

CULTURAL IMAGES OF THE EAST AND WEST IN ELIF SHAFAK'S NOVELS

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Abstract

This article is intended to discuss the images of the East and West as they are portrayed in Elif Shafak's novels, with emphasis on the ethnic clichés and stereotypes which are often engendered in and disseminated through fiction. More specifically, it examines how the novelist depicts Turkish and Oriental culture, often in contrast with its Western counterpart, through the complex and insightful images she skillfully creates. The theoretical part of the article relies on the seminal works of imagologists such as Joep Leerssen and Manfred Beller, who have laid the foundations for the study of cultural images, with emphasis on their shifting, dynamic and context-dependent nature, as well as on David Katan's logical levels of culture, which are used as a starting point for the analysis of the similarities and differences between the East and the West as represented in Shafak's work.

Keywords: *Elif Shafak, cultural orientation, stereotypes, ethnic clichés, clash of civilizations, East and West.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Elif Shafak's fiction is deeply rooted in the political events that define the 21st century; issues such as mass migration, the resurgence of nationalism, the clash between Western and Eastern cultures and ideologies have been skillfully incorporated in the novels of this Turkish writer. Through her characters and the

events she depicts, Shafak creates a series of cultural images, which are often taken at face value by readers. What is particularly interesting in Shafak's case is that in many of her novels, including the ones under investigation in this article, she chooses to describe the East in parallel with the West: in *The Bastard of Istanbul (BI)*, one can witness the gradual portrayal of the main protagonist of the novel, Asya, in contrast with Armanoush, an American girl with Armenian origins, born and raised in the United States; in *Three Daughters of Eve (DE)*, the noisy and stifling city of Istanbul is presented in antithesis with the peace and serenity of Oxford; in *Honour (H)*, a parallel is drawn between life in a small village in the proximity of Euphrates and life in London.

In a dynamic society in which power relations change so frequently, cultural images evolve in time and their creation is influenced by the historical context, as well as by prior mental images that the target audience may already have of other nations or peoples. The concepts of prejudice, stereotype and ethnic cliché have been extensively discussed by imagologists such as Joep Leerssen, Manfred Beller and Waldemar Zacharasiewicz, who have shown that ethnic images are effectively disseminated through literary works, in particular through travel books and novels.

In this sense, Joep Leerssen argues that literature is “a privileged genre for the dissemination of stereotypes” (2007:26) due to two important factors, namely the fact that literary texts “remain operative in the cultural system for a far more extended period” (2000:282) than other type of texts, which are more ephemeral, and to the fact that “national stereotyping is easier in a context that requires the reader's willing suspension of disbelief” (Ibidem).

According to Leerssen, imagology focuses primarily on the investigation of the dynamics between images which characterize the Other (*hetero-images*) and images which characterize one's own identity (*self-images* or *auto-images*). The Dutch comparatist introduces the concept of meta-image, to describe “how a nation believes it is perceived by others” (2007:344) and attempts to show that numerous countries, such as the colonized ones, “have imported the hetero-image from hegemonic foreign sources and interiorized them as auto-images.” (2007:343), process determined, to a certain extent, by power relations.

Manfred Beller, one of the founders of modern imagology, defines the concept of image as “the mental silhouette of the other, who appears to be determined by the characteristics of family, group, tribe, people or race” (2007:4) and states that “Literary imagology deals with attitudes and judgements between nations as fixed in texts.” (2007:432) In Joep Leerssen's view, images “specifically concern attributions of moral or characterological nature” (2007:342). The Dutch imagologist uses the term *image* “to describe an image in all its implicit, compounded polarities” (2007:344) and argues that all images change in time.

