

ELIF ŞAFAK'IN *THE SAINT OF INCIPIENT INSANITIES*: AN ISSUE OF IDENTITY

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Abstract

Elif Şafak is one of the most prominent Turkish novelists of her generation. Through her cosmopolitan novels, such as *The Saint of Incipient Insanities*, she questions themes of love, friendship, culture, nationality, exile, and belonging. According to an old Islamic narrative there is a tree in heaven that has its roots up in the air. In one of her interviews, she likens her past to that tree. She says, " I do have roots, but my roots are not in one place, neither in the ground nor in the air. I' m connected to different cultures, and that's, I think, part of the reason why I believe it's possible to be multicultural, multilingual and multifaith ". Therefore, the aim of this article is to study *The Saint of Incipient Insanities* in which we witness Elif Şafak encountering different identities on her way to experience the world.

Key Words: Belonging, culture, multicultural, multilingual, identity.

ELİF ŞAFAK'IN *ARAF* ROMANINDA KİMLİK OLGUSU

Özet

Elif Şafak günümüz edebiyat dünyasının en etkin yazarlarından biri olarak kabul edilmektedir. *Araf* gibi farklı kültürleri konu alan romanları aracılığıyla "aşk, arkadaşlık, kültür, milliyetçilik, sürgün ve aidiyet" kavramlarını sorgular. Elif Şafak, bir röportajında geçmişini "kökleri havada olan tuba ağacı"na benzetir. "Köklerim yerde değil, havada... Böyle olunca, kendimi birden fazla ülke, kültür ve kimliğe ait hissediyorum. Bu esneklikten de memnunum" der. Bu çerçevede, bu çalışmanın amacı Şafak'ın *Araf* romanını yazanın bize tanıttığı birbirinden farklı kimlikler aracılığıyla değerlendirmektir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Aidiyet, kültür, çokkültürlülük, çokdillilik, kimlik.

The anonymous power of human civilization which is rooted in preserving and enhancing the great diversity of its cultural heritage gives rise to a sense of global consciousness in our era. A multi-dimensional understanding of uniting the past, present and future cultural values is widely recognized across the world nations. It appears that, on the one hand, the world is understood in terms of a mosaic which is composed of multifarious cultures representing clearly defined and static compositions. On the other hand, culture is not viewed as a static and closed system but as a living organism which consists of varying systematics. In this sense of culture, an increasing number of people cross cultural borders, get in contact with the other cultures and learn what was previously unknown about the others, but also about themselves. Still, this intercultural dialogue is a double-edged sword. It can be observed that the accelerated flux between places, languages and ways of life will end up in a homogenized culture through a continuous formation of a melting pot. Yet, from an ethnological perspective, this intercultural conflict will cause fragmented cultures. In short, the validity of these two perspectives has been unavoidably debatable for centuries. The extremely dialectical process of globalization necessitates a much more complex discursive dynamic of different cultural identities.

It is becoming increasingly apparent that the idea of an intercultural identity which is the main characteristics feature of the postnational era has been more influential in all types of relationships than the existing concepts of cultural identities. The bipolar schema of 'familiar' versus 'foreign' constitutes the basis of this notion. In other words, a person does not become a 'foreigner' or a 'stranger' in new cultural contexts anymore. They establish positive relationships due to overcoming the constraints of their own cultural identities. Nevertheless, on the individual level, such an identity must be used in the right sense to avoid those conflicts which result from getting away from your own cultural values. The possibilities of a consciousness or awareness of a dynamic dialectic of transformation through transcultural experiences against the practicability of the concept of intercultural identity is still ambiguous. Kath Woodward provides the connection between idealistic conception of the issue of intercultural identity and the paradoxical nature of it:

The interrelationship between the personal and the social involves negotiation. People reconstruct their own identities, even within the constraints of poverty. Through the collective action of social movements, of class-based action, and through asserting ethnic identities and separate national identities within a multicultural society, people reshape the social structures which restrict them. Even at the level of the individual, through body projects, it is possible to recreate our identities through transforming our bodies, by getting fit, by challenging stereotypes (2000:156-57).

