

Discerning Turkish Food in *The Bastard of Istanbul* and *The Forty Rules of Love*

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Abstract

Food has long been a significant factor in the construction of cultural myths and identities. It plays a major part in the plots and characters of Turkish literature, especially in the works of Turkish writer Elif Shafak. The purpose of this essay is to examine how Turkish food is depicted in Elif Shafak's books, with a particular emphasis on *The Bastard of Istanbul*, published in 2006, and *The Forty Rules of Love*, published in 2009, and how this depiction affects the characters in these stories. The use of food as a narrative element by Shafak will be investigated in this research, along with what Turkish food's cultural significance is and how it influences character development and symbolism. It is crucial to place this conversation within the larger framework of Turkish culinary history to appreciate the relevance of Turkish cuisine in Shafak's books.

Keywords: culture, food, character, Turkish, culinary

1. Introduction

The Bastard of Istanbul (TBOI), Elif Shafak's 2006 novel, interweaves the narratives of two families belonging to rival Turkish and Armenian cultures, whose shared past remains unresolved in the aftermath of the 1915 Armenian Genocide. The Turkish Kazanci and Armenian Tchakhmakchian families live seemingly disconnected lives across North America and Asia, but the novel reveals the profound interconnectedness of these historical adversaries. Food serves as a central motif, functioning as a cultural talisman uniting the families and ultimately helping heal the pain of their troubled past. Through the interlaced stories of the two families, the novel explores how food-related memories and practices shape individual and collective identities, challenging essentialist notions of identity and belonging. *The Forty Rules of Love* (TFRL), published in 2009, weaves a captivating tale that delves into the intricacies of love, spirituality, and personal transformation. At its heart is the story of Ella Rubinstein, a woman in her late thirties who finds herself in a state of complacency, lacking the drive and passion that once defined her life. The novel's dual narratives, one following Ella's journey, and the other exploring the deep, fraternal love between Sufi dervish Shams of Tabriz and the mystical scholar-poet Rumi, converge to create a tapestry of interconnected stories that challenge the reader's understanding of love and its transformative power.

The current study focuses on the two novels and tries to answer the following questions: How is Turkish food portrayed in Elif Shafak's novels TBOI and TFRL? What significant role does food play in the development of the story? This research is significant because it contributes to the contemporary study of food literature and food writing and focuses on the importance of food, specifically Turkish food, to the story's development. It focuses on the role that food plays either in the narrative's forefront or background. The results may help future researchers understand the way not only characters but also food develop the story and resolve the disturbing, unsolved, and unconfessed mysteries of the past. In both novels, food was significant in the past, is significant in the present, and is likely to be significant in the future.

2. Literature Review

Turkish food and its portrayal in literature offer insightful information on its significance in Turkish culture. Three things allowed Istanbul's food to flourish and endure under the Ottoman Empire: palaces, mansions, and chefs. There was a unique hierarchy and differentiation in food consumption under the empire's culinary culture, which was characterised by the division between palace kitchens and public kitchens (Batu & Batu, 2018). Several studies have investigated food's cultural relevance and role in identity development. Food and its symbolic representation can be used to communicate ideas, values, identities, and attitudes. Different social standings are expressed not only through differences in the quantities and varieties of food served at the tables of different social classes but also more subtly through serving and cooking styles (Mennell, 1996).

Food studies examines people's relationships with food and provides a wealth of information about them. It is an emerging multidisciplinary topic that examines the complex link among food, culture, and society from several viewpoints. The 'cultural diamond' is a technique for investigating the relationships among a cultural item, producers, consumers, and the social context. Each facet of a culinary culture may be mapped onto the 'cultural diamond', and comprehending these cultures offers insight into larger societal phenomena (Griswold, 2013). Jean