It is through the creation and dissemination of such images that Shafak's novels, written in English, provide cultural translations of the East, namely Turkey and Istanbul, for Western readers. The novelist takes it upon herself to present a culturally different society, that of the Orient, "Europe's wicked counterpart" (Thum, 2007:391), which relies on a system of values and beliefs that are, sometimes, in sharp contrast with Western cultures. However, Shafak constantly stresses the fact that similarities also exist between the East and the West and that these two civilizations would only have to gain by learning from one another: "I also want the knowledge produced in the West and the knowledge produced in the East to flow into one another, to change and influence each other." (2003:70). Her view is consistent with Edward Said's opinion: while he acknowledges the fact that identity is ultimately constructed by establishing opposites between *us* and *others* and that "Each age and society recreates its 'Others'" (1978:332), the cultural critic proposes that we shift focus to the way cultures overlap and to the enriching effect of this overlapping: "Rather than the manufactured clash of civilizations, we need to concentrate on the slow working together of cultures that overlap, borrow from each other, and live together in far more interesting ways than any abridged or inauthentic mode of understanding can allow." (1978:x).

2. THE EAST/WEST DIVIDE IN SHAFAK'S VIEW

In *The Happiness of Blonde People*, Shafak makes a comparison between the hetero-images of the East and the West, bringing keywords such as well-being, individualism and collectivism to the fore, and arguing that: "A common state of well-being, real or imaginary, is attributed to people in Europe, Canada and the USA. In the West, life is thought to be simpler, and fate, *lighter*" (2011:10, author's italics). The counter-belief is "that life in the East is more real and less degenerate than in the West; and that Western societies are so individualistic, so atomized, that they lack sufficient communal ties and family networks to support a person in his or her hour of need." (*Ibidem*).

According to Shafak, "The 9/11 attacks, the 2004 Madrid train bombings, the 2005 London bombings, the 2006 Danish cartoons incident, the assassination of Theo van Gogh, the anti-Islamic campaign of the Dutch MP Geert Wilders, the debates on banning the veil in France and minarets in Switzerland, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq..." (2011:12) have created a feeling of "perpetual *Angst*" within the European space, leading, I might add, to the reinforcement in the West of a series of negative images of the East, which are resistant to change.

The novelist writes of the United Nations school, where she was the only Turk and where she "encountered the three main international clichés about Turkey: politics, cigarettes and the veil" (2011:16). One could argue that Shafak

has used her own literature as an instrument for challenging such “international clichés”, for determining her readers to move beyond stereotypes and to genuinely try to get to know the Other: “We tend to form comfort zones based on similarity, and then produce macro-opinions and clichés about ‘Others’, whom, in fact, we know so little about.” (2011:24)

The Westerners’ stereotypes with respect to the Muslim world are challenged by Shafak in her literary works, interviews and essays: “The Muslim world is not, and has never been, a homogenous whole. The Muslim world is not, and has never been, stagnant.” (2011:22) The solution proposed by the novelist [3] is to embrace difference, to do our best to learn from the Other, and to avoid stereotypes, which are “so deeply rooted that people take them for granted” and ‘either...or’ thinking”: “...East and West cease to be mutually exclusive categories as soon as we stop regarding them as oil and water.” (2011:22)

The East/West divide is masterfully illustrated by the relationship between Elias and Pembe in Shafak’s novel *H*; the two characters, aware of the cultural gap between their cultures, pay special attention to all the elements pertaining to the cultural horizon of the other, including values, beliefs and way of life: “So fearful was he of saying or doing something wrong, of *eschewing cultural norms*, that he extended his hand for a firm shake. Ignoring the gesture, she approached and kissed him gently on the cheek.” (2015:132, my italics).

3. LEVELS OF CULTURE

Katan’s logical levels of cultures have been used in this paper in order to identify the cultural orientation of the East, respectively of the West, as it is rendered in Shafak’s novels. Arguing that “all communication is bounded by frames” (2021:73), Katan and Taibi make an important distinction between *frame*, which represents our psychological representation, part of our map of the world, our culture-bound patterns and *context*, which is in fact an external representation of reality. They present a series of logical levels of culture, which “function as a hierarchical series of meta-messages linking behaviour in an environment to a pattern of strategies (how), and organized by a set of values and beliefs (why).” (2021:74)

The logical levels of culture proposed by Katan and Taibi are *environment* (physical environment, climate, space, the built environment, dress style, olfaction and temporal setting), *behaviour*, the level at which stereotypes about other cultures are most prominent, *capabilities* (language channel and style, rituals, strategies), the first level that frames the interpretation of behaviour, *values*, *beliefs* (ideological environment, proverbs), *identity* and *imprinting*.

