

NARRATING THE IN-BETWEEN: CULTURAL STEREOTYPES AND GEOGRAPHICAL DETERMINISM IN THE NOVELS OF ELIF SHAFAK

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Abstract

Elif Shafak's fiction enjoys a unique cultural and literary position at the convergence of Eastern and Western traditions, blending personal experience, political thought, and imaginative storytelling. Her fiction is distinct by the way she consistently challenges binary cultural framings, rigid nationalism, and identity singularity, promoting instead "multiple attachments" and inclusive perspectives. Previous research on Shafak's fiction has examined the thematic engagement with gender, politics, and mysticism, as defining features of her novels. This article aims to advance a more integrated analysis of how her novels and public discourse jointly deconstruct long-standing cultural stereotypes and build identity beyond geographical determinism. The purpose of this study is to explore the ways in which Shafak's fiction and public discourse function as interconnected spaces for negotiating cultural intersections, fostering empathy, and disrupting East–West dichotomies. This research attempts to contribute to broader discussions on transnational literature and the narrative strategies used to bridge diverse cultural frameworks.

Keywords: deconstruction, cultural stereotypes, geographical determinism, environmental interconnectedness.

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1. Introduction

Living and writing at the crossroads of East and West, Elif Shafak enjoys the unique position of an exciting and innovative writer who both critiques and bridges contrasting cultural and societal constructs, often considered by many others as mutually exclusive. A prominent contemporary writer, she uses both her literary work and public discourse to explore and challenge rigid cultural stereotypes and boundaries. Raised in a matriarchal household by her mother and grandmother, Elif

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Shafak (born Elif Bilgin) experienced frequent international moves, spending her life in between the East and the West, not only geographically but also culturally, emotionally and intellectually, as she herself often emphasizes: “Inside my soul reside stories from the East and... from the West, and I don’t know exactly where the boundary lies” (Heriyanto, 2019).

In one interview on the occasion of her nomination for the Orange Prize, the writer relates her passion for Turkish popular traditions and women-centred oral traditions, so intriguingly interwoven in her fiction, to her grandmother’s practices: “I realised that women who have been denied any power in other spheres of life can find a means of existence in this little world of superstitions, of folk-tales, of storytelling... They are the queen in that sphere, especially as they get older” (Tonkin, 2007 as cited in Heriyanto, 2008). Moreover, her early interdisciplinary attraction to political theory, gender studies and mysticism is reflected in the choice of her studies. Elif Shafak pursued a Ph. D. in political science, where she focused on Middle Eastern studies and contemporary Western thought, and a Master’s Degree, focusing on the deconstruction of femininity along the cyclical understanding of heterodox dervishes in Islam.

Her resistance to rigid cultural or national labels is aligned with her broader literary achievement of challenging stereotypes and encouraging complexity in how we see ourselves and others. Being used to living between cultures, languages and geographies, she believes in the emotional continuity of place, even when physically distant:

Place is very important to me. As an immigrant author I think a lot about questions of belonging and non-belonging. What does it mean to be uprooted or deracinated, rootless, re-rooted.... Can we have multiple homes, multiple belongings in a world that tries to narrow us down to a single box. (...) Life has also taught me that just because you are physically far away from your motherland it does not mean you are disconnected from it emotionally. We carry our motherlands with us wherever we go. (The Booker Prizes, n.d.)

Elif Shafak’s fiction does not only help us to relive forgotten stories but it also acts as a geographical and cultural bridge builder. Meant to emerge from the writer’s emotions and imagination, fiction should meet the demands of “writing what you feel” rather than “writing what you know” (Shafak, 2010). The writer thinks that stories have the power to stimulate empathy and foster human connection across difference. This perspective, she publicly showed in her 2010 TED talk *The Politics of Fiction*, has been expressively exploited in her literary in-between spaces, where cultures and identities intersect and overlap, while vivid accounts encourage to a more inclusive understanding of the self and of the other.

