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WRITING "LIKE A DRAWING COMPASS": CROSS-CULTURAL NEGOTIATIONS IN ELIF SHAFAK'S NOVEL *HONOUR*

Petya Tsoneva

Abstract

The present article is concerned with how Elif Shafak, a contemporary writer of Turkish origin, questions certain presumptions about the Middle East which, significantly, the region has advanced itself. Shafak not only writes about the region's geographically closest parts neighboring Europe; she directs her narrative perspective from there and her writing, which she compares to the expanding circle of a drawing compass, configures the multidirectional relationship between vernacular and world cultures. This approach, at first taken as a symptom of self-Orientalism, has much wider implications. Shaping a response to Kemalist "westernization," it seeks to restore an internally split Turkey to itself, mediating between its excessive seclusion and culturally violent ways of self-assertion, on the one hand, and the willingness to discard its past and traditions altogether in an attempt to emulate western secularism, on the other.

Shafak's quest for a productive pathway out of such confinements yields the perspective of secular Sufism, a more philosophical and ethical attitude than a religious conviction. This paradigm shifts the modes of self-location from external observation of traditional norms that leads to violent practices of cultural control such as honor killings, to inward understanding and appreciation of difference. In a TED talk, she refers the two perspectives to the two conflicting visions of God she came to know from her two grandmothers – that of Jalal as punishing and masculine; and that of Jamal as maternally all-embracing. In a wider cultural context, Jamal and Jalal represent two figurations of Turkey (and, by inference, the Middle East) within national boundaries and beyond them. Jalal apparently refers to a violent, homogeneous version of nationalism and cultural confinement, while Jamal coincides with the ethos of multiplicity and conviviality.

Keywords: *migration, border crossing, secular Sufism, Middle East, vernacular and world cultures.*

Shafak appears to be one of the contemporary authors of Turkish origin (alongside paradigmatic Orhan Pamuk) who endeavor to restore Turkey's silent self to its contemporary cross-border position, but, in doing that, she also seeks to push open a number of tightly-bordered enclosures, homogenizing national and religious discourses and "hegemonic identitarian nar-

ratives."[1] Thus, for instance, in *The Bastard of Istanbul* (2007), one of Shafak's most debated novels longlisted for the Orange prize, she addresses the problematic "monocultural confinement"[2] of ethnic minorities within post-Ottoman Turkey and insists on the urgent necessity to perceive the kaleidoscopic composition of Turkish identity beyond any monochrome pronouncements. Similarly, in *The Saint of Incipient Insanities* (2005) and *The Forty Rules of Love* (2010), she expands the space of individual and collective self-location in cross-border movements that work against discourses of isolation applied to the Middle East and Turkey, in particular.

Shafak's cross-cultural narratives revisit philosophical, religious, aesthetic and ethical representations that lie within Middle-Eastern self-articulation and yet go against the very grain of radical interpretations of religion that underpin hosts of violent traditions and practices. Keith Critchlow's research *Islamic Patterns. An Analytical and Cosmological Approach* explores the principles that regulate "beauty" in Islamic decorative art to conclude that the beautiful resides in human ability "to see the forms of nature once again as the *vestigii Dei* and multiplicity as so many reflections of the Unity which is both the origin and end of the order of multiplicity."[3] The way this principle operates can be observed in artistic patterns that produce a larger figure out of its miniature collected reflections, arranged according to figural or kinetic geometrical rules (as the figural compositions of the muqarnas dome roofs, Persian glass mosque mosaic, ceramics, tilework and arabesque decoration). In these works, the idea of unity in diversity is translated into the variety of ways of orientation of the pieces to each other and to the whole, and while each fragment constitutes a figure in itself, its significance can only be achieved by referring it to the larger figure of the pattern.

