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**Unearthing the Past: Memory and Identity in the Novels of Elif Shafak**

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**Abstract:**

This paper explores the deep connection between memory and identity in the works of the acclaimed Turkish-British author Elif Shafak. By analyzing two of her major novels, *The Bastard of Istanbul* and *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World*, this study investigates how Shafak uses both personal and collective memories to shape her characters. Shafak's writing challenges the idea of "collective amnesia," the intentional forgetting of history by a nation or society. Through her marginalized female characters, Shafak argues that ignoring the past leads to a fractured sense of self. Conversely, she shows that remembering, even when it involves trauma, is necessary for healing and building a coherent identity. Ultimately, this paper highlights how Shafak rewrites history by giving a voice to those who have been forgotten.

**Keywords:** Elif Shafak; memory; identity; collective amnesia; Turkish literature; marginalized voices

**Introduction**

Who are we without our memories? Identity is not simply about where we are today. It is built on the foundation of what we remember from our past. In the modern, fast-paced world, the concept of identity has become a subject of debate. Identity refers to how individuals and groups define themselves based on race, culture, language, and shared experiences. Memory is the ability to recall past events, and it is a crucial building block of identity. When there is nothing to remember, a person's sense of connection to the world weakens. Therefore, what we remember from the past, and what we choose to forget, helps define who we become in the present.

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Elif Shafak, a Turkish-British novelist, understands the complex relationship between memory and identity. Born in Strasbourg and raised in various countries including Turkey, Spain, and Jordan, her own life has been shaped by multiple cultures and languages. Shafak has noted that constant migration and displacement complicated her sense of “home.” This lack of a single stable root influences her literary style. Her stories frequently take place at the crossroads of East and West, focusing on cultural blending, historical trauma, and identity crises. In Turkey, a country positioned between the Islamic Middle East and Christian Europe, citizens may feel pressured to balance traditional backgrounds with the demands of modern life. This tension can result in dislocation and confusion.

Through her novels, Shafak challenges dominant historical narratives by emphasizing women’s voices and marginalized communities. History is often written by those in power and commonly focuses on political events and influential men, leaving out the everyday experiences of women and minorities. Shafak uses fiction to create a counter-history by weaving personal stories, emotional struggles, and domestic realities into broader historical currents. Her characters often exist in tension between inherited tradition and contemporary change, searching for belonging.

This paper explores how Shafak uses memory to construct and deconstruct identity in *The Bastard of Istanbul* and *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World*. The analysis demonstrates that Shafak treats memory not merely as a record of the past but as an active force in the present. Whether it is a nation shaped by collective amnesia or a dying woman recalling sensory details of a painful life, memory becomes key to understanding identity. Shafak’s work suggests that although the past can feel burdensome, confronting it is a pathway to healing and self-discovery.

### **The Burden of the Past and Collective Amnesia**

In *The Bastard of Istanbul*, Shafak presents a layered story that interrogates identity, memory, and history through the experiences of Turkish and Armenian families. A central theme is collective amnesia. Amnesia refers to memory loss, and collective amnesia occurs when an entire community or nation deliberately forgets painful memories, often under political pressure aimed at reshaping national identity. Shafak suggests that modern state-building can rely on this kind of forgetting. In the name of modernization, a “clean slate” can become an ideal, and the complex and sometimes violent past is minimized or erased in public discourse.

This state-shaped amnesia affects characters in profound ways. When a society loses a shared relationship to the past, individuals can struggle to locate themselves culturally and historically. In the novel, Turkish characters such as members of the Kazanci family lack

knowledge of historical atrocities committed against Armenians. Aunt Cevriye, a Turkish history teacher, treats the past as distant and unrelated to the present. For these characters, time feels discontinuous, as if the past ended and the present began without connection.

In contrast, Armenian characters treat memory as essential to communal survival. For the Armenian diaspora, the past lives in the present, and ancestral history becomes a marker of identity. Forgetting can be seen as a betrayal of communal belonging. Armanoush, an Armenian American, experiences rootlessness and feels compelled to travel to Istanbul to connect with her family's past. Yet Shafak also illustrates how memory can become heavy baggage. An inability to move beyond trauma can trap communities in cycles of fear and resentment.

