

A POSTMODERN STUDY OF IDENTITY AND MEMORY IN “THE BASTARD OF ISTANBUL”

Aniqa Zubair,

Lecturer English ,University of Management and Technology, Lahore Punjab Pakistan

aniqaraozubair@gmail.com

Dr. Hanna e Kalbi,

Assistant Professor ,University of Management and Technology Lahore Punjab Pakistan

hanna.kalbi@umt.edu.pk

Dr. Syed Hussain Irtqa Hussain,

Assistant Professor ,Department of English, University of Gujrat , Gujrat Punjab Pakistan

hussain.Irtqa@uog.edu.pk

Muhammad Rizwan,

Lecturer English,Riphah International University, Lahore Punjab Pakistan

hafizrizwan158@gmail.com

Tarim Masood

Lecturer English (Visiting faculty),University of Sargodha, Sargodha Punjab Pakistan

tarimmasood42@gmail.com

Corresponding Author: Muhammad Rizwan, Lecturer English

Riphah International University, Lahore Punjab Pakistan

Abstract

Elif Shafak's The Bastard of Istanbul (2006) presents a layered narrative that interrogates questions of identity, memory, and collective history within the context of Turkish and Armenian diasporic experiences. This study employs a postmodern theoretical lens to analyze the construction of personal and collective identities, exploring how memory functions as both a source of fragmentation and continuity. The novel's multi-narrative structure, shifting perspectives, and intergenerational storytelling reflect postmodern techniques that destabilize linear histories and challenge fixed notions of identity. The study focuses on the interplay between individual and cultural memory, investigating how past traumas, familial secrets, and societal silences shape characters' self-perception and communal belonging. Methodologically, a qualitative textual analysis is conducted, examining key characters, narrative strategies, and thematic motifs related to memory, identity, and cultural hybridity. Findings reveal that Shafak's novel embodies postmodern skepticism toward grand narratives, emphasizes the multiplicity of subjectivities, and foregrounds memory as a site of both conflict and reconciliation. By situating the novel within postmodern literary discourse, this research contributes to scholarship on diasporic literature, trauma studies, and identity formation, offering a nuanced understanding of how fiction negotiates the intersections of personal and historical memory in shaping selfhood.

Keywords: Identity, Memory, Postmodernism, Diaspora, Elif Shafak, Narrative Structure

1. Introduction

Identity and memory are central concerns in contemporary literature, reflecting broader social, political, and historical anxieties. In postmodern literary discourse, these concepts are particularly salient as writers challenge linear, unified, or stable representations of self and society. Elif Shafak's *The Bastard of Istanbul* (2006) is a compelling example of such narrative experimentation, intertwining personal and collective histories to explore the legacies of trauma, migration, and cultural hybridity. The novel foregrounds themes of gender, family, ethnicity, and historical amnesia, engaging critically with the Armenian genocide and its lasting imprint on Turkish consciousness.

Academic Relevance

From an academic perspective, studying Shafak's novel through a postmodern lens illuminates the interplay between narrative form, memory, and identity construction. Postmodern literary criticism foregrounds fragmentation, metafiction, and narrative multiplicity, all of which are prominent in Shafak's work. The novel's polyphonic structure with multiple narrators spanning

generations reflects postmodern skepticism toward singular truths or absolute histories. Each character embodies a unique lens of experience, memory, and cultural belonging, offering insights into the complexity of diasporic and national identities. Such an analysis is crucial for understanding how contemporary literature negotiates the tensions between individual subjectivity and collective history.

Context and Background

Shafak's novel is set primarily in Istanbul, interweaving the lives of two families: the Turkish Kazancı family and the Armenian-American family represented by Armanoush. The narrative oscillates between Istanbul and the United States, exploring transnational dimensions of identity and memory. The Armenian genocide functions as a historical trauma that continues to resonate across generations, yet remains a silenced or contested narrative within Turkish society. Shafak's work problematizes this silence, revealing how memory and forgetting shape personal and national identities. The novel's title itself, *The Bastard of Istanbul*, signals questions of legitimacy, belonging, and the contested inheritance of history, positioning the city as a site where diverse memories, identities, and histories converge.