The first element in Katan’s logical levels of culture is the *environment*: the cultural theorist argues that “we tend to attach an identity to a geographical

area” (Katan, 2021:77) and that “Where are you from?” is one of the first questions we ask when meeting someone for the first time. In the *Migrations* interview, Elif Shafak spoke about the tendency of the world, and in particular of citizens of the West, to impose identity on other people. Even as a novelist in the USA, Shafak continues to feel that she will always be associated with Turkishness: “Your identity starts to precede your work. The artist is pushed and encouraged to remain in her identity.” (2003:77).

Other dichotomies which are related to the environment are the ones between urban areas, perceived as more civilized and open to change, and the rural setting, as well as the East/West and North-South or the centre-periphery binaries, which can be applied at a national, as well as at an international level; as argued by Katan, “physical boundaries can still narrow our skies or horizons and thus become cultural boundaries” (2021:76).

In Shafak’s novels, the description of the environment plays an essential role: cities are not simple elements of the physical world, on the contrary, they play an active part in the life of the characters in the novel and they may even become characters *per se*. In *BI*, Elif Shafak has managed to create one of her most successful, complex and intriguing characters: the city of Istanbul. The city is perceived through the eyes of several characters in the novel, as well as through the narrator’s eyes: what is interesting is that each character perceives Istanbul in their own way and brings to the surface different characteristics of this “very old, highly difficult and profusely complex city” (Shafak, 2003:69). The narrator, for instance, describes the city which comes to life at dawn as a “hodgepodge of ten million lives. It is an open book of ten million scrambled stories. Istanbul is waking up from its perturbed sleep, ready for the chaos of the rush hour.” (2015:243) The city is also depicted as a “city boat” (2015:170), with “snaky, crowded streets” (2015:341), “a strange land where nothing seemed normal” (*Ibidem*).

In *DE*, “the unashamedly boisterous” city of Istanbul is depicted in contrast with the silence of Oxford. The Turkish city is portrayed as “a civilized city”, “a giant construction site”, a city which “bordered on Europe”. Thus, we may notice that the in-betweenness of Turkey, one of the recurring concerns in Shafak’s fiction, is also addressed in this novel through the perspective of the omniscient narrator who describes Turkey’s struggle to be accepted in the Western world: “It was so breathtakingly close that Turkey had put one foot through Europe’s doorway and tried to venture forth with all its might – only to find the opening was so narrow that, no matter how much the rest of its body wriggled and squirmed, it could not squeeze itself in. Nor did it help that Europe, in the meantime, was pushing the door shut.” (2017:6)

The often contradictory heteroimages that Westerners have of the Turks are brought to the fore in *DE*: “the sunny impression”, with “sandy beaches” and “Eastern hospitality” is contrasted with the “gloomy picture” of “Islamic fundamentalists, police brutality and *Midnight Express*” (2017:189). One is thus faced with what Leersen calls “ambivalent imagery” (2000:279), which appears when contradictory stereotypes overlap. Shirin’s statement, “Even the most educated are not immune to clichés” (*Ibidem*) comes to reinforce the idea that “our way of seeing and judging is conditioned by preconceived notions, prejudice and stereotypes.” (Beller, 2007:4)

According to Katan, the perception of the environment varies from culture to culture: the cultural theorist distinguishes between cultures which feel that they can control the environment and cultures which “will believe that the environment has a measure of control over them” (2021:260). For example, the “In sha Allah” expression which frequently appears in Shafak’s novels suggests the fact that members of the Arabic culture feel that “supernatural forces, destiny or luck” (*Ibidem*) are responsible for the success or failure of their plans.

Climate is another element of material culture, which should not be ignored when establishing cultural orientation: in Shafak’s novels, one comes across a multitude of references to weather: for instance, the first chapter in *The Bastard of Istanbul* depicts a rain in Istanbul, which is described as “agony”, “mud, and chaos, and rage”, as “the struggle” of ten million Istanbulites who “put up a futile fight against the drops” (2015:2). Istanbul’s “infamous downpours” are also present in *Honour*.

