

The Crisis of Belonging in Elif Shafak's Honor

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أزمة الانتماء في رواية الشرف لـإليف شفق

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الملخص

تبحث هذه الدراسة في أزمة الانتماء في رواية الشرف لـإليف شفق من منظور ما بعد الاستعمار، مع التركيز بصورة رئيسية على مفاهيم هومي بابا المتعلقة بالهجنة والهوية والانتماء. واستنادًا إلى أفكار بهابها وفرانتز فانون، تستكشف الدراسة كيفية صراع الشخصيات للحفاظ على التوازن بين ثقافتها الأصلية الكردية والثقافتين التركية والإنجليزية. ومن خلال التحليل، تُظهر الدراسة أن التصادم بين هذه الثقافات الثلاث يخلق "حيزًا ثالثًا" كما يسميه هومي بابا. وفي هذا الفضاء الجديد تعاني الشخصيات من الاغتراب وتشظي الهوية والاقتلاع النفسي. ونتيجة لذلك، تتناول الدراسة كيف تعكس الرواية تعقيدات الوجود الشتاتي، وتكشف عن الصراعات العاطفية والثقافية التي تعيشها الجماعات المهمشة في سياقات ما بعد الاستعمار.

Abstract

The current paper examines the crisis of belonging in Elif Shafak's *Honor* through a postcolonial lens; mainly focusing on Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity, identity and unhomeliness. Drawing on Bhabha and Fanon the paper explores how the characters struggle to maintain a balance between their native culture, which is Kurdish along with the Turkish and English. Through the analysis, the study demonstrates that the collision between these three cultures creates a "third place" named by Bhabha. It is in this new space that the characters experience alienation, fragmented identities, and psychological displacement. Consequently, the study examines how *Honor* reflects the complexities of diasporic existence and shows the emotional and cultural struggles experienced by marginalized communities in postcolonial contexts.

Introduction

Elif Shafak is among the most celebrated contemporary writers within and outside Turkish society. She is viewed as a distinct Turkish-British writer who has been the medium for the marginalized voices in society through her deep and realistic portrayals of Turkish society. Similar to other Turkish writers, being part of a multicultural society, one which includes different religions and ethnicities, resulting in dual identities, certainly influenced Shafak's writings. This multicultural Turkish society is due to the sensitive geographical location of Turkey that connects the Islamic Middle East and Christian Europe (Nihad 4). This explains why most of Shafak's works tend to highlight the voice of the other and explore their identities and various struggles. Nihad

further justifies that Shafak's works function as a bridge between the East and the West, since she writes in both English and Turkish. Her subject matter revolves around marginalized voices, based on ethnicity, gender, or religion. Using the postcolonial concept of the other, Shafak tackles these matters, knowing that the voice of the other is an essential aspect in postcolonial studies (5). Elif Shafak's 2011 novel *Honor* reflects on the cross-cultural Turkish-Kurdish society, highlighting the struggles of the Kurdish people, settled in Turkey, as a minority group. The novel not only shows how such a marginalized group faces various challenges and discrimination within their homeland, but also views how they are underlined under the shadow of "the other" in London. The narrative takes place between two different cultures and different generations of family members. The story of *Honor* hovers around three generations in a Kurdish village on the border of Turkey and Syria. The main plot concerns Naze and Berzo's twin daughters, named Bext and Bese in Kurdish; Kader and Yeter in Turkish; and Destiny and Enough in English. However, their father had alternative names for them: Pembe and Jamila—Pink and Beautiful—as he describes, "Names like sugar cubes that melted in your tea, sweet, yielding, with no sharp edges" (Shafak 8). The first generation's head is Berzo and Naze, the second is Pembe and her husband Adam, and the third is their children: Iskender, Esma, and Yunus. It is normal that a Kurdish family living between the borders of Turkey and Syria has diasporic and hybrid identities. Where they live, they are seen as the other from the perspective of the Turkish people. Marginalized and discriminated against for being from a different ethnicity, this marginalization creates a sense of loss and not belonging to the current country in the characters. Nonetheless, when people from such backgrounds immigrate to a foreign land and try to sustain a stable personality and identity, they fail, similar to the characters in *Honor*. As Zacharia and Senthamarai have pointed out, even when the main characters try to settle in the foreign land—London in their case—they fail to create a sense of belonging to the new land. Unable to get rid of their cultural traditions and beliefs, they confront different challenges and obstacles (Zacharia and Senthamarai 224). Generally, Shafak in *Honor* tries to unveil the injustice marginalized people experience through the novel's different characters. No matter where or when, once marginalized and looked at inferiorly, the sense of belonging is lost, identity is damaged, and home is displaced physically or mentally. The novel is an excellent selection to be analyzed through a postcolonial lens due to its rich content related to the colonized and colonizers.