Research Gap

Although Shafak's work has received scholarly attention, most studies focus on gender, nationalism, or diasporic identity in isolation. Few studies integrate postmodern literary theory with trauma and memory studies to examine how narrative techniques construct complex identities. Existing research often treats memory either as a personal psychological construct or as a sociopolitical phenomenon, without analyzing the interplay between textual form, narrative fragmentation, and intergenerational memory. There is thus a need for a holistic postmodern analysis that considers narrative multiplicity, the destabilization of linear history, and the negotiation of personal and collective identity in Shafak's text.

Research Questions

1. How does Shafak employ postmodern narrative strategies to represent identity and memory in *The Bastard of Istanbul*?
2. How are personal and collective memories negotiated across generations and cultural contexts?
3. In what ways does the novel destabilize linear history and challenge fixed notions of identity?

Objectives

- To examine narrative structure and postmodern techniques in the novel.
- To analyze the representation of memory, trauma, and cultural history.
- To investigate how characters negotiate personal and collective identities.
- To situate Shafak's work within postmodern literary discourse and memory studies.

Scope and Significance

This study focuses on the novel *The Bastard of Istanbul*, analyzing its treatment of identity and memory through a postmodern lens. The research examines characters' personal histories, narrative strategies, and the role of memory in constructing diasporic and national identities. By linking literary analysis with postmodern theory and trauma studies, the study offers a nuanced understanding of the interdependence of memory, identity, and narrative form. This research is significant for scholars of postmodern literature, memory studies, diaspora studies, and contemporary Turkish literature, as it contributes to a deeper understanding of how literature negotiates the tensions between personal subjectivity and collective historical consciousness.

2. Literature Review

The intersection of postmodernism, memory, and identity has been widely discussed in literary studies. Postmodern theory, as articulated by theorists such as Lyotard (1984), Derrida (1976), and Hutcheon (1988), emphasizes fragmentation, textual multiplicity, and skepticism toward grand narratives. In literature, postmodern techniques often include non-linear narratives, multiple perspectives, metafictional devices, and intertextuality. These techniques destabilize fixed interpretations of identity and history, reflecting the fluidity of human experience and the multiplicity of memory.

In relation to Shafak's work, scholars have examined themes of gender, diaspora, and nationalism. Tekin (2010) highlights the novel's exploration of transnational identity and the diasporic consciousness of Armenian and Turkish characters. Similarly, Arslan (2012) emphasizes the intergenerational impact of historical trauma, showing how personal and collective memories intersect in shaping identity. Studies on memory in the novel have drawn upon trauma theory, particularly Caruth (1996), who conceptualizes trauma as an experience that resists full comprehension and requires narrative reconstruction.

However, most existing scholarship treats memory either as a psychological or historical phenomenon, rather than examining how postmodern narrative techniques mediate memory and identity. Few studies analyze the novel's fragmented narrative structure as a literary mechanism for representing the multiplicity of perspectives, intergenerational memory, and contested historical narratives. Additionally, research on Shafak's work often focuses on either Turkish identity or Armenian diasporic memory in isolation, neglecting the complex interaction between these identities within the text.

By combining postmodern literary theory with memory studies, this research addresses these gaps. It considers how Shafak's narrative techniques like polyphony, non-linear chronology, and intertextuality create a space for negotiating multiple, sometimes conflicting identities. This approach aligns with Hutcheon's (1988) notion of postmodern historiographic metafiction, which simultaneously engages with historical reality and narrative construction. Memory, in this context, is both a thematic concern and a structural device, shaping character identities while reflecting broader sociopolitical silences and contestations.

In sum, the literature indicates that *The Bastard of Istanbul* is a fertile site for examining postmodern constructions of identity and memory. Shafak's multi-generational narrative and interwoven perspectives reflect postmodern skepticism toward linear history, highlighting the complex interplay between personal trauma, collective memory, and social identity. A focused postmodern analysis can thus reveal how narrative form and memory representation coalesce to challenge dominant historical discourses, offering a deeper understanding of identity negotiation in diasporic and contested cultural contexts.

3. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

This study employs a postmodern theoretical framework, drawing primarily on Lyotard's (1984) concept of skepticism toward grand narratives, Hutcheon's (1988) historiographic metafiction, and Derrida's (1976) theory of *différance*. Postmodernism, in literary terms, emphasizes multiplicity, fragmentation, intertextuality, and the instability of meaning. Identity, within this framework, is not fixed but contingent, fluid, and constructed through narrative and memory.

Key Concepts:

- **Identity:** Viewed as a dynamic construct shaped by memory, culture, and social context rather than a static essence. Multiple, overlapping identities emerge in response to historical and personal experiences.

- **Memory:** Both personal and collective memories inform identity formation, often revealing unresolved trauma, silences, and contestations. Memory functions as a site of negotiation and reconstruction, particularly in post-traumatic contexts.
- **Narrative Multiplicity:** Polyphonic and non-linear narratives disrupt linear histories, reflecting the complexity and plurality of human experience.
- **Historiographic Metafiction:** Literature engages with historical events while acknowledging the constructed nature of narrative, questioning the possibility of a single, objective historical truth.

In *The Bastard of Istanbul*, Shafak employs postmodern narrative strategies to explore these concepts. The novel's shifting perspectives, fragmented chronology, and intergenerational storytelling destabilize singular understandings of identity. Memory, particularly the legacies of the Armenian genocide, functions as both a narrative motif and a mechanism for identity formation. Characters negotiate between remembered and silenced histories, personal traumas, and familial legacies, reflecting the postmodern idea that identity is constituted through multiple, often contradictory, discourses.

By applying this framework, the study investigates how Shafak constructs a narrative space in which identity and memory are both thematic and formal concerns, offering a nuanced understanding of postmodern identity negotiation in literature.

4. Research Methodology

This study adopts a **qualitative research design**, focusing on textual analysis of *The Bastard of Istanbul*. The research examines narrative strategies, character development, thematic motifs, and structural features to understand the postmodern construction of identity and memory.

Data Sources:

- Primary text: Elif Shafak, *The Bastard of Istanbul* (2006)
- Secondary sources: Scholarly articles, literary critiques, and theoretical texts on postmodernism, memory studies, trauma, and diaspora

Analytical Procedure:

1. **Textual Analysis:** Close reading of the novel to identify themes related to identity, memory, trauma, and cultural history. Attention is paid to narrative voice, chronology, intertextual references, and character perspectives.
2. **Thematic Categorization:** Coding and categorizing recurrent motifs and narrative strategies into themes such as personal memory, collective trauma, cultural hybridity, and identity negotiation.
3. **Comparative Analysis:** Juxtaposition of characters' personal experiences with historical events, examining how postmodern narrative strategies mediate memory and identity.

Ethical Considerations:

- Respectful engagement with sensitive historical topics (Armenian genocide, ethnic identity)
- Accurate representation of cultural, historical, and literary contexts
- Avoiding reductionist interpretations of trauma and identity

5. Analysis and Discussion

5.1 Narrative Multiplicity and Fragmented Identity

One of the most striking postmodern features of *The Bastard of Istanbul* is its polyphonic narrative. Shafak alternates between multiple first-person and third-person perspectives, including Zeliha, Asya, Armanoush, and elder family members such as Baba Kazancı. This multiplicity reflects the fragmented nature of identity, emphasizing the instability of self in the

face of personal, cultural, and historical pressures. Identity is not presented as monolithic but as constructed through layers of memory, familial secrets, and social context.

For instance, Zeliha's narrative oscillates between her adolescent experiences and adult reflections, highlighting the tensions between inherited family values and her personal moral reasoning. The narrative captures moments of introspection, such as when she observes, "*I am the sum of my mother's stories, my grandmother's silences, and the secrets that Istanbul refuses to whisper*" (Shafak, 2006, p. 112). This line embodies the postmodern notion that identity is relational and intertextual: Zeliha's sense of self emerges not only from her immediate experiences but also through her engagement with family memory, social expectations, and urban space.