In an “Age of Angst”, literature has an even more important function, that of enhancing hope, on the one hand, and that of building resistance, on the other hand. The unique ability of literature to evoke empathy and reaffirm the interconnectedness of our shared human experience, as the writer thinks, is emphasized in both her public discourse and her fiction: “In the age of hyper information, instant gratification, fast consumption and climate destruction, literature is, and has to be, an act of hope. And resistance. Resistance not through force, but through its capacity to remind us of our shared humanity” (Shafak, 2024). Another role she assigns to literature is that of reclaiming marginalised voices and empowering those whom society has silenced: “As a writer I am not only interested in stories and storytelling, I am also drawn to silences – and the silenced. There is a part of me that wants to understand where are the silences in my society and who are the silenced.” (The Booker Prizes, n.d.)

Eastern spiritualism and Western rationalism (*The Forty Rules of Love*, 2009), feminist resistance and traditional norms (*Three Daughters of Eve*, 2016, *Honour*, 2012), the reconciliation of national identities and worldliness (*The Bastard of Istanbul*, 2006, *The Architect’s Apprentice*, 2013, *The Island of Missing Trees*, 2021, *There are Rivers in the Sky*, 2024), migration and memory (*The Bastard of Istanbul*, *The Island of Missing Trees*, *There are Rivers in the Sky*) are some common and constant themes explored in Shafak’s fiction. Basically, her literary approach challenges the rigid nationalism and opposes the binary East-West framing, with her last two novels being lyrically threaded by environmental interconnectedness: through the voice of a fig tree narrator whose perspective shows that human history also leaves traces on environment history and through water, which becomes the literal connector of cultural memory.

Shafak’s fiction is paralleled by her own vision about the erosion of diversity and the cognitive biases of binary thinking, as shown in her 2017 TED Global talk *The Revolutionary Power of Diverse Thought*. Her characters’ permanent navigation between East (the liquid countries) and West (the solid countries), tradition and modernity, relatedness and alienation is analogous to the writer’s rejection of identity singularity in favour of what she calls “multiple attachments” (Shafak, 2017). Insisting on the power of emotions in shaping cultural realities, Shafak challenges the assumption that democratic stability is the preserve of the West, a viewpoint also reflected in the Western-Eastern dichotomies exploited in her fiction (Armanoush’s conversation with her relatives, Kazanci family’s silences - *The Bastard of Istanbul*, Peri’s encounters with Western peers - *Three Daughters of Eve*, Defne and Kostas’s relationship, Ada’s experiences of cultural isolation and racial microaggressions - *The Island of Missing Trees*).

Much like her public discourse, the lives, behaviours and attitudes of her characters undermine cultural stereotypes by showing that democratic and strong authoritarian impulses are likely to manifest anywhere because identities cannot be reduced to

geographical determinism (the political violence in Cyprus versus migrant exclusions in the UK - *The Island of Missing Trees*). Resembling the Turkish word “yurt”, which means home “homeland” and “nomadic tent”, home is depicted in her novels as an evolving space, built on memory, mobility, empathy across boundaries, not confined to one location or cultural framework (Ella Rubinstein’s journey, starting with her encounter with a Sufi traveller, Aziz’s life, the Rumi–Shams narrative – *The Forty Rules of Love*). The beauty of diversity lies in reimagining identity as a spot of cultural intersection.

This article aims to move beyond existing studies on themes such as gender, spirituality and cosmopolitan identity, by examining how narrative strategies, symbolic structures and non-human perspectives actively participate in dismantling cultural stereotypes and questioning geographical determinism. Focusing on the convergence between Shafak’s literary texts and her public interventions as well as on the environmental interconnectedness as a narrative mechanism, this study offers a more nuanced understanding of literature as a space for negotiating identity beyond fixed cultural and geographical limits. In doing so, the critical focus is shifted towards how her narratives actively construct alternative ways of thinking about culture, belonging, and identity.

Methodologically, this study adopts a qualitative, interpretive approach grounded in close reading and discourse analysis. It examines selected novels alongside the author’s public statements in order to identify recurring thematic patterns, narrative strategies, and symbolic structures. By integrating literary analysis with insights from cultural theory, the article seeks to demonstrate how fiction and public discourse jointly participate in challenging cultural stereotypes and geographical determinism.

