



Geopolitical Configurations in the Fictional Terrains of Elif Shafak

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Abstract— Every discourse on geopolitical issues in contemporary world rearticulates how geographical factors such as location, resources, terrain, and climate influence political behaviour, power structures, and foreign policy decisions of states and nations act on the global stage. Any strategy undertaken for geopolitical analysis considers the distribution and exercise of power by examining the capabilities of states in terms of military strength, economic resources, technological advancements, and diplomatic influence. In fact foreign policies are formulated; trade, commerce and international relations are assessed; the significance of territory and borders are shaped; potential disruptions, political instability and shifts in global power dynamics are anticipated; all determined and bridled by the geopolitical flux. Even though literature is primarily entitled to narratives and character build ups, literary texts are often employed by authors to comment on real-world geopolitical issues, power dynamics, and global events. By delineating details such as borders, territories, and geopolitical alliances; by examining the larger politics between individuals, communities, or nations; by weaving complex plots involving espionage agents, political leaders, or diplomats, by highlighting the intricacies of international relations and the pursuit of strategic interests, fictional narratives offer insights into the complexities of human relationships, societal structures, and the forces that shape our world. The current paper is an exhaustive study of the geopolitical configurations and intricate dispositions in the fictional fabric of Elif Shafak, the most widely read Turkish British author whose novels reflect the convoluted tapestry of Turkish society, the intersection of Eastern and Western cultures, and Turkey's unique position bridging Europe and Asia.



Keywords— Geopolitics, geography, power dynamics, globalisation

Geopolitics is the study of how geography shapes politics

-- Colin S. Gray

I. INTRODUCTION

The primary intention of art and literature is multifaceted—to engage, inspire, and enrich the human experience by fostering creativity, empathy, and connection across cultures and generations. Art and literature play a vital role in preserving and transmitting cultural heritage, traditions, and historical narratives across generations. Nevertheless it

is a collective consummate inclusive of the entirety of all aspects of human life like power, race, gender, culture, ethnicity, geography, ecology and what not. Functionally, art seems to do the work of politics in the contemporary globalising era, but it is invariably the vital relevance that art displays “in the shaping of the public imaginary” (Papastergiadis 2014).

“The emancipatory rhetoric of globalization has been overtaken by the grim realities of increasing geopolitical polarization, the precarious conditions of everyday life and a culture of ambient fear” (Papastergiadis 2014). With the

growing geopolitical rivalries, power struggles, financial crises, terrorist attacks, job insecurity and even pandemics; create a pervasive sense of vulnerability and uncertainty in human consciousness. At the level of international relations, Geopolitics is a field of study that examines the relationship between geography, politics, and international affairs.

Geopolitics focuses on political power linked to geographic space, in particular, territorial waters and land territory in correlation with diplomatic history. Topics of geopolitics include relations between the interests of international political actors focused within an area, a space, or a geographical element, relations which create a geopolitical system. (Toncea 2006)

Even though literature is primarily entitled to narratives and character build ups, literary texts are often employed by authors to comment on real-world geopolitical issues, power dynamics, and global events. By delineating details such as borders, territories, and geopolitical alliances; by examining the larger politics between individuals, communities, or nations; by weaving complex plots involving espionage agents, political leaders, or diplomats, by highlighting the intricacies of international relations and the pursuit of strategic interests, fictional narratives offer insights into the complexities of human relationships, societal structures, and the forces that shape our world. The award winning Turkish-British author, Elif Shafak, the galvanizing writer in the global fictional spectrum weaves intricate narratives that traverse through various historical, cultural, and geopolitical landscapes. "I think it is an age in which emotions guide and misguide politics" (Shafak 2020).