Thus, the extent that the individual is both shaping and being shaped through a mixture of cultural codes, provides the basis for offering a multi-

dimensional system for explaining the linkage between identity experience and other facets of cross-cultural adaptation.

It is this duality in Elif Shafak's *The Saint of Incipient Insanities* which makes it worth analyzing from an epistemological standpoint. The title of the book in Turkish is 'Araf' which means in English "purgatory" or "the space in between". This transience – the conflict between her sensibilities and her intellect – make her swing between two opposite poles, shifting alternatives of various ideal constructions such as foreign-native, settled-nomadic, sanity-insanity, etc. "*It is this deviation which deconstructs the whole, philosophized in being against the stream. I always interpret life from this dialectical perspective*" says Shafak in one of her interviews (Özkan, 2004:2). In *The Saint of Incipient Insanities* she pictures her characters – Ömer, Gail, Abed, Piyu, Debra Allen Thompson, Allegra – operating on two levels. On the individual level, they are spaceless, timeless, alienated and psychologically distorted personalities with fragmented sense of belongings, who attempt a dialectic growth quest for order and spiritual development. On the individual-society level, these characters do not have a sense of belonging neither to the country they live in, nor to their homelands they left behind. Shafak, in the same interview, offers a solution for the people who cannot overcome the compulsions of belonging nowhere. "*It is being many, being multiple at the same time*" (2004:2). Therefore, the aim of this paper is to analyze *The Saint of Incipient Insanities* which as a novel attempts to seek a mode of intercultural identity emerging as a series of devastating personal crises. Further, it will attempt to give an answer to the question whether it is possible or sane to have multiple identities through intercultural experiences of the characters both in America and Turkey.

The Saint of Incipient Insanities is divided into four parts which is of crucial significance in understanding how Shafak explores the paradoxical journey of intercultural identities in question. All parts are interwoven in a quite complicated and intricate plot. So, the analysis will be made under four headings, namely The Crow, The Stork, Birds of a Feather, and Destroying Your Own Plumage. The first twenty-nine pages serve as an introduction to the novel and technically confirm her confidence in the existence of her characters' imagination which provide her with certain assumptions of the disease of multiple identities. It is her marginal characters' vast range of imaginative power that let her create possibilities of treating the issue of identity in a multicultural world.

The novel opens with a quotation from Rumi's Mathnawi, Book II ("The Cause of a Bird's Flying and Feeding with a Bird That Is Not of Its Own Kind") which indeed justifies this confirmation:

*I saw a crow running about with a stork
I marveled long and investigated their case,
In order that I might find the clue*

As to what it was that they had in common...

*When amazed and bewildered, I approached them,
Then indeed I saw that both of them were lame.*

So, as readers, at the very beginning of the novel, we come across Rumi's sense of "universal love and brotherhood" which manipulates us to discover the dichotomy of being 'different' and 'same' at the same time. This theological and social reality, above and beyond everything else, envelopes the spirit of the whole story.

When the novel opens, we are introduced to two similar – both are from Muslim countries, doctorate students and foreigners who do not feel at home in Boston – but also, contrasting figures – Ömer, "*drunk as a skunk, the other as sober as always*" (Shafak, 2004:3). They have been sitting at a bar side by side for almost five hours. Ömer, "*oscillating madly between nonpresence and omnipresence*" (2004:4), is making huge holes in the napkin with his fountain pen and complaining to his closest friend Abed about the missing dots of his name in English. He was called Ömer Özsipahioğlu in Turkey, but "*Here in America, he has become an Omer Ozsipahioğlu*" (2004:5). Here, by using Ömer's imagination filled with ouzo, and "*perfectly competent to philosophize about a dot of ink-for hours and hours*" (2004:6), Shafak stimulates the core of the issue in terms of the relation between a person's name given at birth and its implications over his or her identity:

As names adjust to a foreign country, something is always lost – be it a dot, a letter, or an accent. What happens to your name in another territory is similar to what happens to a voluminous pack of spinach when cooked – some new taste can be added to the main ingredient, but its size shrinks visibly. It is this cutback a foreigner learns first. The primary requirement of accomodation in a strange land is the estrangement of the hitherto most familiar: your name. (2004:6)

Imbedded in Shafak's words is the fact that our names are deeply rooted in our past cultural ethoses that realization of the rich meanings they acquire leads us into the world of constituting identity. Therefore, in an intercultural context, the individuals strongly react against imposing a change of name by the new ethos. Another issue that Shafak takes up in *The Saint of Incipient Insanities* within the framework of multiculturalism is owning a mother tongue. "*I think language shapes us, our imagination, our thoughts. So first and foremost I think we need to understand that*", she says in an interview with John Freeman (2007:3). Georgi Fotev also in his book *Ethnicity, Religion and Politics* finds a common ground between linguistics and ethnology:

This common ground, according to Saussure, includes "all relations existing between the history of a language and the history of an ethnos or civilization. In their history these two things are interwoven and interrelated... The customs of a people reflect upon its language, and on the other hand, it is precisely language that, to a great extent, makes a people." It could be said that a language, in its entirety, is the home of the being of a given ethnos. (1999:15)

Fotev's ideas are clearly reflected in Ömer's "ouzo-fogged eyes" which reveal feelings of isolation, aloofness, estrangement, foreignness and alienation. The pervasive influences of these extreme sensibilities can be observed in Ömer and Abed's dialogues in English, even hostile, oppressive and absurd at times, but never avoiding interaction adhering to the codes of being foreign in a foreign country. Astounded by their conversations, Shafak humorously categorizes a foreigner-to-foreigner conversation in a language that was foreign to both in three subgroups. In the first group, when one cannot find a particular word, it turns out that the other cannot either. In the second group, when one of them cannot find a particular word and neither can the other, still they will be able to understand each other entirely. Finally, in the third group, she says, "whatever inconvenience one of them might face in speaking English, the other was bound to give at least some credit to the tacit claim of "I-sure-could-have-sounded-wiser-than-this-if-only-I-had-the-vocabulary-and-the-grammar" (2004:16). Therefore, the chaos which first stems from the clash of mother tongue and a foreign language in a foreign country will permeate through the novel crowded with aliens, marginal and psychologically disordered schizoids, in the texture of their relationships with their families, society and its institutions, in their hopes and daily routines, and even in their own personalities. These marginal characters help Shafak foreground the social and psychological unrest and provide good enough reasons 'to go against the stream'.

1. THE CROW

In the section entitled *The Crow*, the two central characters are Ömer and Gail who come from completely different cultural and religious backgrounds. They are Rumi's lame birds – the stork and the crow – who paradoxically find the strength to fly in the very union of being lame.

Gail is a chocolate maker and what makes her weird at first glance is that the only food she eats are chocolate and bananas. Whenever she eats a banana, she observes a letter inside the banana "the dark, jagged stain in the middle of the soft, white fruit" (37). She takes these letters as a sign and creates words which was also a childhood game she and her mother used to play. Her mother tells her that God in heaven cooks himself an alphabet soup and lets it cool in a huge bowl near his kitchen window. However, a gale, an angel or the devil himself, either accidentally or intentionally drops the bowl into the skies. All the letters in the