Such optical performance is made possible by the interaction of the observer and the observed, studied with exquisite philosophical luminosity by Ibn al-Haytham, author of *Kitab al-Manazir* (*Book of Optics*, 1011-1021) and one of the brilliant philosophers and theoreticians of visual perception and representation in the eastern schools of thought. According to him, beauty is the outcome of the correspondence of the parts to the whole, "when a form combines the beauty of the shapes of all its parts and the beauty of their magnitudes and their composition and the proportionality of parts."[4] From a contemporary perspective, Claudia Michael points out that,

> the complexity of unity is best described through the geometry of the circle. […] It is a complete form, yet it has no beginning and no end. Its shape symbolizes the perfect unity of filled and unfilled space. […] It has many parts within a whole yet contains a center point that anchors all other

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[1] Elena Furlanetto,"'Safe Spaces of the Like-Minded': the Search for a Hybrid Post-Ottoman Identity," in *Elif Shafak's The Bastard of Istanbul*, *Commonwealth Essays and Studies* 36, no. 2 (2014), p. 21.

[2] Elena Furlanetto, "'Safe Spaces'," p. 27.

[3] Keith Critchlow, *Islamic Patterns. An Analytical and Cosmological Approach* (Rochester, Vermont: Inner Traditions, 1976), p. 6.

[4] Ibn Al-Haytham, *The Optics of Ibn Al-Haytham. Books I-III on Direct Vision*, trans. ed. A.I. Sabra (London: University of London, 1989), p. 205.

> dissections of its core. / The circle exhibits several types of symmetry. It has lateral, radiating and reflective symmetrical properties.[5]

Here, it is necessary to draw a definite distinction between the circle as a line of graphical contour, which, I suggest, is the way Shafak refers to circular enclosure in the opening of one of her TED talks, and the way she employs circularity as a structural mode of narration that coincides with a figure of openness perceived by the contents it includes. Such a distinction is needed to avoid the internal conflict caused by the same trope Shafak employs when she refers to the harmful effects of the like-minded, self-encircled communities, and when she describes the way she sees herself as a writer in the same TED talk,

> There's a metaphor which I love – living like a drawing compass. As you know, one leg of the compass is static, rooted in a place. Meanwhile, the other leg draws a wide circle, constantly moving. Like that, my fiction as well. One part of it is rooted in Istanbul with strong Turkish roots, but the other part travels the world, connecting to different cultures.[6]

While the circle as a ring-folded line may signify seclusion and tightly-bordered identity, the kinetic figuration produced by the drawing leg of a compass is a representation of a "spatial envelope," i.e. "a description of the whole space that provides an instant impression of the volume of the place."[7]

The mobility of Shafak's writing space is remarkably reminiscent of the Sufi model of the universe, symbolically performed in the whirling dervishes' dance. The choreography and religious significance of their movements imply extreme openness towards the four directions of the world and the cosmic universe that surrounds it, as the ecstatically moving bodies of the dancers strive to produce a human equivalent to the mythological *axis mundi*, the pathway to heaven, and the rotating skirts of their robes "embrace" horizontally a multifarious world. In what follows, I will observe how Shafak applies this dynamics to articulate border crossing in her novel *Honour* through the relationships between the characters Pembe and Jamila, their families, Turkish Kurdistan, Istanbul and London.

The narrator Esma traces her familial history back to a 1945-Kurdish village on the banks of the Euphrates. Significantly, the place is located in the margins of Turkey, at a literal and metaphorical crossroads between the "universe beyond the shores of the Euphrates,"[8] identified as a space of "strange things" like "[t]he aftermath of the Second World War, the atomic bomb…" [9] and the "world" beyond Turkey's eastern border with Syria. The border location of the village is metaphorically enhanced by its name, *Mala Çar Bayan*, which, trans-

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[5] Claudia Michael. "An Interdisciplinary Study of Symmetry in Islamic Geometric Design and Symmetry in Moroccan author Laila Lalami's novel *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits*," last modified January 30, 2016, http://www.macece.org/fhsprojects/CMichael.pdf

[6] Elif Shafak, "The Politics of Fiction," last modified October10, 2016, http://www.ted.com/talks/elif_shafak_the_politics_of_fiction/transcript

[7] Aude Oliva, Soojin Park et al., "Representing, perceiving, and remembering the shape of visual space," in *Vision in 3D Environments*, eds. Laurence Harris and Michael Jenkin (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2011), p. 111.