Intersection of East and West

Even though Shafak's fictional fabric primarily focus on the intricate tapestry of Turkish society, they also delve into broader geopolitical themes like "terrorism, environmental crisis, food shortages, refugee displacement..." (Shah 2023) Her narratives frequently explore the **intersection of Eastern and Western cultures**, reflecting Turkey's unique position bridging Europe and Asia. This geopolitical configuration is evident in works like *The Bastard of Istanbul* (TBI 2006), where characters grapple with their Turkish identity while being influenced by Western ideologies and lifestyles. On a visceral level, it narrates the lives of two young girls Asya Kazanci and Armanoush Tchakhmakhchian, how their individual life stories decussate in the larger schemes of things where each strives to assert their space and voice. The readers are ushered into the multi-layered cityscapes of Istanbul, its varied aromas, 'the broken pavement stones' (1), the old Galata Bridge (7), the Grand Bazaar (7) and the well-off quarters of the city

(9); at the same time the novel also briefly mentions other locations, including Arizona, Tucson, and New York. Rose, Armanoush's mother is from Kentucky, Mustafa lived as an expatriate for years in New York and Armanoush's paternal family, the Armenian Tchakhmakhchians resided in Tucson, each places representing different backdrops for exploring themes of identity, belonging, and cultural hybridity. The novel's characters for whom 'Sanity was a promised land' (25) find themselves in the vortex of cultural divides, ethnic lifestyles, past-present conflicts, divergence of political attitudes, historical issues and even polarising foods that generate strong and opposing opinions among people. "No more weird ethnic food! From now on she would cook whatever wanted. She would cook real Kentucky dishes for her daughter!" (39)

The plot of *Honour* (HNR 2013) offers a sharp contrast between Karakuyu, the fictional village in Turkey and homeland of the protagonist Pembe, which represents the rural, conservative Anatolian culture; and the urban life of Istanbul. Istanbul serves as a background representing the collision of traditional values and modernity. Yet London, portrayed as a multicultural metropolis, is where Pembe's son Iskender and most of his life happens, offering opportunities for immigrants nonetheless presenting challenges of adaptation and integration. Again Berlin and other European cities are briefly mentioned in the novel, reflecting the diasporic nature of the characters' experiences. The theme of **East-West polarization** is central to the narrative of *Three Daughters of Eve* (TDE 2016), as the protagonist, Peri, battles with her identity and beliefs while studying at Oxford University in England. Hailing from a secular Muslim family in Istanbul, Peri experiences a cultural clash between her Eastern upbringing and the Western values prevalent at Oxford. She struggles to reconcile her Turkish identity and Islamic faith with the secular and liberal environment of the university. The novel touches upon political divides between the East and the West, particularly in the aftermath of events such as 9/11 and the rise of Islamophobia.

The Ottoman Legacy

The **Ottoman Empire's legacy** is a recurring motif in Shafak's writing, reflecting on its historical influence on modern-day Turkey and the broader Middle East. The geopolitical contours stemming from the Ottoman era, including its collapse and the subsequent formation of modern nation-states, are often explored in her works. Through *The Architect's Apprentice* (TAA 2014) she presents a gorgeous picture of the city of Istanbul teeming with secrets, intrigue and romance. Set in 16th-century Istanbul, during the height of the Ottoman Empire's power and influence, the rich historical backdrop of Ottoman

Istanbul provides a vivid portrayal of the city's vibrant culture, majestic architecture, and cosmopolitan society. Istanbul's iconic landmarks, such as the Hagia Sophia, the Topkapi Palace, and the Suleymaniye Mosque, are prominent features in the novel. Though the Ottoman Empire itself is not explicitly the focus, *The Flea Palace* (TFP 2002), an enchanting bundle of farce, passion, mystery and history, is set in contemporary Istanbul, a city deeply imbued with the cultural, architectural, and social legacy of the Ottoman Empire. Throughout the story, references to Istanbul's Ottoman past are intertwined with the modern urban landscape, evoking a sense of continuity and historical resonance. "The slightly decrepit, high-ceilinged Ottoman *konak*" (22) is completely antipathetic to Café Kundera "on a narrow, snaky street on the European side of Istanbul" (TBI 76).

The absorbing novel *Three Daughters of Eve* (TDE 2016) subtly explores the Ottoman Empire's legacy through its characters, settings, and themes, offering a nuanced portrayal of contemporary Turkish society and its complex relationship with its historical past. "Istanbul abounded with the old poor and the nouveau riche" (8), "the Nalbantoglus lived on Mute Poet Street, in a lower-middle-class neighbourhood on the Asian side of Istanbul" (14), the plentiful light from the high, arched windows, the chandeliers, the calligraphy, the architecture of Sinan" (84), the Dolmabahçe Palace, with its triumphal arches and clock tower" (88), the Blue Mosque, and the Topkapi Palace are instances evoking the city's Ottoman past and its enduring architectural legacy.