soup are scattered across the universe. Since then, “*letters were everywhere, waiting to be noticed and picked up, wishing to be matched to the words they could have written had they remained inside their Bowl of Eden*” (37). These “*Letters in Frenzy*” which is a typical of chaos in her mind is the only remedy for her creative imagination and mostly producing contradicting ideas about the meaning of life itself. In order to compensate for the chaos and absurdity wrapping her in the principles that guide the workings of her mind, she creates another systematics, namely “*The Law of Absences*”. Basically, it requires that “*there always be a cavity, a loss, something missing from each and every entirety*” (65). Her attempts to systematize life, itself, are far above the understanding limits of her intellect that during all these introspection and retrospection activities, speculative abstractions and mental observations, she is confronted with personal identity problems which accelerate more insoluble ones. In other words, she lives a gloomy life which continually threatens her to distort the reality of her environment, leaving her in a deep well full of hallucinations, fragmented memories and fantasies.

The most significant of these memories is related to her attempts to commit suicide in her childhood. “*She recalled her mother shoveling into her mouth the dubious substance in the bowl, and she constantly giving it back. Her mother had always been a terrible cook. She then remembered her father trying a new food on her, the taste of an omelet, the heavy smell of melting butter, and a piece of pepperoni, spicy and hot, unreturnable, unswallowable, stuck somewhere in her baby throat*” (45). In the rest of her life, wavering between life and death due to her bipolar mood, the hypersensitive Gail cannot help herself committing suicides in trial and error procedures that end with the proof of her mortality. Paradoxically, in all these attempts, Gail realizes how close she is to death, and how difficult it is to die. Death is so pervasive in the prevailing chaos surrounding her identity that, she also looks for ways to escape death. For that reason, she has to answer the overwhelming question of who she is “*anchored in a world that fixes names forever, where letters are not permitted to be in frenzy*” (58). Then, in her quest for a particular identity, she is confined to a particular behaviour. Indeed, she can recompose not only new names, but also her identity and fate with the letters from the alphabet soup.

At high school, she calls herself by the name Zarpandit. It belongs to “*an early Assyro- Babylonian pregnant goddess who was worshipped each night as the moon rose. It means silver-shining*” (27). Then, she turns out to be Debra Ellen Thompson at the psychiatrist's. When she is answering the readers' letters in the magazine, she both speaks in the name of Gartheride and Ilena in an optimist - pessimist duality, as they are.

... the relief of throwing out even your name like a broken toy, of no longer being what you used to be in hands that were always anxious... it was this ambivalence that helped her to handle her anfractuious world of angst. Being given an opportunity to swing freely between two poles soothed her bipolar

pendulum. After all, the cure might be of the same essence as the illness sometimes, just like the counterpoison is soul sister to the poison.

As the metaphorical spoon of evanescence drew circles, the idea of henceforth attaching a real spoon somewhere on her costume, perhaps onto her wavy hair, crossed her mind. That spoon would constantly remind her that whatever name she found herself attached to, could be erased and replaced with the letters of another name. (70 Emphasis added)

Finally, when she takes the spoon out of the Bowl of Eden, she sees that the new combination of letters is "Gail". She likes the sound of it and decides to use it as her new name.

2. THE STORK

In the part entitled *The Stork*, as a newcomer, Ömer is not supposed to feel at home in Boston. His life in many ways reflects instability and rootlessness. In his isolated state, that is in vacuum, he suffers from feelings of alienation. There lies a creeping paralysis that permeates every level of existence from which no deviation is possible without disastrous consequences. " 'Lost' was precisely what he has and what he had been more than anything for the last five, ten, fifteen years of his life ... a graduate student of political science unable to accomodate himself...; a new-to-the job husband finding it hard to breathe amid the flora and fauna of the marital institution; an expatriate who retained a deep sense of not being home here, but not knowing where that home was anymore, even if the had had one sometime in the past..."(14). His strong addiction to coffee, cigarettes and drugs is a consequence of his desires to find a less chaotic way of life. One of the problems basically, seems to be related to having no definite identity, he loses the reference points that can define him. In the external world, his bonds are so loose that there is nothing which Ömer's identity can be based on.