Cultural Hybridity and Identity in Honor

Among the central themes, and most significant according to the author's focus in *Honor*, is cultural hybridity and identity. Shafak intensively tackles this subject through the experiences of the central characters. Torn between two cultures, the Kurdish-Turkish and English, the central characters go through various ups and downs that put their identity in the face of enormous challenges. Doğrul justifies the cultural hybridity and identity crisis in *Honor* by relating it to Shafak's background. Since she is from a similar culture to that of the characters, a continuous feeling of belonging to her ancestral roots, culture, and forgotten memories forms a huge part of her identity. An identity formed from the untold stories of the marginalized voices is a hybrid one that belongs to more than one physical location (Doğrul 85–86). The concept of hybridity is inseparable from unhomeliness, since unhomeliness is the outcome of hybridity. Bhabha, in *The Location of Culture*, defines hybridity as the mixing of cultures found in what he calls a third place. This third place, where the person appears, creates conflicts and negotiations over meaning and identity. Nonetheless, once the person is confronted with this third place, they grow a feeling of belonging to none of these cultures (Bhabha 56). In *Honor*, the central characters live in a hybrid culture, once in their homeland, where their Kurdish culture is mixed with the Turkish culture, and again in the English culture when they migrate to London. Consequently, they find themselves in a situation where they belong to none of these cultures. They are trapped from all sides, unable to detach from any of them. Since the story of *Honor* revolves around a Kurdish family living in a village between Turkey and Syria, there is no doubt one might think of the Kurdish people's case. Jamal and Romano explain the Kurdish-Turkish conflict as an identity-driven one: the Kurdish requirement of recognition, safety, and cultural expression, and Turkey's denial of these requirements. The frustration resulting from Turkey's response has created the conflict (Jamal and Romano 263). Shafak, in *Honor*, represents the outcomes of this case through a Kurdish family, which is the central focus of the story. As the story starts, the description of the village shows how the Kurds living in Turkey are overlooked and neglected: It was a rugged, remote Kurdish village with no roads, no electricity, no doctor, no school. Barely any news from the outside world permeated its sheath of seclusion. The aftermath of the Second World War, the atomic bomb... The villagers hadn't heard of any of this. And yet they were convinced that strange things happened in the universe, that is, beyond the shores of the Euphrates." (Shafak 6) The geographical location is crucial for establishing a reasonable and effective analysis, for the