The attitude towards the cold is another element which proves that climate is indeed part of the cultural orientation of a people. A revealing consideration in this respect is provided in *Honour*: “Tariq observed the English children, their button nosed red, their skins pallid, and their clothes always too light. Turkish mothers would swathe their babies and toddlers in cardigan after cardigan, and place a knitted blanket on top of them before taking them outside. English mothers, however, made do with a pair of shorts and a thin anorak. Sometimes the children didn’t even wear socks. Why didn’t they freeze? For the life of him, *Tariq couldn’t understand how the ability to deal with the cold could be cultural.*” (2015:234, my italics). The weather in London is also presented through the eyes of Pembe, who is unable to adjust to the “permanently overcast sky”: “What she couldn’t adjust to, however, was the weather. The rain. The gloom. The clouds always a tint of some obscure colour.”(2015:337).

Space and built environment are also elements incorporated by Katan in the logical levels of culture: physical space needs, for instance, are culture-specific and the built environment provides useful information about a country’s or even a family’s history: for instance, the konak of the Kazancı family is presented in contrast with the modern buildings surrounding it: “the slightly-decrepit, high-

ceilinged Ottoman konak that looked out of place amid five times as tall modern apartment buildings” (2015:22), the “once fashionably opulent but now long outmoded and dilapidated konak in Istanbul” (2015:90), emphasizing the contrast between traditional buildings erected during the Ottoman era and the modern buildings of the modern times.

Big cities are perceived as suffocating by some characters in the novels: “Jamila found big cities suffocating, and was daunted by the thought of unknown places – the buildings, the avenues, the crowds pressing on her chest, leaving her gasping for air.” (2015:33), whereas rural areas, such as the village where Jamilla lived, “a remote Kurdish village with no roads, no electricity, no doctor, no school” (2015:6), are associated with lack of progress and change: “Human beings were ordained to be sedentary, like trees and boulders” (*Ibidem*), with a feeling of hopelessness and abandonment.

Dress, “usually the first sign of identity” (Katan, 2021:82) is amply discussed in all the three novels under analysis: Shafak makes use of a plethora of cultural terms which refer to the traditional Arab code of dress, such as *burka*, *çador*, *niqab*, *hajib*, which are unfamiliar to the Western world and which often give rise to heated debates all over the globe. As stated by the novelist in *Divided by the veil* [2] “...in Turkey the headscarf is not seen as a trivial symbol.[...] At a first glance there seems to be a huge mental, cultural and political gap dividing Turkey’s women. Yet if we look closer this gap becomes illusory. In everyday life the two types of Turkish women are more mixed than they are usually assumed to be.” Shafak illustrates this aspect by including headscarf wearers and non-wearers within the same household: in the Kazanci family, for instance, Aunt Banu chooses to cover her head, whereas her mother, Grandma Gülsüm, does not approve of her choice, considering it a betrayal of the rights bestowed upon Turkish women by Atatürk. In *Three Daughters of Eve*, readers are faced with a heated debate with regard to the headscarf: while Mona associates the headscarf with her identity and sees the act of wearing “that little piece of cloth” as a matter of personal choice, Shirin is openly against it.

The attitude of a people towards time is another constituent of cultural orientation; for instance, in *The Bastard of Istanbul* the narrator insists on the difference in the perception of time between the Armenian and the Turks, with emphasis on the collective amnesia of the latter: “The Armenians and the Turks lived in *different time frames*. For the Armenians, time was a cycle in which the past incarnated in the present and the present birthed the future. For the Turks, time was a multihyphenated line, where the past ended at some definite point and the present started anew from scratch, and there was nothing but rupture in between.” (2007:164-165, my italics) Shafak herself states in *Memory-Less*

Turkey/Amnesiac Turkey [1] that “Turkey is a society of collective amnesiacs”, where “the tendency towards forgetting history tends to dominate” (*Ibidem*).