Due to his heavy exposure to popular culture and American music while back in Turkey, "in spite of what many Americans would presume, this foreigner was better acquainted with their culture than with his own"(75). He, simply uses the wide range of American songs in order to measure time, "that is what he liked least" (76). According to him, "The circular loop of songs eased the burden of the irreversibility of linear time"(77). As Shafak explains in an interview "the linear understanding of time orders past, present and future times on a linear line that we are all used to. On the other hand, in circular understanding of time there is a circular link among the parts of the whole because all carry the same essence in itself. I prefer the latter because it helps me to show how things might be tightly connected to each other by small shifts in time and space" (Dede, 2007:3). Ömer's sense of time, therefore, in a state of being without order, without time and without identity which leaves an individual with nothing positive in life, creates naturally some sense of distinctiveness of time in connection with demoralizing and depressing sense of time passing without any notable event.

The basic problems that lead Ömer into a personal identity crisis are the existential mystery of being human, the bewilderment and paradox of human existence, the existential anxiety about what to do with freedom. In order to sustain a self-definition and therefore a meaningful life, he undergoes a deep moral and psychological search into his personal existential dilemma and decides to take on a nomadic identity.

Nomads were noble and restless. They were neither infatuated with the doctrine of a "better future" that kept gorging on the insatiable lust of capitalist consumption, nor entrapped in a good-old-days fetishism that required piling up sentimental relics of an unsentimental past. On the saddle of a nomad's horse there was no room for memento mori, family albums, childhood photos, love letters, or adolescence diaries-each dead long ago but never allowed to rest in peace, no, none of those sappy shackles. Only freedom that merits the name, so pure and plain, could ride a nomad's horse. (19)

In essence, it is this double nature of reality about Ömer that Shafak aims to focus on through his realizations about a nomadic way of life, that is, his new position in America. In another interview, she puts emphasis on this dilemma – *"those who seek to be pastless, memory-free, in other words the future-oriented and then those for whom the past determines the basic parameters, in other words the past-oriented. I do not believe this is an easy dilemma that can be overcome by solely reasoning"* (Mouradian, 2005: 2). In this context, Shafak resembles her own identity and her writing to the "Tuba Tree" in the Koran. It is supposed to have *"roots up in the air, not in the ground"* (2005:2). Through this metaphorical comparison, Shafak clearly explains the reasons of her feelings of being connected to more than one country, culture, and identity. Yet, this theological and romanticized way of idealizing the probability of having multiple identities might have some devastating consequences in reality as in Ömer's case now.

3. BIRDS OF A FEATHER

As the story unfolds, Shafak tests the possibilities of different ways to cope with life, its absurdity and prevailing chaos. As a consequence of this, each character develops at least one kind of psychological distortion. Namely, Gail is a manic depressive suffering from bipolar disorder. This refers to her mood alternating between "poles" of mania and depression. This illness causes unusual changes in her mood, energy, and ability to function. What is more dangerous, however, is the fact that, she has got a strong instinct to commit suicide during her poles of depression. As to Ömer he is strongly addicted to smoking, alcohol and drugs. Abed cannot have relationship with any woman because of his restrictive cultural and religious bonds to his homeland, Morocco. The Spanish member of this family, Piyu develops fear of sharp-edged objects in spite of the fact that he will become a dentist. In the case of Allegra, she eats and vomits too much throughout the story due to her bulimia. Debra Ellen Thompson, however, is an

exception because of her awareness of the deviation in her gender identity and her success in coping with it in her relations with the society members.

Undoubtedly, their understanding of living in a multicultural society, first and foremost, means having an awareness of diversity. They recognize the existence of world concepts different from their own and of a variety of approaches and points of view. They have an empathic attitude towards each other. In this sense, Allegre's birthday party dinner turns out to be a representation of the world's cultures.

