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4. The Matriarchal Sieve: Patriarchal Silence and Female Identity in Elif Shafak's *'The Bastard of Istanbul'*

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Abstract

"I have always been intrigued with the stories and silences women transfer from one generation to another, from their mothers to their daughters" says Elif Shafak, a Turkish-British novelist, essayist, public intellectual and advocate for women's rights and freedom of expression. This paper examines how women in *The Bastard of Istanbul* inherit not only memories and identities but also silences surrounding trauma, sexuality and patriarchy. It also examines the complex interplay between female identity and patriarchal power structures and historical memory in Elif Shafak's *The Bastard of Istanbul* (2006). The novel foregrounds the Kazanci household a domestic space inhabited almost entirely by women the absence of adult male authority does not signify the absence of patriarchy. The novel reveals how patriarchal structures continue to operate through internalized cultural norms, familial silence and collective acts of forgetting. Drawing upon transnational feminist theory, feminist trauma theory and memory studies, this paper argues that the Kazanci household functions as a 'matriarchal sieve,' a metaphorical space that absorbs and reproduces the traumatic residue of patriarchal violence while simultaneously concealing its origins. Through an analysis of the characters Zeliha, Banu, Asya and Armanoush, the article demonstrates how women negotiate competing ideological pressures generated by secular modernity, religious conservatism and nationalist discourse. Furthermore, it explores the structural parallel between the concealment of Zeliha's incestuous rape and the broader culture of denial surrounding the Armenian Genocide of 1915. By linking personal trauma with collective historical amnesia, Shafak exposes the interconnected mechanisms through which patriarchal and nationalist systems regulate memory, identity and female agency. The study contends that the recovery of suppressed histories and the reclamation

of bodily autonomy emerge as crucial acts of resistance against institutionalized silence and gendered oppression

Keywords: Patriarchal Silence, Female Identity, Bodily Subjugation, Sexual Violence, Historical Amnesia, Matriarchy.

Introduction

Elif Shafak is an award-winning British-Turkish novelist and the most widely read female author in Turkey. She writes in both Turkish and English and has published seventeen books, eleven of which are novels. Her work has been translated into fifty languages. Elif Shafak's *The Bastard of Istanbul* presents a seemingly paradoxical domestic landscape: the Kazanci household, a multi-generational home inhabited exclusively by women. Due to a perceived familial 'curse' that causes the premature deaths of its male members, the home functions as an apparent matriarchy. However, reading this space as an empowered feminist utopia overlooks the invisible, pervasive nature of patriarchal hegemony. As postcolonial and transnational feminist scholars note, patriarchal systems do not require the physical presence of men to enforce subjugation; their dictates are embedded within culture, language and national identity.

This article captures both female identity formation and the inheritance of silence, which are central to the novel's women-centered narrative. It explores how female identity in the novel is systematically fractured by a dominant patriarchal framework. It posits that the Kazanci matriarchy acts not as a shield, but as a sieve—a structural mechanism that filters, absorbs, and uncomfortably hosts the collateral damage of male violence. By evaluating the binary identities of the characters—ranging from the hyper-secular rebellion of Zeliha to the spiritual internalization of Banu, and the nihilistic fragmentation of Asya—this paper investigates how the female body becomes a site of ideological warfare. Additionally, the paper argues that the micro-level silencing of female trauma within the family directly mirrors the macro-level collective amnesia enforced by the Turkish state regarding its past, particularly the Armenian Genocide. Through this intersectional lens, Shafak demonstrates that reclaiming female identity requires a dismantling of both domestic and national patriarchal myths. *The Bastard of Istanbul* has extensively examined themes of cultural memory, Armenian-Turkish relations and female subjectivity, relatively little attention has been devoted to the ways in which the novel portrays patriarchy as a structure that survives within apparently female-dominated spaces. This article

addresses this gap by conceptualizing the Kazanci household as a matriarchal sieve that absorbs, reproduces and conceals patriarchal trauma.

Patriarchal Silence and Female Identity in Elif Shafak's '*The Bastard of Istanbul*'

The Bastard of Istanbul focuses on the relationship between the suppression of women's voices and the formation of female identity in *The Bastard of Istanbul* by Elif Shafak. The phrase 'patriarchal silence' refers to the various ways patriarchal societies discourage, erase or conceal women's experiences, especially those related to sexuality, violence, trauma, and personal autonomy. In the novel, silence functions not merely as the absence of speech but as a social mechanism that protects patriarchal authority and family honor while marginalizing female voices.