2. Literature review

Elif Shafak’s role and recognition in world literature have prompted not only considerable but also controversial analysis in scholarly discourse across national and international contexts. Most research has focused on the representation of gender roles, incorporating perspectives from feminist theories. Portraying women’s lives constrained by cultural traditions, Shafak’s fiction highlights the global persistence of gender inequality bridging Eastern and Western contexts, thus calling for the need to redefine gender roles based on individual happiness and norms of equality (Zacharia, 2023: 227). Actually, Shafak’s literary representation of gender roles in her fiction is also reinforced by the opinions presented by the writer in her public discourses, where she claims that much of Turkish historiography is “*his-story*”, focusing on male figures in positions of power while silencing the lived realities of women and minorities:

Most of the history that is taught to us in Turkey is his-story, meaning the stories of a few men in positions of power and authority—like Sultans. How was life in the Ottoman Empire like for women? Where are the stories of women? Silence. How was it like for minorities—a Kurdish peasant, an Armenian silversmith, a Jewish miller, an Arab farmer, a Greek sailor.... Silence. So as writers we have to dig deep through layers of history and amnesia to unearth untold stories. (Shafak, 2024).

Calling on for critical reflection on how global capital influences the production and perception of transnational literature, Doğangün highlights the tension between Shafak’s artistic intention to promote inclusivity and the role of cultural hybridity in bridging East and West, on the one hand, and the global market imperatives, which have commodified her work into a brand satisfying Western readers’ literary tastes, on the other hand (Doğangün, 2021). Shafak’s fiction has also been analysed in relation with Edward Soja’s theory of Thirdspace: “a purposefully tentative and flexible term that attempts to capture what is actually a constantly shifting and changing milieu of ideas, events, appearances, and meanings” (Soja, 2009: 52). Venues like cafés and taverns function as third spaces where conflicting identities meet and attempt to negotiate difference, to confront historical traumas and try reconciliation. These places – Café Kundera in Istanbul and a cybercafé called Café Constantinopolis, where Asya Kazanci and Armanoush Tcakhmakhchian meet (*The Bastard of Istanbul*) and The Happy Fig Tavern, where Kostas and Defne hide their relationship (*The Island of Missing Trees*) – facilitate resistance against conflicts and their consequences, many of which eternalize ethnic and territorial divisions (Asyifa, 2023:11).

Some of her novels (*The Forty Rules of Love* and *Three Daughters of Eve*) have been studied through the lenses of cosmopolitanism and spirituality. In an article examining the responses of secular and religious readerships in English and Turkish, Gregory Fox frames Shafak’s narrative strategies as acts of faith in her readership: rather than directly correcting stereotypes about Muslim women or “teaching” Western readers about other cultures, she invites an intimate, imaginative engagement that goes beyond rigid identity politics (Gregory Fox, 2023:366). Aware of how fiction has been marketed, “as providing a “window” onto an orientalist vision of Muslim women’s lives, or characterized as a profane national insult”, the writer puts forward culturally rich micro-narratives and counts on the reader’s willingness to respond with empathy and openness (2023:363). There is also relevant research on the perception of multicultural identity, basically following the story of Pembe Toprak, an immigrant minority carrying with her the authoritative culture she has fled (Gürbüz, 2019).

Recent scholarship has also examined the construction and negotiation of East–West cultural imagery in Shafak’s fiction. Ichim (2022) explores how cultural representations of the “East” and the “West” are not fixed oppositions but fluid and context-dependent constructs, shaped through narrative perspective and character

development. Shafak destabilizes fixed representations of East and West by presenting culture as hybrid and continuously evolving, “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.” (Ichim, 2022: 85)

3. Research framework

This article aims to advance a more integrated analysis of how her novels and public discourse jointly deconstruct long-standing cultural stereotypes and build identity beyond geographical determinism. The purpose of this study is to explore the ways in which Shafak’s fiction and public statements function as interconnected spaces for negotiating cultural intersections, fostering empathy, and disrupting cultural dichotomies. This research attempts to contribute to broader discussions on transnational literature and the narrative strategies used to bridge diverse cultural frameworks and it is guided by the following research questions:

1. How are cultural stereotypes represented or challenged in Elif Shafak’s novels?
2. Is environmental interconnectedness used to support or criticize cultural and geographical determinism?
3. Does Shafak’s literary works and her public discourse converge in disrupting rigid cultural frameworks?