Shafak dramatizes these tensions through younger characters, especially Asya Kazanci and Mustafa. Asya, a rebellious Turkish teenager labeled a "bastard," feels disconnected from family and society, in part because she does not know her father. Without a clear origin story, her identity feels unstable. Mustafa, living in the United States, is haunted by memories of his homeland and his personal history. He longs to erase memory and begin again, but the mind resists such erasure, and the past returns.

*The Bastard of Istanbul* suggests that attempting to erase the past, whether nationally or personally, deepens identity crises. Memory may be suppressed, but it resurfaces and demands recognition. When characters confront buried truths, the pain of remembering becomes linked to the possibility of healing. By blending women's voices across generations, Shafak challenges official, male-centered history and emphasizes how lived truth survives in domestic spaces, storytelling, and ordinary lives. The novel implies that both remembering and selective letting go matter. Hatred sustained by trauma can be corrosive, but denial also damages identity.

### **Marginalized Voices, Sensory Memory, and Roots**

While *The Bastard of Istanbul* examines national history and collective amnesia, *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World* explores memory on an intensely personal level. The novel follows Leila, a sex worker who has been murdered and discarded in a rubbish bin in Istanbul. The title draws on the idea that the brain may remain active for a brief period after the heart stops. Shafak uses this premise to structure the narrative. Each passing minute of Leila's fading consciousness triggers a memory, and her life unfolds through these fragments.

In this novel, memory is intensely sensory. Leila's recollections are activated through smell, taste, and sound, such as the scent of cardamom coffee or the taste of specific

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foods that return her to childhood and pivotal moments in her migration to Istanbul. Memory studies often describe remembering as an active process occurring in the present, where the past is reassembled to create meaning. By reconstructing Leila's story through embodied sensations, Shafak challenges conventional history, which tends to rely on documents and public events. Leila's emotional and bodily experiences become forms of knowledge and testimony.

Leila's life is marked by trauma, abuse, gendered violence, and social rejection. Her body bears the imprint of a patriarchal society that exploits vulnerable women and then discards them. Within dominant moral frameworks, Leila is treated as disposable, destined for a "graveyard of the unaccompanied." Shafak refuses this erasure. By centering Leila's memories, she restores Leila's dignity, complexity, and resilience. The narrative shows that Leila, despite suffering, retains compassion and the capacity for love.

Because Leila is severed from biological roots and excluded from traditional society, she must create identity and belonging through chosen relationships. Shafak introduces the "water family," Leila's circle of close friends who are also outcasts. They have been punished or marginalized for displacement, gender identity, or faith. Migration and exclusion cut them off from inherited roots, producing a shared rootlessness. Yet their chosen family becomes a form of resistance against a society that has failed them.

Shafak's emphasis on marginalized voices functions as a postcolonial feminist intervention. Conventional narratives often silence prostitutes, refugees, and minorities, pushing their lives out of collective memory. By building the novel around Leila's dying consciousness and her community of outcasts, Shafak refuses that disappearance. Leila's memories demonstrate a life that was vivid and meaningful, not reducible to stigma. The novel argues that the most marginalized carry histories that deserve recognition. Their memories matter as much as the public narratives of rulers and institutions. Leila's peace emerges through fleeting but profound connections, not through acceptance by oppressive structures.

### **Conclusion**

Elif Shafak's fiction demonstrates that memory and identity are intertwined. Identity is not a simple label but a tapestry formed through personal experience, family history, and cultural memory. Shafak suggests that who we are cannot be separated from what we remember.

In *The Bastard of Istanbul*, Shafak warns against the dangers of collective amnesia. When a nation attempts to erase violent or shameful history, citizens may become

disoriented, and societies may repeat patterns of harm. The novel proposes that clinging tightly to trauma can fuel hatred, but denying the past empties identity and blocks healing. Acknowledgment becomes necessary for repair.

In *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World*, Shafak turns toward the intimate memories of a marginalized woman. Through Leila’s sensory recollections, the novel insists that every life holds value and meaning. Literature can resist social erasure by resurrecting stories that dominant culture tries to bury. By allowing a sex worker to narrate her own history, Shafak challenges patriarchal systems that decide who deserves remembrance.

Shafak rewrites history by restoring voice to those silenced. Her novels argue that history is not only dates and political events but also the lived, emotional, sensory experiences of ordinary people. Identity is a dynamic journey that requires balance. Not everything can be remembered, and not everything should be forgotten, but it is through facing memory, both joyful and painful, that individuals can understand roots, claim identity, and find a sense of home.

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