The different relationship of the cities of Istanbul and Oxford with the past is also addressed in *DE*: whereas in Istanbul “the past was treated like a visitor who had overstayed his welcome” (2017:98), in Oxford the past was “the guest of honour” (*Ibidem*). The relation between Istanbul, and implicitly Turkey, with the past, is an issue extensively discussed by Shafak, who highlights the importance of continuity between past and present, arguing that complete oblivion or amnesia with respect to one’s past can only lead to feelings of incompleteness and uncertainty.

All the novels discussed in this paper comprise a plethora of culturally marked terms and references specific to Turkey, whose national identity escapes categorization because of the constant oscillation between East and West. As Shafak states in one of her interviews, the Turks are very much concerned with the way they are perceived by the West and this concern is often reflected in their behaviour: “Turks are generally too obsessed with the idea of how they look to the eyes of foreigners, to the eyes of Westerners. Too busy to prove how different they are from the Arabs or other Muslims, too preoccupied with their image...” (2003:68)

Whereas true Istanbulites, such as Aunt Zeliha, feel that they belong to the city, foreigners have to deal with the impenetrable nature of Istanbul: Asya takes Armanoush on a ferry ride, so that “she could see the city in all its vastness and splendour.” (2015:197) The Armenian teenager perceives the city through the eyes of the newly arrived, seeing it as an “urban maze, cities within a city” (2015:179), as a “jumble of aromas, some of them strong and rancid, others sweet and stimulating” (2015:246), “twisted and multifaceted” (*Ibidem*).

The culinary tradition is one of the key elements used by Shafak in most of her novels to stress the difference of perception and mentality between the East and the West: on the one hand, there is the richness of the Oriental cuisine, where cooking appears as a manifestation of women’s affection and commitment towards their families. A multitude of references are made to traditional recipes which are passed on from one generation to the other, a predilection towards eating indoors and high regard for traditional cooking. On the other hand, there is the “heavy and insular” (2015:131), resistant-to- change English cuisine, the modern wives who “don’t have time to cook” (2015:130), the British kitchens which were “deliberately made tiny and gloomy so that everyone would have to make do with takeaways” (2015:46).

The Turks are also described through their behaviour, through their belief in superstitions; *BI* introduces the reader to a world of myth and superstitions, where emotions, habits and customs prevail over reason: for some characters, Turkey is also the land of the djinns, who cast spells on human beings; the evil

eye goes away every time a glass breaks, lead pouring is an effective technique for fighting evil, and the fig tree is perceived as a symbol of bad things, “an ominous sign”, which “does not bring good luck” (2015: 255).

The novelist explains the significance of the djinns in Islamic culture, thus offering useful insights to foreigners: “Back in the Ottoman Empire, thresholds were regarded as the abode of the *djinn*. Unlike we humans, the *djinn* were created of smokeless fire, So says the Qur’an. They were nebulous, intangible. Although some were known to be good and generous, you could never trust a *djinni*. Not surprisingly, in Islamic cultures thresholds have been seen as elusive places, zones of ambiguity.” (2011:18-19)

The multitude of references to mythological creatures and places, which are part of traditional Turkish folklore, such as: Shangri-La, a fictitious, utopian realm, Dabbet Arz, “the ogre destined to emerge on the Day of Judgment” (2015:63), the nefs, Kaf Mountain, “the abode of all things imaginary” (2013:170), “where no human beings were ever welcome, the abode of fairies, nymphs and sprites” (*Ibidem*) reveal the strong power of myth in the Islamic way of life as represented by Shafak.

The wedding and funeral rites, described in *BI* and *H*, are also specific to Islamic culture, so foreigners may be unable to grasp the full meaning of those traditions. In the chapter devoted to the funerals of the last man in the Kazanci family, one learns that the procession is led by a hearse “sage green as a Muslim hearse is dictated to be, the colour black being reserved for the funerals of the minorities” (2015:340), that the dead was laid on a divan, that “two large coins of darkened silver were placed on his eyelids so that they wouldn’t flip open” (2015:350), that “water from Holy Mecca” had been poured on his mouth and that “bits of sandalwood incense were burned ” (*Ibidem*) and that performers were hired “to come and cry at the house of the dead” (2015:352). The rites of mourning also included the fact that “there was no more cooking in the house”, “every guest came with a tray of food” and “music was not allowed” (*Ibidem*).