A breeze of geniality canopied the table, now garnished with six different dishes and six distinct soups, a breeze tenderly ferrying them from the Muslim concept of sabr to the verb aguantar in Spanish. From pious surrender they glided into mundane endurance, the need to carry on in life, no matter what, aguantar la vara como venga. A pretty much serene conversation, sparkled now and then with praises for and comments on each dish tasted...(144)

So, the general atmosphere of the dinner implies that on the individual-society level, human beings feel the necessity to go beyond existing conflicts and the models of representation peculiar to each culture and to search for shared values. The construction of a sense of understanding among human beings can originate from the sheer respect of valuing differences.

It is these values of love, brotherhood, tolerance and respect from Rumi's teachings that make them live together, share their secrets, hopes, worries, frustrations, feelings of loneliness and 'alienation. Though they are from different species, they are Rumi's lame birds who achieve living together.

4. DESTROYING YOUR OWN PLUMAGE

In the final section of the novel entitled *Destroying Your Own Plumage*, Ömer and Gail come to İstanbul to visit Ömer's family. Rather surprisingly, however, "the bellboy would not be the only one to take Ömer for a tourist" (324). Shafak, again, touches on the recurring theme of being a foreigner even in one's own environment:

On the hand, there were the more educated, the more affluent, and far more sophisticated who were irrefutably Western and modern, and then there was a second group of people, greater in numbers, less in power, less Western in appearance. The discrepancy in between could transfer the members of the former bunch into "tourist" in the eyes of the latter group. A Turk could easily look like a foreigner to another Turk. (330)

Undoubtedly, Ömer, who was raised by his parents in a 'westernized' and 'modern' oriented education system is not aware of his own roots, history and culture that lay the foundations for a sense of belonging which is also the capacity to recognize those who are different and to be open towards others. In other words, Ömer has not become aware of his values, and on those shared with his family or the groups he belongs to. So, it is this gap in the social dimension of his

identity which makes him be filled with rage towards whom he, himself does not even know. Nevertheless, Gail clearly knows that Ömer's inexplicable rage is so similar to her inexplicable sorrow. *"There was sorrow inside her, there always was, but if someone asked her the reason why, she didn't have any immediate answers"* (333).

After staying ten days in İstanbul, Gail and Ömer are leaving the city now. Unfortunately, crossing the Bosphorus Bridge at rush hour, is one of the worst decisions they could have made. *"So we are in the in-between right now..."* Gail murmurs looking ahead (345). *"Suddenly it occurred to her, and the next second she knew with certainty that this inbetweendom was the right place, and this very moment was the right time to die"* (347). *"Once again in his life Ömer watches himself lagging behind the speed of time, unable to catch the cadence of life, except that this time it is the cadence of death he is running after"* (349). *"Suddenly she feels falling with an enourmous speed, and a swifter release, into some indigo vacuum where it wouldn't matter anymore what her next name would be"* (350).

[...] a fleeting consolation crosses Ömer's mind... People do not commit suicide on other's people's soil, and this is not her homeland. But did she ever have one? Who is the real stranger – the one who lives in a foreign land and knows he belongs elsewhere or the one who lives the life of a foreigner in her native land and has no place else to belong? (350-51)

In conclusion, through her characters' search for order and an awareness of sense of belonging, Shafak does not reach promising solutions. Shafak, caught between the poles of her own perception of inner ideal and the reality of the external situation, attempts to formulate this imbalance through her marginal characters Gail and Ömer. Yet, her idealization of *"being many, being multiple at the same time"* renders disappointingly due to the exhausting ideal constructions based on doctrines of feelings. In this respect, as an author 'philosophized in being against the stream', it is her mission to investigate and expose these insanities through intercultural experiences of Gail and Ömer both in America and Turkey. Trying to achieve multicultural identity does not seem to be attained easily and it can possibly lead to various identity problems such as alienation, isolation and getting lost within the great range of new, social, historical and anthropological values of different cultures.

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