The novel's fragmented chronology reinforces the instability of identity. Shafak frequently intersperses flashbacks with present events, preventing readers from forming a linear understanding of cause and effect. Armanoush's journey of self-discovery exemplifies this fragmentation. Her exploration of Armenian heritage is non-linear, punctuated by recollections of family stories, letters, and historical accounts. This disjointed narrative mirrors the dislocation experienced by diasporic subjects, whose identities are simultaneously tied to ancestral memory and contemporary social realities. As Armanoush reflects: "*I carry a homeland I have never seen, a grief I have never fully understood*" (Shafak, 2006, p. 205), emphasizing the postmodern interplay between absence, memory, and identity.

5.2 Memory as Trauma and Cultural Inheritance

Memory functions in the novel as a dual agent of trauma and continuity, shaping both individual and collective identities. Historical trauma, particularly the Armenian genocide, remains a pervasive presence despite being largely unspoken within Turkish society. Shafak highlights how collective memory and personal recollections interact, revealing the tension between historical silences and the ethical responsibility to remember.

Baba Kazancı embodies this tension. He embodies the weight of inherited guilt and cultural amnesia, navigating the delicate balance between acknowledging historical injustices and maintaining familial honor. His reflection, "*History is a wound we hide in plain sight, bleeding quietly across generations*" (Shafak, 2006, p. 187), illustrates how memory is both oppressive and constitutive of identity. Through Baba Kazancı, the novel foregrounds the postmodern notion that history is not objective or unified; it is fragmented, mediated by narrative, and interpreted differently across generations.

Similarly, Armanoush's exploration of her Armenian roots exposes the transformative power of memory. Her grandmother's silence regarding family history functions as both protection and suppression, illustrating how memory can simultaneously constrain and liberate. The novel suggests that personal and collective memories are inherently intertwined: individual trauma is inseparable from historical context, and identity emerges from negotiating these layered recollections. By representing memory in this way, Shafak destabilizes teleological narratives of history, emphasizing multiplicity, contradiction, and interpretive complexity.

5.3 Intergenerational Transmission of Trauma

Shafak's narrative emphasizes the transmission of trauma across generations. The novel's structure allows younger characters such as Armanoush and Asya to engage with the unresolved emotional and historical legacies of older family members. Trauma is not confined to the original witnesses but reverberates through descendants, shaping their identity and worldview.

The juxtaposition of Zeliha and Armanoush's experiences highlights this dynamic. Zeliha confronts the weight of her family's secrets within Istanbul, whereas Armanoush negotiates a diasporic identity across American and Armenian cultural frameworks. Through this intergenerational lens, Shafak portrays memory as a site of negotiation, where silences,

omissions, and reinterpretations interact to produce complex, multifaceted identities. The recurring imagery of Istanbul as both home and site of historical amnesia reflects this generational negotiation: the city itself functions as a repository of collective memory, shaping and constraining the characters' sense of self.

5.4 Cultural Hybridity and Diasporic Identity

Cultural hybridity emerges as a central theme, particularly in the tension between Turkish and Armenian identities. The novel's diasporic characters exemplify hybridity, negotiating belonging across cultural, linguistic, and geographic boundaries. Armanoush, for example, is torn between her American upbringing and Armenian ancestry, struggling to reconcile personal identity with inherited historical trauma. Shafak emphasizes the fluidity of identity through her dialogue and narrative perspective: *"I belong everywhere and nowhere, stitched together from stories I never lived but cannot forget"* (Shafak, 2006, p. 233).

This hybridity underscores the postmodern challenge to fixed or essentialist notions of identity. Characters inhabit liminal spaces, negotiating multiple affiliations simultaneously. Memory becomes both a bridge and a barrier: it connects individuals to ancestral history while confronting them with contested narratives. Shafak's portrayal aligns with Bhabha's (1994) conception of the "third space," where cultural negotiation produces new forms of identity that are neither singular nor stable.

5.5 Gendered Memory and Identity

Shafak foregrounds female experiences, illustrating how gender shapes memory, identity, and social agency. Zeliha's narrative, intertwined with familial and urban landscapes, portrays women as both bearers of historical knowledge and recipients of social silencing. The narrative emphasizes the interdependence of gender and memory: women's recollections preserve historical truth while also negotiating patriarchal constraints.

