. Their domestic spaces become archives in which the past remains alive. In *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World*, friendship performs a similar function. Leila's friends refuse to allow her life to disappear after her death. Shafak therefore transforms memory into a feminist literary practice. By recovering the voices of women whose experiences have been marginalized, she expands the definition of what constitutes history.

VIII. CULTURAL IDENTITY AND THE EXPERIENCE OF BELONGING

Shafak's characters frequently inhabit spaces between cultures. They may be Turkish and Western, religious and secular, migrant and native, traditional and modern. Their identities cannot be reduced to a single category. This hybridity reflects Hall's understanding of identity as an ongoing process. Shafak's characters become who they are through encounters with different histories and cultural narratives. Memory plays a crucial role in this process because individuals must determine which memories they inherit, reject, reinterpret, or preserve.

In *The Bastard of Istanbul*, Asya and Armanoush represent different cultural histories but discover points of connection. Their friendship suggests that cultural identity need not be constructed through absolute opposition. Shared experiences can create alternative forms of belonging. In *The Forty Rules of Love*, Ella discovers that identity can change through encounters with unfamiliar ideas. Her engagement with Rumi and Shams enables her to question the identity that her social environment has constructed for her.

In *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World*, Leila's identity is shaped by her movement across geographical and social spaces. Her memories preserve the different stages of her life, demonstrating that identity is cumulative rather than singular. Shafak thus presents cultural identity as a process of remembering, forgetting, negotiating, and reconstructing. The self is not an isolated entity but a product of relationships with people, places, histories, and narratives.

IX. STORYTELLING AS AN ALTERNATIVE ARCHIVE

Storytelling is perhaps the most important technique through which Shafak preserves memory. Her novels repeatedly demonstrate that stories can challenge official versions of history. When an experience has been excluded from public discourse, storytelling can provide an alternative archive. This is particularly significant in relation to trauma. Traumatic experiences may resist direct representation, but they can emerge through fragmented narratives, metaphors, family stories, dreams, objects, and sensory memories.

Shafak's narrative structures themselves reflect this understanding. *The Bastard of Istanbul* combines multiple family histories; *The Forty Rules of Love* interweaves historical and contemporary narratives; and *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World* reconstructs an entire life through fragments of memory. These structures challenge linear understandings of history. The past does not always appear in chronological order because memory itself is non-linear. A smell may evoke childhood; a song may recall a lost relationship; a place may revive a traumatic event. Shafak reproduces this associative quality in her fiction. Storytelling therefore becomes an ethical practice. To tell a forgotten story is to acknowledge the existence of those who have been excluded from dominant narratives. Shafak's fiction gives literary form to this act of remembrance.

X. CONCLUSION

Elif Shafak's fiction demonstrates that memory is inseparable from trauma, identity, gender, and cultural belonging. In *The Bastard of Istanbul*, inherited historical trauma shapes family relationships and cultural identities. In *The Forty Rules of Love*, engagement with historical and spiritual narratives enables a contemporary woman to recover a suppressed sense of self. In *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World*, memory becomes an act of resistance through which a marginalized woman reconstructs her life after death. Despite their different narrative structures, the three novels share a fundamental concern with the consequences of remembering and forgetting.

Shafak's treatment of memory is particularly significant because she refuses to regard the past as something completed. Historical events continue to exist through their effects on later generations. Trauma can be inherited through silence, stories, family relationships, cultural practices, and emotional responses. At the same time, memory can provide the possibility of healing when individuals are willing to confront suppressed histories.

Her fiction also reveals the political significance of remembering. What societies choose to remember determines whose experiences become part of collective identity. By giving literary space to women, migrants, minorities, outsiders, and culturally displaced individuals, Shafak challenges dominant

historical narratives and constructs alternative forms of cultural memory.

Shafak's novels suggest that identity is created through an ongoing conversation between memory and the present. Remembering does not simply reproduce the past; it allows individuals to reinterpret it. The unspoken therefore possesses enormous power in her fiction. Silenced memories continue to shape individuals and communities until they are acknowledged and articulated. Through storytelling, Shafak transforms those silences into voices and those fragmented memories into narratives of survival. Her fiction consequently demonstrates that remembering is not merely an act of looking backward but a means of imagining a more inclusive future.

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