Cultural and Geographical Diversity

Elif Shafak frequently depicts **the rich cultural diversity** within Turkey, reflecting its **complex geopolitical landscape**. Through characters from diverse ethnic, religious, and cultural backgrounds, she explores themes of identity, belonging, and the tensions that arise from Turkey's multicultural fabric. In *Honour* (2013), the story spans across various locations in Turkey and Europe, representing the **cultural and geographical diversity** of the characters' experiences. The story of the Toprak family, who leaves their Kurdish village and settle in Istanbul for an enhanced life finds the family members later in London where they face challenges as immigrants "navigating cultural differences and striving to preserve their traditions in a rapidly changing world" (Banu 2023).

Food, language, culture, geography, history, religion, politics and gender intricately permeates through the fictional matrix of Elif Shafak whose novel settings serve as **microcosms of multiculturalism**, highlighting the complexities of identity, belonging, and coexistence in diverse urban environments.

If London were a confection, it would be a butterscotch toffee – rich, intense and traditional. Istanbul, however, would be a chewy black-cherry liquorice – a mixture of conflicting tastes, capable of turning the sour into sweet and the sweet into sour. (HNR 75)

In *The Bastard of Istanbul* (TBI 2006) she offers an array of characters, whether Turkish, Kurdish, Armenian, Jewish, Greek, or other ethnicities, embodying the richness and diversity of the societies in which they live.

Just like the rug, the table above looked ornamented. There were black olives, red pepper – stuffed green olives, white cheese, braided cheese, goat cheese, boiled eggs, honeycombs, buffalo cream, home-made apricot marmalade, raspberry jam and olive-oil-soaked minted tomatoes in china bowls. (TBI 126)

The **blending of different tastes and flavours** in portraying the quintessential Turkish and Armenian cuisines – the *Çay*, or Turkish tea, the home-made *manti*, *bastırma* from Yerevan, the grilled *sucuk*, garnished *musaqqa*, seasoned *kofta* (meatballs), grilled or roasted *kebabs*, the decadent *baklava*, the flaky *borek* - is suggestive of the Turkish gaiety and satiation; in fact both the Turkish Kazancis and Armenian Tchakhmakhchians "followed a routine to have plenty of dishes displayed on tables to enjoy from morning till evening. Their food preferences and culinary practices expressed their temperaments as well" (Jawad 2018). The interesting habit of keeping two peeled oranges and two sliced apples for the youngest of the family at night, **tasseography** or 'Turkish coffee cup reading' practice to interpret symbols, shapes, and patterns, believed to reveal insights into the drinker's past, present, and future, the custom of preparing the traditional dessert 'Azure' or Noah's pudding as an epitome of community, religion, belonging and cosmopolitanism are testimonies to her exploration into the interconnected histories of different cultures and civilizations, emphasizing the ways in which they have influenced and shaped each other over time. Whether through historical events, cultural exchanges, or personal narratives, Shafak's works celebrate the intermingling of diverse traditions and perspectives.

Urban and Rural Spaces

Shafak often contrasts the **dynamics between urban centers and rural regions**, reflecting on the socioeconomic disparities and cultural divides within Turkey. These regional tensions contribute to the broader geopolitical configurations as depicted in her novels.

Jamila found big cities suffocating, and was daunted by the thought of unknown places – the buildings, the avenues, the crowds pressing on her chest, leaving her gasping for air. (HNR 33)

Urban centers, such as Istanbul, London and Arizona are portrayed as hubs of modernity, diversity, and opportunity, while rural regions are depicted as more traditional, conservative, and economically disadvantaged. This **cultural gap** can lead to misunderstandings, stereotypes, and clashes between urban and rural characters.

After having lived in Tucson for more than twenty years, Rose, once a Kentucky girl, had Arizona written all over her. (TBI 284)

Istanbul had imperceptibly become a ghost city for him, one that had no reality except to appear every now and then in dreams...America was his home now – a home with its backdoor closed to the past. (TBI 285)

The **process of migration** can be fraught with challenges, as characters confront issues of identity, belonging, and adaptation in their new surroundings while moving between urban and rural environments in search of better opportunities or to escape hardships. Soon after the Nalbantoglus left Peri at Oxford residence, she felt “a sickening sense of loneliness” as she had “an unsettling feeling” (110) after they had gone. Her vain attempts to search for “habitual smells – deep-fried mussels, roasted chestnuts, sesame bagels, grilled sheep intestines” of an “Istanbul that mixed unlikely aromas in the same cauldron” (110) was met with Oxford’s “resinous odour hanging in the air that seemed unwavering, reliable”(TDE 110).