The rites for honouring the dead in Asian communities are also presented in *H*, where readers are made aware of the different traditions of the East, unfamiliar to Western citizens: “The other day I made halva for her soul. I distributed it to my neighbours. They were a bit surprised, *not being familiar with our customs.*” (2015:91, my italics)

4. THE WESTERN OTHER

Elif Shafak sketches a portrait of the English in *H*, where the protagonist’s family moves to London after having lived in Istanbul, and emphasizes the immigrants’ difficulties in adjusting to life in the British capital. The narrator

makes the reader aware of the efforts Pembe makes to grasp the meanings that the English often convey through irony, considering that she is accustomed to a more direct and transparent communication style: “To her, England was a nation of words, and she tried hard to crack the *hidden meanings, the in-jokes, the irony.*” (2015:338, my italics). The difficulty in understanding the English language, its metaphors and idioms in particular, is also expressed through the voice of Iskender: “Imagine trying to crack the meaning of ‘kicking the bucket’. You learned the verb ‘to kick’ and you know what a damn bucket is, but, no matter how hard you try, it just doesn’t sink in.” (2015:135)

Adem’s perception of the British comes to reinforce his wife’s opinion; through the voice of the lonely and miserable character addicted to gambling, who does not succeed in laying the foundations for a prosperous life in London, readers are introduced to other stereotypes with respect to the English, such as bad weather, small-sized apartments, tasteless food, and politeness: “No rain coming down in buckets, no pork sausages wrapped in glazed bacon as if to double the sin, no pint-sized kitchens in mouldy houses, no tomatoes without taste, no youngsters dyeing their hair purple and terrorizing the streets with their drunken madness. The Brits were always polite: they spat in your face so courteously that you expected them to hand you a handkerchief afterwards. You could not come to blows with an English gentleman, for he would hit you with faint praise.” (2015:271-272)

The main protagonist in *DE* also reflects on the different communication styles of the English and the Turks, on “the indirect way of expressing their opinions” (2017:182) of the English, who have “layers to communication” and who “clothed their criticisms in cryptic praise” (*Ibidem*). The same opinion is voiced by Adem, the Turkish immigrant who struggles to understand the ways of the English: “It took years to figure out when the English were complimenting you and when they were telling you that you had screwed up. With the Arabs, things would be more direct, more transparent. You would know that when someone said ‘Welcome’ they really meant it.” (2015:271-272)

Pembe’s image of Londoners is also rooted in stereotypes: the *self* is constructed, once again, in relation to the *other*, through a process of alterity. “The starchiness of old ladies, the brazenness of youth, the freedom of housewives, the kind of confidence she never had and never thought she would obtain. She would watch the women in their T-shirts with their nipples showing, their hair iridescent in the sun, and marvel at how they wore their femininity like a gown. Couples kissing on the streets, smoking, drinking, debating. Never had she seen people so keen to lead their lives out in the public...” (2015:337-338).

One could argue that *H* is actually the novel which makes its readers keenly aware of stereotypes and where “standardized images of others” (Beller, 2007:429) and “standardized self-images” (*Ibidem*) intertwine incessantly.

London, the city with “red, two-tiered buses and immense clock towers” (2015:32) turns out to be overwhelming for Asian immigrants who have already reached adulthood and who have a pre-determined set of expectations with respect to this city and its inhabitants. However, the children-protagonists in these novels seems more receptive to change and more willing to embrace a new way of life, which combines the old and the new.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This article has attempted to show how Shafak managed to create complex images of the East and West, bringing to the fore stereotypes which have been associated with Istanbul/Turkishness/the East, on the one hand, and London/the West, on the other hand. Her representation of the East versus West in the novels *The Bastard of Istanbul*, *Honour* and *Three Daughters of Eve* was discussed using Katan’s logical levels of culture, namely environment, behaviour, capability, beliefs and values, identity and imprinting; my analysis has shown that identifying the cultural orientation of a nation contributes to acquiring deeper and genuine understanding of the Self, as well as of the Other, moving beyond stereotypes that are often part of our socio-cultural heritage.

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