This study employs qualitative, interpretive research grounded in literary and discourse analysis, based on both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources consist of selected novels by Elif Shafak —*The Forty Rules of Love* (2010), *The Island of Missing Trees* (2021)— as well as her TED talks (*The Politics of Fiction*, 2010; *The Revolutionary Power of Diverse Thought*, 2017) and relevant public interviews. The analysis focuses on recurring thematic patterns, narrative strategies, and symbolic structures that address cultural stereotypes, identity beyond geographical determinism and the role played by environmental interconnectedness in disrupting rigid cultural frameworks. Secondary sources include media interviews and critical essays to contextualize Shafak’s work within transnational and postcolonial literary frameworks.

These methodological tools guide the analysis in the following sections, where close readings of selected passages are interpreted through the lens of cultural theory in order to reveal how stereotypes are constructed, negotiated, and ultimately destabilized.

4. Theoretical framework

Stereotypical thinking and geographical determinism have long shaped the way societies perceive themselves and the others. Based on the assumption that all

members of a particular culture or religion think, act and behave in the same way, cultural and religious stereotypes generate distorted perceptions, misunderstandings and even conflict, both within and outside the stereotyped group. The various cultural stereotypes long emerging across societies have been categorized into different types and have been studied from different perspectives by numerous scholars.

Fons Trompenaars and Charles Hampden-Turner conceptualize culture as a layered phenomenon. The “explicit products”, such as food, language and art, make up the “outer layer” or the “explicit culture”, likely to generate stereotypes, because the symbols of this surface level are interpreted through the lens of one’s own cultural background: “each opinion we voice regarding explicit culture usually says more about where we come from than about the community we are judging” (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 2012: 21). The middle layer consists of norms, “the mutual sense a group has of what is “right” and “wrong”, and values, which “determine the definition of “good and bad”, and are therefore closely related to the ideals shared by a group” (2012: 21-22), both of which have been shaped over centuries by environmental and historical conditions. Last but not least, the core layer consists of unconscious assumptions about existence.

According to Trompenaars, cultures do not differ because they face different core human problems, but because they prioritize different solutions to shared dilemmas. His framework of seven cultural dimensions – universalism/particularism, individualism/communitarianism, neutral/emotional, specific/diffuse, achievement/ascription, sequential/synchronic time, and internal vs. external control – has resulted from the interaction between inherited norms and adaptive responses: how to relate to others, how to approach time, how to act upon nature etc. Consequently, a stereotype, defined as “a very limited view of the average behaviour in a certain environment”, occurs when one culture views the other through the extreme ends of these dimensions, mistaking difference for deficiency (2012: 26-28).

In his comprehensive analysis of the influence of cultural values on individual and social behaviour, G. Hofstede identifies six primary cultural dimensions: power distance, individualism/collectivism, masculinity/femininity, uncertainty avoidance, long-term/short-term orientation, and indulgence/restraint, according to which he further identifies a few common stereotypes or generalizations. Categorized as being high power distance, Middle Eastern countries are stereotyped as focusing on hierarchical order in society and family, showing respect and submission to someone in a position of power or influence, children being expected “to be obedient toward their parents”, while “independent behaviour on the part of a child is not encouraged” (Hofstede, 2010: 67). Unlike individualistic societies, collectivist ones, such as those in many Asian and Middle Eastern cultures, prioritize group harmony and family loyalty, always honouring their ancestors (2010: 94-101). Cultures with a high score

in masculinity – defined as “the desirability of assertive behaviour”– value competitiveness and material success, attributing these to men. On the contrary, cultures scoring high in femininity – defined as “desirability of modest behaviour” – are stereotyped as valuing quality of life and taking care of their family and of the weak. (2010:136)

Cultures with high uncertainty avoidance, such as Middle Eastern and African countries, (uncertainty avoidance being defined as “the extent to which the members of a culture feel threatened by ambiguous or unknown situation” (2010:191)) prefer clear rules, strong traditions and structured social norms. Leaning toward the short-term orientation side of the “yesterday, now or later” spectrum (2010:235), Middle Eastern countries show respect for historical continuity, family honour and religious values, unlike long-term oriented cultures, known for their ability to adapt their traditions to modern contexts. Moreover, high-indulgence cultures are stereotyped as being optimistic, open to change, valuing leisure and personal freedom (North and Latin America, Western Europe) while high restraint cultures (Middle East, North Africa and Eastern Europe) are typically generalized as having reserved emotional expression, focusing on self-control, formality, linking gratification to religious and traditional values (2010: 280-285).