[8] Elif Shafak, *Honour* (London: Penguin Books, 2013), p. 6.

[9] Ibid., p. 6.

lated from Kurdish, means "House of the Four Winds."[10] The place is likewise ambiguously represented as a site of rooted belonging where "human beings [are] ordained to be sedentary, like trees and boulders";[11] as a panoptic accumulation of communal life, "[w]hatever took place in one corner was heard, at once, by everyone else";[12] but also as a starting point of self-relocation in a world of larger, cosmic and natural movements. Thus, in spite of the seemingly stagnant, monotonous and repetitive ways of life in the village, there are hints that its location is governed by the winds, and the winds, in their association with the four cardinal directions, appear to convey the same sense of motion and spherical openness as the twirling perimeter of a dervish robe.

The controversial location of the village is confirmed by reminiscences of its multicultural past. When the narrative voice describes Jamila's dwelling place in a hollow-nested hut in the ravine, it becomes evident that the present-day village is just a remnant of a formerly teeming multicultural settlement: "For centuries Christians and Muslims and Zoroastrians and Yazidis had lived here side by side, loved and died side by side. Their grandchildren, however, had long ago left for other lands. All but a handful of peasants remained in the area – and Jamila."[13] Rather than being solely a site of oppressive enclosure, then, the House of the Winds is also located as a place of departure, similar in many ways to the "interval space" of the airport lounge in Kapka Kassabova's meditation on contemporary migrant processes.[14] Such forms of openness obviously operate in the regime of Shafak's rooted and routed writing and self-location. Gaston Bachelard's theoretical inquiry into the phenomenology of space describes such type of mixed, semi-mobile spatial experience through the metaphor of the cosmic house, a largely imagined domestic form which takes shape in the movements of homecoming and home-leaving: "an immense cosmic house is a potential of every dream of houses. Winds radiate from its center […] Or, to put it differently, the universe comes to inhabit [it]."[15] A similar form of imagined domesticity is at the heart of Shafak's negotiation of Turkishness in a wider multicultural context.

For Shafak, the beginning of a family history is extremely important because it represents the "center point that anchors all other dissections to its core."[16] In consistence with the Sufi aesthetic paradigm in this curious case of narrative geometry, the main centrifugal movements that dissect the characters' displacements are performed by the specular splitting of the twin sisters Pembe Kader and Jamila Yeter, born in the strictly patriarchal family of Berzo and Naze as the next two in the row of already six daughters. The proliferation of female offspring that plagues the familial expectations of a son intensifies the manifestations of Shafak's articulation of rural Kurdish culture. An interesting fact adds further strength to this hypothesis – the Kurdish plural form of the word "wind" – "bayan" coincides with the plural

[10] Ibid., p. 6.
[11] Ibid., p. 6.
[12] Ibid., p. 6.
[13] Ibid., p. 35.
[14] See Kapka Kassabova, *Street Without a Name: Childhood and Other Misadventures in Bulgaria* (London: Portobello, 2008).
[15] Bachelard, Gaston, "House and universe," in *The Poetics of Space*, trans. John R. Stilgoe (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964, 1994), p. 51.
[16] Claudia Michael, "An Interdisciplinary Study."

form of "woman" in Turkish. This known, the pun makes it possible to translate the name of the village as "House of Women" and consider the "house," in its more symbolic and imaginative significance, as a womb-like figure. We can, therefore suggest that the village on the Euphrates "births" the characters' centrifugal itineraries, while, at the same time, it provides a constant point of orientation in their routes. In a parallel way, Pembe and Jamila's twinship configures the spatiotemporal relationships in the novel both as a centrifugal embrace of difference and as a centripetal retreat to origins. Pembe's marriage to Adem Toprak, their migration to Istanbul and settlement in London represent the wider moving circle in the drawing-compass model of Shafak's narration, while Jamila's physical barrenness, life in the remote village and attachment to the land shape the fixed axis of the narrative. Jamila's journey to England, vigorous intervention to protect her sister offering her life in her stead and Pembe's subsequent return to the village to take her sister's place at the end of her life, reverse the model, thus destabilizing the focal point of reference, constantly mediating between "here" and "there" in a productive dialogue. Prior to her death, however, Pembe reclaims her origins as a "kneeling place" from where she can offer her prayers to the four corners of the world. This spectacular geometrical expansion and retraction of space operates in consistence with the symmetric principle of moving circularity, illustrating the "many reflections of the Unity which is both the origin and end of the order of multiplicity."[17]