Political and Social Chaos

Shafak doesn't shy away from addressing contemporary political issues in her fiction. She often portrays the impact of **political turbulence, authoritarian regimes, and social unrest** on individual lives. These themes provide insight into the evolving geopolitical landscape of Turkey and its neighbours. Her novels seem overstuffed with political and social affairs that culminate in drastic upheavals in human lives like the acknowledgement of the historic genocide of the Armenians by the Turkish during 1915, cultural division, the dynamics of honour killings and honour suicides culturally motivated in Turkey in order to purify tarnished honour, religious fatwas that encumbered social life, the clash between the Turkish Army and the Kurdish separatists, widely practised tortures in prisons, detention centres and young offender institutions in the aftermath of the 1980 Turkish coup d'état and many more.

10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World (MSSW 2019) is a psychological and philosophical narrative that unravels the distressing lives of sex workers, human trafficking, and the exploitation of refugees in an unstable context of religious and political corruption. The characters of Peri and her best friends in *Three Daughters of Eve* (2016) - the rebellious Shirin and the faithful Mona – are trapped in the irresolute socio-political milieu which

actually were the situations that Elif herself has experienced in Turkey during 2015 and 2016.

In Turkey, all the political exchanges she had ever witnessed, from those of her father's friends to her own, were besieged with the three capital R's: Resentment, Rage and Resignedness. (TDE 284)

The mutual aggravation between Mona and Shirin was growing and their arguments and verbal battles especially while watching a scene of chaos on TV where a synagogue in Tunisia had been attacked by terrorists. Towards the end we find Peri herself trapped inside the wardrobe of the businessman who was the host for the grand dinner that she was attending as a group of organized mafia men or robbers attacked the seaside palatial mansion on the dinner night.

'I am questioning,' Mona said. 'I question history. Politics. Global poverty. Capitalism. Income gap. Brain drain. War industry. Don't forget the appalling legacy of colonialism. Centuries of plunder and exploitation. That's why the West is so rich! Let's leave Islam in peace and start talking about hardcore issues!'

'Typical,' Shirin said, throwing her hands up in despair. 'Blaming others for our problems.' (TDE 309)

Role of Women and Gender Dynamics

Gender dynamics and the role of women in society are central themes in Shafak's works. Through her narratives, she explores how societal norms, cultural expectations, and political structures intersect to shape the geopolitical landscape, particularly concerning **issues of power and representation**. Full of vigorous, unforgettable female figures her storylines feature a diverse range of female characters, each with her own unique experiences, struggles, and aspirations allowing Shafak to explore the intersectionality of gender with other aspects of identity such as ethnicity, religion, and sexuality. For any reader who has been acquainted with Nazperi Nalbantoglu, Pembe Toprak, Asya Kazanci, Zeliha Kazanci, Armanoush Tchakhmakhchian, Tequila Leila and even the Princess Mihrimah, not a single day would pass by in their lifetime without reminiscing the bleakness, courage, resilience and strength they impersonated in their journeys of self-discovery and empowerment.

Years had to pass before she (Peri) came to the realization that her passivity actively contributed to the ruination of the man she loved. When she betrayed Azur, she betrayed the truth. (TDE 349)

And that's how my mother, Pembe Kader Toprak, thirty-three years old, and deceased according to official records, began to live in a dilapidated squat in Hackney, occupied by a group of punk rockers. (HNR 319)

Addressing gender inequality issues, discrimination of women, the ambiguities of gender identity, minority rights and freedom of speech, Elif Shafak, one of the deepest voices reverberating in contemporary writing, furnishes her readers with nuanced, thought provoking and enormously human characters, most of them from her real life experiences and the rest out of her imaginative furnace. Narrating tales of incest, molestation, abusive marriages, distrusting virginity, illicit born kids, domestic violence, discriminated daughters and toxic relations, the author meticulously pushes us into pathways of poignant, heart-wrenching and tangible life sequences endured by women regardless of race, ethnicity, location, faith and culture.