concepts of hybridity and identity are bound to place. In the above quotation, the location of the village determines how the Kurds were marginalized; even the place of their settlement is detached from the outer world. When a group of people are distanced in this way, their culture, identity, and safety are denied, leading to a conflict with themselves and with the ruling power. This is what the characters of the first and second generations, Berzo and Naze, Pembe and her husband Adam, experience. The narrative takes place between the past and the present, London and the village, meaning that there is a continuous wavering in the actions and narrators. Before elaborating on the characters experiencing hybridity and unhomeliness as immigrants, the feeling of being torn between two cultures and belonging to none is elaborated on in the characters' homeland. At the very start, the remote nature of the village reflects on the nature of the Kurdish-Turkish case. Pembe and Jamila are sent to a distant school: "Unlike the other eight-year-old girls in her village, she and Jamila went to school—a decrepit, one-storey building in another village forty minutes' walk away—and could count" (Shafak 10). Shafak tries to tell the reader how the Kurdish people in that village are denied and prevented from their simplest right. This is the very first step to create a hybrid culture for the little girls. At the school, they have a racist teacher who punishes whoever speaks the Kurdish language: "Whoever uttered a word in Kurdish would have to stand on one foot" (Shafak 10). From here, the twin sisters make their choices: one decides to leave the country and explore the outer world, believing that her happiness lies in that. It is Pembe who decides to excel in the Turkish language to escape her current, remote life, while Jamila refuses to speak a different language. As the story proceeds, Pembe follows her husband, Adem Toprak, and moves to London, while Jamila chooses to stay in an isolated house away from the village, metaphorically representing the native culture, and Pembe the hybrid culture. This is the start of the hybrid culture and identity crisis the characters experience throughout the course of the story. In a scene which takes place in London, emphasizing Adam's struggles to remember his past and the face of his mom, this struggle represents the struggles of individuals from hybrid cultures, for they live between the current culture of the colonizer and their native one. In Adam's case, the new life in London contradicts his traditional Turkish life. What is meant by "resilience" in the third space created by the collision of two different cultures can be viewed here: There were unwritten rules here that everyone obeyed. Indians, Pakistanis, Indonesians, Bangladeshis, Caribbeans, Iranians, Turks, Greeks, Italians ... Everybody spoke English but swore, conspired and prayed in his mother tongue. The Lair, they called it. Run by a taciturn Chinese family who had lived in Vietnam for generations and been forced to leave after the war. (Shafak 42) In a different culture and country, they still use their native language along with their broken English, as if these immigrants are trying to remind themselves that they come from a different cultural background and that it is possible to curse and shout in their native language. It is their reaction against the hegemony of the colonizer. These people, among them Adam, were lost, torn between two different worlds. Adam could sense this when the roulette wheel reminded him of himself: "Just like him, the wheel lacked a solid memory" (Shafak 42). This shows Adam's struggle in the culture and his feeling of belonging to none; he is on the edge of trying not to forget his past life and stopping the new culture from colonizing him. Adam Toprak's family consisted of Adem and Pembe, Iskender, Esma, and Yunus. After moving to London, each member experiences the collision of cultures; their reactions differ but are the result of the same conflict. One day, Iskender leaves school early, avoiding any encounter with friends or teachers after finding difficulty in uttering words. When he arrives home, after contemplating his father's name on the door nameplate, he expresses his feeling of unhomeliness, where he belongs nowhere or has never existed: I myself, would have left the nameplate anonymous. That would have been more decent, more straightforward. It would be my way of saying nobody lived here. Not really, we didn't live in this flat, only sojourned. Home to us was no different than a one-star hotel where mum washed the bed sheets instead of maids and where every morning the breakfast would be the same. (Shafak 49-50) Iskender clearly says that their current life is equal to no life, as if they never exist. Although he has a place he can call home, he feels homeless; this homelessness is the result of living between a culture completely different from his. He further expresses himself, justifying their current situation: "We Topraks were only passers-by in this city—a half-Turkish, half-Kurdish family in the wrong end of London" (Shafak 50). Unhomeliness in this scene is seen in Iskender's words, the first son of the Toprak family, who spent his childhood in Turkey among his Turkish-Kurdish family and who is now experiencing the sense of belonging to neither. The second son and youngest child in the Toprak family is Yunus, who was named after the prophet Jonah: "He was named after the prophet Jonah, the fleeing prophet" (Shafak 61). Frantz Fanon describes the "double consciousness" of the colonized subject, torn between adopting the colonizer's language and values while remaining excluded from their privileges (Fanon 17). It is this internal conflict that reflects Bhabha's notion of unhomeliness, where