The aspect of multiplicity is also frequently visualized by tropes of fluidity (water and air) that, by virtue of their containment properties, evoke the ambience of fetal development and birth-giving. Thus, the four winds that circulate the village and the river Euphrates operate as symbols of extreme mobility that suggests both fertility and evasion, the *plerosis – kenosis* cycle of conception and birth. Within this dynamics, the body of Pembe and Jamila's birthland equally splits between the specularly conjoined possibilities of a triumphant motherhood (Pembe's birth of Iskender as fulfilment of her mother Naze's lifelong wish for male offspring) and barren motherhood (Jamila's barren womb that reciprocates the barrenness of the village). In the Sufi registry of correspondences, physical barrenness is part of the physiology of life while spiritual barrenness is unnatural and signifies ultimate self-enclosure. The narration negotiates between these two extremes of human self-location in a familial dynamics, in which multiplicity is constantly checked and sanctioned by the principle of self-assertion. The ensuing growth and sickness of the family lines operates as a genealogical model of cross-cultural relationships in Shafak's attempt to negotiate difference.

Both the circular and the branching genealogical structures in the novel correspond technically to the complex symmetric relationships that hold between the multiple elements of larger figures in the aesthetic organization of space in Middle-Eastern art and architecture. The dynamically changing routes of the characters' displacements and their willingness or unwillingness to go beyond bordered forms of self, are part of Shafak's larger project of raising ethical questions by means of an aesthetic technique of narration producing a text that will, possibly, instruct contemporary readership on the pernicious effects of violently bordered identities.

In a chain of relationships, the expanding and retracting movements of the characters' self-location configure places, times and positions in specularly reflexive units. Thus, for in-

[17] Keith Critchlow, *Islamic Patterns*, p. 6.

stance, the Kurdish village, urban Istanbul, London and Abu Dhabi, Adem Toprak's final destination, are catoptrically refigured versions of each other. They all share a quality of elusiveness, shape-shifting and instability, which is positively defined by tropes of fluidity within the paradigm of comprehensiveness. At the same time, fluidity is constantly constrained by norms, regulations and traditionally affirmed practices of surveillance defining fluctuation as a deviation that has to be reinserted within the limits of the norm. Thus, while Mala Çar Bayan is the House of the Winds, i.e. a place of extreme openness, it likewise represents the site where communal regulations require the death of Naze and Berzo's eldest daughter Hediye who "taints" family honor. Pembe and Adem's migration exports village and regional culture to London where it enters the diasporic borders of the Muslim community. Similarly, Istanbul is configured as a place of ambiguous experience. Esma's memories of her early childhood there recollect it as a city of water, ever-changing shapes and erosion of firmly-built enclosures (the floodings in the Toprak family's basement flat, for instance). However, the city also enters Esma's narrative through her father's memories of his childhood, loss of mother (who joins the group of family-betraying characters), sober and drunken father and the claustrophobic enclosure of public opinion. London reciprocates the Kurdish village and Istanbul in its methods of surveillance (racism, migration laws, spikes to prevent migrant birds from settling on window sills), but also with its fluidity and the multicultural encounters it welcomes. The latter quest for openness is best illustrated by the squatters' house, a dwelling in suburban London. It represents an aquatic version of the House of the Winds through its association with Noah's ark, "'It is like a floating house',"[18] and operates as another manifestation of embraced diversity. The squatters' unwillingness to observe government laws is, in turn, ambiguously defined as a mock sense of freedom without obligations.