In the Introduction to *Orientalism*, a canonical “analysis and description of a very worldly matter, the rise, development and consolidation of Orientalism” (Said, 1978: 27) and the way it has been represented by the West over centuries, Edward Said expresses his firm disapproval of those believing that “the Orient was almost a European invention and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunted memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences” (1978:1). Interpreted under the cultural perspective envisaged by Said (the other two perspectives being the academic and the political ones), Orientalism is a “style of thought”, based on a fundamental distinction between the East (“Orient”) and the West (“Occident”), which, due to the cultural differences, has become permanent. In this rigid East-West dichotomy, the Orient is depicted as static, irrational, despotic and mysterious, while the Occident is described as dynamic, rational, moral and superior (1978: 2-3). While reducing the Orient to a single, rigid identity, such ideological tools promote the Occident as a natural point of authority, also serving as a comparison benchmark.

Far from being isolated prejudices, Orientalist stereotypes have been reinforced by repetition across genres and time periods. As Said suggests, such cultural stereotypes should be understood as politically motivated constructs, rather than factual descriptions (1978: 11-12). At the same time, the author invites the reader to see the East and the West beyond geographical determinism: “the Orient (...) is not merely there, just as the Occident itself is not just there neither (...) such locales, regions, geographical sectors as “Orient” and “Occident” are man-made.” (1978: 4-5)

5. Stereotypical thinking and geographical determinism - case studies

Presenting hybrid identities, cross-cultural settings and characters who do not fall within essentialist classification, Elif Shafak's narratives disrupt the rigid cultural generalized thinking, empowering us to claim that the writer does not belong to the "large mass of writers (...) who have accepted the basic distinction between East and West as the starting point for elaborate theories, epics, novels, social descriptions, and political accounts concerning the Orient, its people, customs, mind, destiny and so on" (1978: 3). Using storytelling to deconstruct the rigid cultural stereotypes often imposed by geographical determinism, Shafak builds active characters who blend, resist and reimagine tradition and culture while navigating between East and West.

The Forty Rules of Love basically reveals the spiritual transformation through love of two main characters: Ella Rubinstein, set in contemporary America, and Jafal al-Din Rumi, set in thirteenth century Anatolia, in an embedded narrative. Ella's journey should be read in the light of challenging and disrupting socially accepted stereotypes. The novel opens with Ella Rubinstein, a forty-year-old housewife, who has a stable but emotionally stagnant marriage, three children and handles a lot of domestic routines. Ella's spiritual emptiness and disappointment in love are deepened by her daughter's abrupt announcement of her engagement, during an ordinary family lunch. The dialogue between Jeannette and her parents is a first attempt to deconstruct the stereotype that marrying within one's own religious and cultural group is innately safer. Even if David and Ella appear to be educated and open-minded individuals, they tend to unconsciously perpetuate cultural and religious boundaries that the younger generation challenges. Rooted in inherited cultural prejudices rather than in genuine lived evidence, the "big gamble" Ella mentions is related to a bias common across religions and cultures. A close reading of this dialogue reveals how cultural stereotypes are reproduced through everyday language and familial interaction. Stereotypes also operate linguistically in Shafak's writings: difference is framed as instability and danger, or, as Ella herself points out, as "a big gamble".

Jeannette, however, seemed relentless. Turning to her mother, she asked, "Can you look me in the eyes and tell me you'd still be making the same objections if Scott were a young Jewish man named Aaron? (...) "Sweetheart, I'll be completely honest with you, even if you might not like it. I know how wonderful it is to be young and in love. Believe me, I do. But to get married to someone from a different background is a big gamble. And as your parents we want to make sure you're doing the right thing. (Shafak, 2010: 7)