identity is contested, blurred, and unsettled. In *Honor*, it is Yunus who best represents this idea: Yunus was the only one of the Toprak children who had been born in England. His English was fluent, his Turkish halting, his Kurdish nil. [...] Yunus had a tendency to cut and run. When he didn't like it at school, he ran away, and when he didn't like it at home, he fled his family. [...] he spent so much time outside, mastering the side street and back alleys of Hackney." (61) Yunus is linguistically and culturally torn between three cultures, and none give him an identity that makes him feel complete. It is what Bhabha calls the third place; here Yunus is trapped, torn between his parents' tradition and the English culture. As noted in the above quotation, whenever he feels unhomeliness and a lack of belonging anywhere, he escapes. His escaping represents the struggles of individuals torn between different cultures, struggling to belong to only one. Yunus spends most of his time outside, on the side street "the side street and back alleys of Hackney", symbolically showing his marginalization and staying out of the circle. Yunus tries to survive the hybrid culture he is trapped in and the sense of unhomeliness by alienating himself from others. This is the result of growing up in a complex postcolonial environment, where home to him becomes unfamiliar. Shafak's diasporic characters, at certain points, resist the imposed English culture in different ways. Pembe, as Iskender describes, struggled to speak the English language more than the rest. This was because "she didn't trust English in general" (Shafak 134). In the third space that she finds herself in—between the Turkish, Kurdish, and English cultures—she refuses to master the English language, thinking it was dangerous, in order to maintain her current mixed identity: "We answered her in English and spoke only English amongst ourselves" (Shafak 134). Iskender, as the narrator of this scene, further justifies this by generalizing the struggle and including all immigrants: "Perhaps all immigrants shrink from a new language to some extent" (Shafak 135). It is small acts of resistance, and their absence, that lead to identity crisis. In the clash between one's traditions and the colonizer's, Iskender tries to survive and maintain an identity accepted by the English people. Trying to fit in with the host country, instead of refusing to change his name, Iskender accepts being called Alex, a name far removed from his own and his traditions. This happens not only with his English friends but with some family members too: 'Why does she call you Alex?' 'Don't mind her. She's my sister . . . Everybody calls me that. You know, it's short for . . .' 'Alex is not short for Iskender,' the Orator inveighed. 'Think about it again, brother. Are we going to have to change our names so that the Brits can pronounce them more easily? What else will we have to give up? It should be the other way round. Make everyone learn your full name and say it with respect. With that he left, leaving an awkward silence in his wake. (Shafak, 217) The above incident is an awakening moment for Iskender, being reminded of his real name and the fact he gave it up. He felt stunned and lost—a moment of realization and a feeling of loss. When he is asked about the reason, he is called Alex, his identity is questioned and so is where he belongs. In this moment, Iskender's experience of unhomeliness is most obvious. Pourgharib, along with co-authors, discusses that no member of the Toprak family is excluded from experiencing unhomeliness in the host country. Feeling like an outsider and struggling to detach from the past or get attached to the present is also felt by Adam Toprak. The feeling he develops leads him to the pit of failure, unable to establish a proper life in London even though the chances of success were greater there. Unlike the other immigrants, Adam could never live a happy life in London (Pourgharib et al. 57). Shafak, through the characters of the second generation, illustrates how being trapped between two cultures, in their case, three, creates the third space Bhabha describes. They feel torn between who they are and who they should be in the new country. Characters like Adam, Pembe, Iskender, and Yunus experience hybridity and unhomeliness differently. At certain points, they try to resist the imposed culture of the colonizer, yet they fail, creating the feeling of being homeless. Moreover, each of the characters proves that feeling homeless does not necessarily mean lacking a physical home. Most of them, despite having a place to keep them safe, felt unsafe and escaped it.

Conclusion

Once individuals are displaced from their native land, they find themselves in a hybrid culture, what postcolonial theories call the "third space", where they belong to neither. This paper examined the main characters' struggles in a multicultural society, where they experience loss of identity, home, culture, and a strong sense of belonging. The state of being unhomely, experienced by these characters, is analyzed based on Bhabha's concepts of hybridity and unhomeliness. Despite being with their family members, sharing the same home with them, they feel unhomely and struggle to maintain their native identity. It offers a nuanced examination of how *Honor* serves as a postcolonial narrative, portraying fractured identities, unhomeliness, the feeling of not belonging, and the quest for belonging.

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