Abu-Dhabi is yet another ambiguous location in the novel. Its city-scape outlined by skyscrapers built on "soft sand"[19] operates as a panoramic spatial projection of Adem Toprak's failure to understand the beauty of multiplicity. In the chapter entitled "Sandstones" we learn about what underpins his inability to embrace difference, "His life had been a maze of mirrors, in each mirror he had seen a different reflection of himself, but which one of them was the real Adem, he couldn't tell."[20] The specular properties of sand grains, magnified by their accumulation in the desert, constitute a natural version of the labyrinth of mirror selves Adem attempts to decipher in the course of his problematic self-assertion. The greatest predicament he faces in this endeavor is his willingness to claim only one of his reflections as his true and only self in consistence with the Jalal-regulated mode of thinking. As he finds this impossible, he prefers to have himself absent, lose himself in the labyrinth. His final escape from choice stages his literal and metaphoric dissolution in the desert space, a symbolic *sparagmos* of his parched self. As a literal and metaphoric location, Abu Dhabi illustrates very clearly Shafak's model of individual and collective self-location. Read parabolically, the city-scape with solid buildings reared on sand foundations operates not only as a configuration of the successfully maintained symbiosis between nature and culture, but also as a spatial projection of the fluid and solid components, the "routes" and "roots" of self-location.

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[18] Elif Shafak, *Honour*, p. 63.
[19] Ibid., p. 271.
[20] Ibid., p. 270.

In the novel, places form part of Shafak's mosaic topography – they represent variations on one and the same pattern whose multiplicity yields new, different forms. The same compositional principle underlies character construction. We already observed that the topos of twinned femininity can be attributed not only to the role of symmetry in her aesthetic project, but also to her own experience of relocation as a writer who sees part of herself "pegged" and another part – moving freely across cultures. It is, however, difficult to measure Pembe and Jamila's fixity and mobility separately. In the end, each one of them takes her sister's previously established place, which attests to Shafak's cross-cultural approach. At the same time, neither sister can fully leave the place of her origins, or fully remain there. When in London, Pembe loves to do her shopping on Ridley Road and is fascinated with the multicultural vitality of the place where "one could come across so many different people with skins of all shades of brown, white and black, from places that were, to her, only names on a blurry map."[21] Pembe's displacement may, at first sight, seem to fulfil her childhood wish to become a sailor waking up at a different port every morning. Yet, when she finally arrives in London, she is not in a hurry to see the ocean or the Queen's palace. Rather, she feels comfortable in the multi-ethnic, but predominantly eastern neighborhood of Lavender Grove, and is always anxious to perform her traditionally imposed obligations.

Pembe's likeness Jamila occupies an equally ambiguous position. Seemingly subsumed by the desiccating Kurdish village, she is open-minded, performs her midwife duties in the company of smugglers, and is not afraid of difference – when faced with a villager's superstition about his wife's birth of conjoined twins, one alive, the other – dead, she assures him that the living child is special and needs exceptional parental love and care. Although as children Pembe and Jamila have different dreams about the world and unlike Pembe who wishes to see it, Jamila feels comfortable at home, she undertakes a perilous journey to England, helped by smugglers.

Pembe and Jamila's migrations take shape as vectoral movements that both extend the domestic world of the beginning and reroute it to new forms of self-location. Contrary to the conventionally interpreted myth of the Dioscuri twins whose separation guarantees life's continuation, Jamila's death in her sister's place is followed by Pembe's sickness and death in the village not long afterwards. For Shafak, such forms of conjoined multiplicity organically result in the spread of loss across the entire body of the interconnected parts.

In conclusion, Shafak's novel questions certain presumptions about the Middle East which, significantly, the region has advanced itself. She not only writes about its geographically closest parts neighboring Europe; she directs her narrative perspective from there and her writing which she compares to the expanding circle of a drawing compass configures the multidirectional relationship between vernacular and world cultures. This movement, at first approached as a symptom of self-Orientalism, has much wider implications. Shaping a response to Kemalist "westernization," it seeks to restore an internally split Turkey to itself, mediating between its excessive seclusion and culturally violent ways of self-assertion, on the one hand, and the willingness to discard its past and traditions altogether in an attempt at emulation of western secularism, on the other.

[21] Ibid., p. 337.