A housewife for a while, Ella has found a part-time job as a reader for a literary agency and her first assignment was to read and evaluate "an unpublished novel by an unknown author (...) on a subject as irrelevant to her as Sufism..." (Shafak, 2010: 9). Her initial reaction and the hesitation in reading the manuscript are illustrative

examples of cultural insularity: cultural distance is considered irrelevant just because it is remote and unknown. Ella, like many other people, thinks that literature and history from foreign culture is less meaningful because it is not from her own cultural background. The subconscious filter she applied when she judged her daughter's relationship due to a religious and cultural difference is once again revealed in her dismissal of a book and an author just because they are culturally distant. Ella's stereotypical thinking is challenged by her colleague/superior – Michelle – who thinks that living in Massachusetts does not mean one should only read novels set there: "Just because you live in this state, you can't expect to edit only novels that take place in Massachusetts, right? (...) Just this week I finished working on a book by an Iranian woman (...) Should I have told her to send the manuscript to an Iranian agency instead?" (Shafak, 2010: 9). The very qualities Ella now sees distant, irrelevant and unsafe will become the source of profound emotional and spiritual rebirth. Both her daughter and her colleague show Ella that cultural openness is the willingness to accept diversity even when it is unfamiliar, uncomfortable, but most of all, personal. This narrative transformation reflects what Ichim (2022) identifies as Shafak's strategy of dismantling culturally inherited binaries, replacing them with relational and experiential understandings of identity. Moreover, interpreting this shift through Trompenaars' understanding of culture as layered (2012), Ella's initial reactions reflect the "outer layer" of culture, while her transformation illustrates a movement toward more complex and less stereotyped interpretations.

Before reading the manuscript, Ella is portrayed as having a conventional worldview, valuing security, predictability and obeying social norms, disapproving cross-cultural and cross-religious unions. The more involved she gets into reading Aziz Zahara's manuscript, and consequently the story of Rumi and Shams of Tabriz, the deeper her spiritual awakening is. Once she understands and feels that love can transcend religious, cultural and social boundaries, she questions her stereotyped assumptions. By the end of the novel, Ella is willing to abandon her safe life as a suburban American wife and engage in an emotional and spiritual relationship with Aziz, a Muslim, a wandering Sufi and a writer living outside Ella's cultural framework. Moreover, Ella's spiritual journey is also a challenge to generalized gender stereotypes. An emotionally reserved wife and a perfect and meticulous housewife, handling home and family care routines and concerned about meeting social expectations, Ella shows at first a perspective reinforcing traditional gender roles. Ella's transformation by the end of the novel defies such gender stereotypes of conformity, showing how women can pursue individual fulfilment and become independent, challenging the fact that a stable domestic life cannot fill emotional void. Interpreted through a discourse-analytical lens, her shift from stability-oriented language to expressions of emotional and spiritual openness signals a reconfiguration of identity beyond culturally prescribed norms.

One of the three ways promoted by society to alleviate ambiguity and anxiety is the pursuit of religion, due to the fact that "religion helps followers to accept the

uncertainties against which one cannot defend oneself” (Hofstede, 2010: 189). Most often than not, especially in such countries as those from the Middle East and Africa (see Hofstede cultural dimensions above), the religious truth is fixed and universal and it is held, conveyed and interpreted by religious authorities. In the teachings delivered during his journey, Shams of Tabriz, “a wandering dervish searching for God high and low” (Shafak, 2010: 30), challenges some of these stereotyped religious and social norms. A first rule among his forty ones emphasizes the fact that different readers may perceive texts from Qur’an at different spiritual levels rather than as a universal truth:

Each and every reader comprehends the Holy Qur’an on a different level in tandem with the depth of his understanding. There are four levels of insight. The first level is the outer meaning and it is the one that the majority of the people are content with. Next is the Batm—the inner level. Third, there is the inner of the inner. And the fourth level is so deep it cannot be put into words and is therefore bound to remain indescribable. (Shafak, 2010: 31)

As Shams further claims, love rules over ritual (“if we see love, God is love. If we see fear, God is fear” (Shafak, 2010: 21)), holiness is not reached by memorizing scripture, people should not be judged by the way they connect with God since God is to be found “through everything and everyone in the universe, because God is not confined in a mosque, synagogue, or church” (2010: 36). Such a perspective challenges the kind of fixed, universal interpretations associated with high uncertainty avoidance cultures (Hofstede, 2010), instead promoting a more fluid and individualized understanding of religious experience.