"If you have no reason or ability to accomplish anything, then practice the art of becoming. If you have no reason or ability to practice the art of becoming, then just be. If you don't have any reason or ability to just be, then endure." (123)

The women of the Kazanci household occupy a seemingly matriarchal space; however, their lives continue to be shaped by patriarchal values. The hidden truth surrounding Zeliha's sexual assault and Asya's birth exemplifies how women are compelled to bear trauma in silence. The concealment of these experiences demonstrates how patriarchal structures control narratives about women's bodies and identities. Rather than openly confronting violence and injustice, the family suppresses these realities, allowing silence to become a form of social control.

To analyze the textures of female subjugation in *The Bastard of Istanbul*, one must move past classical, binary definitions of patriarchy. Traditional patriarchies rely on the overt authority of a pater familias. However, in contemporary postcolonial and Middle Eastern literary contexts, patriarchy often manifests as what structuralists call an 'absent center'-a force that exerts total control precisely through its invisibility. Transnational feminism provides a crucial diagnostic tool here. It rejects the monolithic Western feminist assumption that non-Western women are passively oppressed solely by religious fundamentalism. Instead, it looks at how women navigate the overlapping pressures of local traditions, globalized modernity, and state-backed nationalism. In Shafak's *Istanbul*, female identity is caught in a tug-of-war between two patriarchal ideals: The Traditional-Nationalist Ideal: Enforces domesticity, modesty, and the preservation of family honor (namus). The Aggressive Secular-Modernist Ideal: Superficially liberates women by

demanding they look 'Westernized,' yet continues to commodify and police their bodies under a secular male gaze.

The Matriarchy as a Sieve for Internalized Trauma

In *The Bastard of Istanbul*, the Kazanci household functions as a matriarchal space that absorbs and transmits trauma across generations. Although women dominate the family structure, they continue to internalize patriarchal values, particularly through silence surrounding violence and suffering. The concealment of Zeliha's trauma and the secrecy surrounding Asya's origins illustrate how unresolved pain is filtered through the family and inherited by subsequent generations. Thus, the matriarchy acts as a sieve, preserving and transmitting internalized trauma while shaping female identity and memory.

The Kazanci household is governed by Grandma Gulsum and her four daughters: Feride, Cevriye, Banu and Zeliha. On the surface, these women exhibit immense agency; they run businesses, argue politics and manage their daily lives without male oversight. Yet, a closer reading reveals that their domestic arrangement is designed to cope with, rather than escape, patriarchal trauma.

"Man is born free but everywhere is in chains. In reality, the difference is that the savage lives within himself while social man lives outside himself and can only live in the opinion of others, so that he seems to receive the feeling of his own existence only from the judgment of others concerning him." (235)

The household functions as a sieve because it selectively retains the psychological burdens inflicted by men while maintaining a respectable facade for the outside world. The ultimate manifestation of this hidden rot is the character of Mustafa-the only surviving son, who was sent away to America to escape the family curse. Before his departure, Mustafa commits the ultimate patriarchal violation: the incestuous rape of his youngest sister, Zeliha. The family's reaction to Zeliha's subsequent pregnancy is a textbook example of patriarchal internalization. Rather than exposing the abuser, the family structure absorbs the shock. Mustafa is protected and sent abroad, maintaining his status as the precious male heir, while Zeliha is forced to bear the social stigma of giving birth to a 'bastard.' The matriarchy protects the patriarch at the expense of the female victim. The aunts become complicit in policing the secret, proving that an all-female space can still uphold the very codes that subjugate its members.

The Inheritance of Patriarchal Silence in a Matriarchal Space

Although the Kazanci household in *The Bastard of Istanbul* is dominated by women, it remains influenced by patriarchal values. The women inherit and perpetuate silence surrounding trauma, violence, and family secrets, particularly in relation to Zeliha's assault and Asya's parentage. This inherited silence demonstrates how patriarchal norms continue to operate even within a female-centered space, shaping identity, memory, and relationships across generations. Thus, the matriarchal household becomes a site where patriarchal silence is preserved and transmitted rather than completely challenged. Shafak uses the next generation, alongside Zeliha, to map out the different ways women respond to this systemic oppression. Each character's path illustrates a different survival mechanism within the patriarchal landscape.

Zeliha: The Limits of Bodily Rebellion

Zeliha chooses radical, somatic rebellion. She wears short skirts, dons heavy makeup, refuses to marry and opens a tattoo parlor—a deeply transgressive profession for a woman in a traditional society. Her hyper-visibility and assertion of bodily autonomy are direct responses to her past violation. By transforming her body into an avant-garde canvas, she attempts to wrest control away from the patriarchal forces that violated her. However, her rebellion remains reactionary. She is constantly subjected to harassment on the streets of Istanbul, illustrating that individual bodily autonomy is chronically vulnerable when the surrounding public space remains heavily patriarchal.