I still remember her (Mihrimah). I still ache. A travelling pain that moves so fast from one limb to another that I cannot say whether it exists. She is the shadow that follows me everywhere, towering above me when I feel low, draining the light from my soul. (TAA 450-451)

The day Zeliha was raped she was nineteen years old. An age deemed to be a grown-up according to the Turkish laws. At this age she could get married or get a driver's license or cast a vote, once the military permitted free elections to be held again. Likewise, should she need one, she could also get an abortion on her own. (TBI 318)

Globalisation and Transnational Relations

In an increasingly globalized world, Shafak's narratives reflect on the **interconnectedness** of individuals and communities **across borders**. She explores how **globalization** influences Turkey's geopolitical positioning and its **transnational relationships** with other nations, as well as the tensions that arise from cultural exchange and globalization's uneven impacts. Through her novels, she provides nuanced insights into Turkey's evolving role on the global stage and the complex interactions between local, national, and international forces. Most of her characters navigate between traditional Turkish values and Western cultural norms, reflecting the tensions and opportunities that arise from globalization's impact on cultural identity as is evident in the discussions between Asya Kazanci and her Café Kundera friends,

Western politicians presume there is a cultural gap between Eastern Civilization and Western Civilization. If it were that simple! The real civilization gap is between the Turks and *the* Turks. We are a bunch of cultured urbanites surrounded by hill-billies and bumpkins on all sides. They have conquered the whole city. (TBI 81)

The author incontestably pinpoints the uncertainties and apprehensions of the cultured, civilised, urban, sensible people residing in modern Turkey as they realize them being, "stuck between the East and the West. Between the past and the future" and caught up between the 'secular

modernists' who were proud of their regime and the 'conventional traditionalists' who were infatuated with the Ottoman past. (TBI 81) While delineating on the Armenian-Turkish hostility to Armanoush, the genuine attitudes of Asya's aunts are carefully portrayed.

For the Turks, time was a multi-hyphenated line, where the past ended at some definite point and the present started anew from scratch, and there was nothing but rupture in between. (TBI 165)

Consequently globalisation has paved the way for **economic interdependence** of Turkey with other nations shaping the country's economic policies, trade relations, and integration into the global market. Even if it is Zeliha who runs a tattoo parlour against the will of the Kazanci family, Pembe, the Kurdish girl from along the Euphrates river, who takes up domestic household on account of her drunkard husband Adem, or Peri who finds a part-time job in a bookstore to brace up her Oxford education, the financially ruined Adem Toprak, his economically flourishing brother Tariq, the proud owner of a store, Tequila Leila who turns to prostitution owing to the stifling and oppressive patriarchal home, whoever the character be Elif purposely tossed them through circumstances of opportunities for prosperity or challenges related to inequality and economic insecurity.

CONCLUSION

To encapsulate the current study, Elif Shafak, the backbreaking presence in fiction today offers nuanced insights into the fictional geopolitical configurations of Turkey and its place in the wider world.

Societies like Turkey are divided into tribes. Collectivistic, tribal entities fail to coexist. Collectivistic identities erase individuality. It is not a coincidence that authoritarian ideologies depend on "crowds"—masses, collectivities chanting in unison with synchronized energy. This is how we lose individuality. (Shah 2023)

"In addressing the tension between the globalizing trajectories and a cosmopolitan worldview" (Papastergiadis 2014), her works serve as a mirror to society, inviting readers to contemplate the complexities of identity, politics, and culture in a rapidly changing world. When Pembe Toprak, disgraced by a racist shopkeeper while purchasing in a London supermarket, is rescued by Elias with whom she develops a chaste affair, she is incomprehensible of the big religious divide and the racist hostility. Through the thoughts of Elias who helplessly watches Pembe for her 'sheer simplicity and innocence' (HNR 114) Shafak throws light on the issues like rising unemployment, poverty, xenophobia, terrorism, ideological clashes, environmental

crisis, food shortages, the oil crises, refugee displacements and many more that has been crushing humanity lately. In fact her stories are hopeful contemplations and an anticipation to re-humanize those who have been dehumanized.

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