Besides these ample and well-defined perspectives challenging traditional beliefs, there are some other less evident assumptions that Elif Shafak attempts to disrupt. The narrative voices of Desert Rose (the prostitute), Hasan (the beggar) and Suleiman (the drunk) dignify the perspective of marginalized people, who, in their turn, even if socially stigmatized, experience true spirituality and divine love. These narrative voices disclose how marginality is redefined within the text, being seen as spiritual authority rather than social exclusion. From a discourse-analytical perspective, the expected moral hierarchies are reversed and the dominant cultural narratives do not associate virtue with social status any longer. In line with Said’s critique of essentialist representations, these characters disrupt socially constructed hierarchies that associate moral or spiritual value with fixed social categories.

Geographical determinism is another supposition Shafak opposes in both her public discourse (as shown above) as well as in her fiction. By acknowledging that “Having roots nowhere, I have everywhere to go” (Shafak, 2010: 25), Shams emphasizes the beauty and freedom of universal belonging – belonging everywhere and nowhere in particular – making geography irrelevant in building one’s spiritual and cultural identity. Shams is also the one who fights against a deeply rooted social belief,

according to which “every child takes after his father and mother” and attempts to show both through his words and behaviour that identity is not fixed in familial tradition: “That was when I realized that although I loved my parents and craved their love, they were strangers to me” (2010: 25). A close reading of Shams’s reflection highlights the discursive rejection of identity as inheritance. Interpreted through the methodological lens of narrative analysis, this moment reframes identity as a process of detachment and self-definition rather than continuity, thereby directly challenging assumptions associated with geographical and familial determinism.

Many of the above-mentioned cultural and religious stereotypes are challenged by Shafak in almost all her subsequent novels, including *The Island of Missing Trees* (2021), which basically tells the touching story of Kostas, a Greek Cypriot, and Defne, a Turkish Cypriot, through a unique narrative perspective — that of a female fig tree, “present in every creation story, bearing witness to the ways of the humans and their endless wars” (Shafak, 2021: 32). Set against a society disrupted by historical violence and collective suspicion, “at the crossroads of three continents – Europe, Africa, Asia – and the Levant, that vast and impenetrable region, vanished entirely from the maps of today” (2021: 1), “in the summer of 1974”, Kostas and Defne’s relationship is another challenge claimed by Shafak against romantic relationships which do not remain within one’s ethnic or religious community. Both their families feel the deeply-rooted ethnic pressure and have opposing political beliefs which actually creates strong barriers to their union: “He knew he could never tell his mother that he was in love with a Turkish Muslim girl” (2021: 109). In its many attempts to articulate the unspoken prejudices of society, the fig tree warns against the well-established hostilities between the two communities sharing the same island: “God knew there were enough people on this island who would hate to see a Turk and a Greek involved romantically (...)” (2021: 152).

As the conflict escalates, Kostas is forced to flee Cyprus, leaving behind both his homeland and Defne. In a letter sent to her brother, asking to accommodate Kostas in his house in London, thus hoping to separate him from Defne, Kostas’s mother reveals how collective prejudices are reproduced within the family sphere, often under the disguise of moral and religious authority. Her anxieties are mainly caused by the fear of social rejection and divine punishment:

Our Kostas is in love with a Turk! (...) A Christian cannot marry a Muslim; it offends the eyes of Our Lord. (...) You and I both know there are people from either community ready to punish them for what they have been doing. The highest penalty under the circumstances will be gossip and slander. (2021: 173)

After years of separation, he returns to Cyprus, where he and Defne reconcile and make the difficult decision to emigrate, seeking a safer and more stable life in England to raise their daughter, Ada. Nevertheless, the enduring trauma of the conflict, along with the collective memory of the violence and loss experienced in

Cyprus, continues to haunt them and shapes their identities. A close reading of this reaction highlights the internalization of culturally inherited norms. Interpreted through Trompenaars' framework, this illustrates how deeply embedded values shape perceptions of acceptable behaviour.

When she came to see Ada in London, Meryem, Ada's aunt, acknowledges both her initial resistance as well as her acceptance of Defne's feelings:

I didn't want your mother to marry a Greek, God knows I tried to stop it. But she didn't listen. And she did the right thing. Kostas was the love of her life. Your mother adored your father. They both paid a heavy price, though. You grew up without seeing your relatives. I'm very sorry about that. (2021: 139)

Another cultural stereotype – the sensible choice in love, favouring routine and stability – is also challenged through the perspective of the narrating fig tree:

Not a very sensible thing to do, I admit, to fall for someone who is not of your kind, someone who will only complicate your life, disrupt your routine and mess with your sense of stability and rootedness. But, then again, anyone who expects love to be sensible has perhaps never loved. (2021: 32)