Banu: Spiritual Internalization and Mysticism

In sharp contrast to Zeliha, Banu turns inward, adopting strict religious piety and developing skills as a clairvoyant (soothsayer). Banu's identity is constructed through traditional spiritual networks. By mastering the realm of the unseen and communicating with djinn, Banu carves out a unique position of authority within her community. Because the material, political and social worlds are dominated by male authority, the spiritual realm becomes one of the few avenues where a woman can exercise legitimate power. However, this power requires her to conform to traditional expectations of modesty, showing that her agency is granted only because she accepts patriarchal boundaries.

Asya: Nihilism and the 'Bastard' Identity

Asya, Zeliha's daughter, represents the generational fallout of these unresolved traumas. Growing up without knowing her father's identity, she embraces a subculture of nihilism, existentialism, and Western rock music. Asya refers to herself simply as a 'bastard,' using the

derogatory term as a shield. Her identity is defined by a refusal to engage with the past, a stance born from the claustrophobic atmosphere of her home. Because the true story of her origin is wrapped in patriarchal violence and maternal silence, Asya concludes that history is a burden best thrown away. Her nihilism is a defense mechanism against a reality that is too painful to uncover.

Parallels of Silence: Domestic Abuse and Historical Amnesia

The narrative core of *The Bastard of Istanbul* deepens significantly when Armanoush Tchahkmakhchian, an Armenian-American girl, arrives at the Kazanci home. Armanoush is searching for her family's old house in Istanbul, driven by a need to connect with the memory of her ancestors who perished in the 1915 genocide. Her arrival brings Asya's desire to forget into direct conflict with her own profound need to remember. Shafak draws a deliberate structural parallel between how the Kazanci family treats Zeliha's rape and how the Turkish state treats the Armenian Genocide

- The Micro-Level (The Family): Mustafa's crime is hidden, wrapped in silence, and forgotten to preserve family honor. The victim is marginalized, and the lineage continues under a false narrative.
- The Macro-Level (The Nation): The state-enforced historical narrative omits the atrocities of 1915 to preserve a clean, proud national identity. The historical victims are erased from public memory, and modern citizens are encouraged to live in a state of collective amnesia.

This connection highlights how deeply patriarchy and nationalism depend on one another. Both systems rely on top-down authority to decide what is remembered and what is erased. When Armanoush and Asya uncover the truth-discovering that their families are historically linked, and that Mustafa is both Asya's uncle and father-the domestic and national secrets unravel simultaneously. Mustafa's sudden death by poisoning (orchestrated by Banu via spiritual insights and ancestral intervention) serves as a symbolic execution of the abusive patriarch, suggesting that historical and domestic justice are deeply intertwined.

Conclusions

In *The Bastard of Istanbul*, Elif Shafak demonstrates that patriarchal silence is not merely the absence of speech but a powerful mechanism that shapes female identity, suppresses traumatic experiences, and preserves unequal power structures. Through the lives of Asya,

Zeliha and the women of the Kazancı household, the novel reveals how women negotiate identity within a culture marked by secrecy, stigma and gendered expectations. While silence functions as a tool of patriarchal control, Shafak also portrays the act of remembering and storytelling as forms of resistance. By recovering hidden truths and giving voice to marginalized experiences, the novel challenges the erasure of women's histories and affirms the importance of self-expression in the formation of female identity. Ultimately, *The Bastard of Istanbul* emerges as a compelling critique of patriarchy and a celebration of women's resilience, agency and capacity to reclaim their narratives.

Elif Shafak's *The Bastard of Istanbul* offers a nuanced critique of patriarchal systems, demonstrating that they persist even within entirely female environments. The Kazancı matriarchy does not break free from patriarchal oppression; instead, it acts as a sieve that strains and stores its traumatic residue. By analyzing the diverse responses of Zeliha, Banu and Asya, the novel shows that neither surface-level modern rebellion nor traditional spiritual retreat can fully heal a fractured female identity. True liberation requires breaking the silence that protects the abuser. By linking Zeliha's personal trauma with the collective memory of the Armenian Genocide, Shafak delivers a powerful truth: female identity cannot be whole without historical integrity. Healing can only begin when women confront both domestic secrets and national myths, reclaiming their bodies and their histories from the structures that demand their silence.

Shafak demonstrates that patriarchy survives not only through visible male authority but also through inherited silences, cultural narratives and institutionalized forgetting. By connecting gendered trauma with national amnesia, *The Bastard of Istanbul* expands feminist discourse beyond the domestic sphere and reveals memory itself as a site of political struggle. The novel therefore remains a significant intervention in contemporary debates surrounding gender justice, historical accountability and cultural reconciliation.

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