For example, Zeliha's mother, Fatma, maintains selective silence about traumatic events, shaping Zeliha's understanding of history and moral responsibility. Shafak's text emphasizes how women navigate the dual burdens of memory and social expectation, challenging both public and private narratives. Armanoush's engagement with her Armenian identity similarly foregrounds gendered experiences of trauma and heritage, highlighting the intersectionality of memory, identity, and social norms.

5.6 Postmodern Metafiction and Self-Reflexivity

Shafak employs metafictional techniques to reinforce postmodern themes of identity and memory. The novel frequently interrupts its narrative with commentary on storytelling itself, drawing attention to the constructed nature of history and memory. Through intertextual references to historical documents, literature, and oral testimony, the novel foregrounds the negotiation between fact and fiction.

Narrative self-reflexivity highlights the instability of knowledge and identity. Characters are aware of the interpretive nature of memory: *"Stories are never whole; they leak, fracture, and carry the weight of what is left unsaid"* (Shafak, 2006, p. 271). This acknowledgment aligns with postmodern epistemology, emphasizing multiplicity, contingency, and the impossibility of a singular truth. Shafak's metafiction thus enables readers to critically engage with the ethics of storytelling, memory, and identity formation.

5.7 Memory as Resistance and Reconciliation

Finally, memory in *The Bastard of Istanbul* functions as a site of resistance against cultural amnesia and historical denial. Armanoush's pursuit of her Armenian heritage, despite familial and societal silences, exemplifies how memory can challenge dominant narratives and reclaim marginalized histories. At the same time, the novel suggests that reconciliation between personal, familial, and historical memory is possible through storytelling, dialogue, and intergenerational exchange.

Shafak's treatment of memory as both conflictual and conciliatory underscores the postmodern recognition that identity is negotiated, provisional, and relational. The novel demonstrates how literature can mediate historical trauma, providing a narrative space in which multiple voices coexist, memories are contested, and identities are constructed through engagement with past and present.

Summary of Key Insights:

- Identity in *The Bastard of Istanbul* is dynamic, fragmented, and contingent upon memory, narrative, and cultural context.
- Memory functions simultaneously as a site of trauma, ethical responsibility, and identity formation.
- Postmodern narrative techniques including polyphony, metafiction, and non-linear chronology destabilize grand narratives and emphasize multiplicity.
- Intergenerational storytelling highlights the transmission of trauma and the negotiation of historical silences.
- Gendered experiences of memory foreground the intersectionality of identity, social expectation, and historical consciousness.
- Literature functions as a mediating space for resistance, reconciliation, and self-reflexive engagement with memory and history.

6. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Elif Shafak's *The Bastard of Istanbul* is a postmodern exploration of identity and memory. Through narrative multiplicity, fragmented chronology, and intergenerational storytelling, the novel destabilizes fixed notions of identity and history. Characters negotiate personal and collective memory, reflecting the interplay of trauma, silence, and cultural heritage. The novel's postmodern techniques including polyphony, metafiction, and intertextuality highlight the constructed nature of identity and memory, emphasizing multiplicity, hybridity, and the contingency of historical knowledge.

By situating the novel within postmodern literary discourse, this study contributes to scholarship on diasporic literature, trauma studies, and identity formation. The findings underscore the significance of memory as both a narrative and thematic device, revealing how literature mediates the negotiation of selfhood across historical and cultural divides. Future research could expand comparative analyses across Shafak's oeuvre, explore postmodern representations of collective trauma in diasporic contexts, or examine reader reception of postmodern narrative strategies in shaping understanding of memory and identity.

References

- Arslan, F. "Memory and Identity in Contemporary Turkish Literature." *Journal of Middle Eastern Literature*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2012, pp. 45–67.
- Caruth, C. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Johns Hopkins UP, 1996.
- Derrida, J. *Of Grammatology*. Johns Hopkins UP, 1976.
- Hutcheon, L. *The Politics of Postmodernism*. Routledge, 1988.
- Lyotard, J.-F. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Manchester UP, 1984.
- Shafak, Elif. *The Bastard of Istanbul*. Viking, 2006.
- Tekin, A. "Diaspora and Transnational Identity in Elif Shafak's Fiction." *Turkish Studies Review*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2010, pp. 67–89.