Unlike her sister, Meryem, who embodies the traditional, deeply rooted in convention, gender roles – “I was careful not to disappoint my parents, always trying to do the right thing” (2021: 139) – Defne is a complex character who defies the traditional expectations imposed upon women, not willing to follow family or cultural rules: “But your mum ... she was unstoppable (...). She was brave – and foolish (...) Your mum was a free spirit. Even when she was a little girl, she had this wild, unpredictable side. If you told her not to touch fire, she'd go and build a bonfire.” (2021: 139)

A vehement critique against geographical determinism and its cultural and political impact is first and foremost revealed by the female fig tree narrator, an immigrant itself that becomes the embodiment of interconnectedness across space, time and humans, which claims that: “A map is a two-dimensional representation with arbitrary symbols and incised lines that decide who is to be our enemy and who is to be our friend, who deserves our love and who deserves our hatred and who, our sheer indifference” (2021: 1). A close reading of this passage reveals how geographical space is narratively constructed rather than naturally given. This perspective directly resonates with Said's argument that geographical categories such as “East” and “West” are constructed rather than inherent, as well as with Ichim's (2022) observation that Shafak's narratives reconfigure spatial divisions as fluid and relational. As the events deployed in the novel show, geography does not actually determine feelings, identities, religion or morality, human connection going beyond lines on a map. Interpreted through the theoretical framework of Said's critique of

spatial essentialism, this reinforces the argument that human connection transcends imposed boundaries, revealing identity as fluid, negotiated, and context-dependent.

6. Conclusions

This study set out to examine how cultural stereotypes are represented and challenged in Elif Shafak's fiction, how environmental interconnectedness functions as a narrative tool against cultural and geographical determinism, and whether her literary work converges with her public discourse in disrupting rigid cultural frameworks. Contributing to existing discussions about environmental interconnectedness, particularly through non-human narrative voices such as the fig tree, this study expands existing interpretations of Shafak's work by showing how space, memory, and ecology are intertwined in the construction of identity. The analysis has shown that in both her fiction and her public discourse, Elif Shafak challenges the rigidity of cultural stereotypes and the determinism of geographical belonging. Hybrid characters, multi-layered storytelling and non-human narrators help the writer to expose the senseless East-West polarity, as well as the historically and geographically inherited prejudices that confine individuals to singular identities. Her fiction reveals how prejudice operates not only at the societal level but also within families and intimate relationships. As shown in her novels, stereotypes are not only abstract cultural constructs. Lived, as everyday pressures, they govern personal choices and relationships. By focusing on the discursive reproduction of stereotypes in everyday language, family interactions, and intimate relationships, this article shifts the critical emphasis from what cultural stereotypes are to how they function and how they are dismantled within narrative structures.

As Shafak shows us, holiness is not equated with social respectability, the socially marginalized figures of society being spiritually significant. Marginalised and silenced identities are given a voice to tell their stories, geographical boundaries do not determine cultural ones and the sharply contrasting cities of Istanbul and London are depicted as dynamic and connected spaces. In both her novels and her public discourse, Shafak sends a powerful message, showing us how to challenge cultural and religious stereotypes, how to go beyond geographical determinism and embrace the in-between.

While previous scholarship on Elif Shafak has primarily focused on themes such as gender, spirituality, cosmopolitan identity, or the representation of hybridity, this study brings a new perspective by examining the convergence between her fiction and her public discourse as a unified site of cultural critique. By analyzing these two dimensions together, the article demonstrates that Shafak's challenge to cultural stereotypes is not only thematic, but also discursive and strategic, extending beyond the novel into her public intellectual interventions. Finally, the convergence between Shafak's novels and her public statements demonstrates her coherent project of resistance against binary cultural framings. Both in fiction and in her TED talks or

interviews, she advocates for “multiple attachments” and inclusivity, affirming literature as an act of resistance. By bridging Eastern and Western traditions, integrating environmental voices, and reclaiming marginalized perspectives, Shafak creates narrative spaces where stereotypes are deconstructed.

This article therefore advances current Shafak scholarship by reframing her work as a multi-layered critique of cultural determinism operating across narrative, discourse, and ecological dimensions.

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