Anthelme Brillat-Savarin (1825), a pioneer of French gastronomy literature, famously stated, 'Tell me what kind of food you eat, and I will tell you what kind of man you are'. Food is used to communicate, and our eating habits may reveal a lot about who we are. There is a distinction to be made between the notions that what you eat defines you and that what you eat shapes who you are. Specific connotations have been attached to specific foods, to the point that the food that one chooses to eat or not eat can legitimately be considered as taking a moral or political stance, which maintains that eating is an agricultural act, that the relationship between consumers and food producers is political, and that continuing to engage in unsustainable patterns of production and consumption endangers the globe. Eating locally is the "right thing to do" because it demonstrates moral character, a moral position, and the formation of a "good society," not because it suits your disposition. The old proverb's moral connotations have not vanished in modern times; they have simply undergone a significant idiomatic shift. (Shapin, 2014). The link between humans and food is complicated and may be interpreted from two different perspectives. The first is biological to cultural and consists of functions from the nutritive to the symbolic, and the second is individual to collective and consists of functions from the psychological to the social (Fischler, 1988). Sociologists of culture investigated the social norms guiding eating and showed that 'tastes' may be viewed as socially produced (Bourdieu, 1994). The authors Keaton and Bodie contended that 'objects exist only after they enter communicative space.' A theoretical framework based on social constructionism serves as the foundation for researching the link between food and social interaction (Keaton & Bodie, 2011, p. 192). Food is fundamental to an individual's identity; therefore, the food they consume shapes their biological, psychological, and social identity. Food continues to play a symbolic role in shaping social power and status connections as well as in establishing a sense of cultural, ethnic, spiritual, and social belonging (Shah, 2018). Alice Mclean (2013) states "women's cookery as a form of community building and self-expressing and explore women's cookery instruction and recipe writing as a means of recording and preserving the values and traditions that characterize familial, social, ethnic, racial and national foodways" (Mclean, 2013)

3. Methodology

A critical reading of the two novels to recognise food-related scenes and references, identifying all situations, descriptions, and dialogues in the novels that mention food. Take note of specific dishes, ingredients, meals, culinary activities, and any symbolism associated with food. To examine how characters' attitudes towards food reflect their identities, cultural background. Exploring the impact of food interactions on character relationships, are meals shared peacefully, or are they sources of conflict? How does food serve as a means of bonding, manipulation, and expressing affection? The use food as a catalyst to identify pivotal moments in the story. Does the preparation, consumption, or withholding of food advance the narrative? Examine the relationship between food and the story's setting. Does the availability or shortage of food reflect the environmental and historical contexts? Thematically analyze food and memory to consider whether food brings back memories, nostalgia, or a sense of connection to the past. How does food serve as a tool for understanding topics like loss, identity, and cultural heritage? To analyze the Symbolic connotations linked with certain foods or meals in the story. Do they symbolise abstract ideas such as love, nutrition, sacrifice, or corruption? Determine whether food-related activities take on ritualistic importance in the narrative. Do these rituals strengthen social bonds? A critical analysis of both the books and secondary sources. Wherever possible, the stories are interpreted concurrently; nonetheless, certain aspects must be evaluated in one narrative at a time.

4. Textual Analysis

Elif Shafak's 2006 novel *TBOI* masterfully weaves together the intricate stories of two families. Through the lens of food, Shafak deftly navigates the complex cultural divide between the two communities in the novel, using it as a unifying theme that not only reflects their distinct identities but also serves as a salve for the wounds of the past. The novel begins in 1986 Istanbul, where nineteen-year-old Zeliha Kazanci contemplates an abortion before changing her mind and returning home. Concurrently, in Tucson, Arizona, Rose Tchakhmakchian, a Kentucky native, encounters and befriends a young Turkish student while grocery shopping. This chance encounter leads to their eventual marriage, despite the reservations of the Armenian family of Rose's ex-husband. Shafak highlights the deep-seated tensions and historical baggage that continue to linger between the two communities. The narrative then shifts to San Francisco, where the Tchakhmakchian family grapples with their daughter Armanoush's plans to visit Istanbul, unbeknownst to them. Meanwhile, the Kazanci family prepares to host Armanoush, whom they know as Mustafa's stepdaughter, as their American visitor. The intertwining of these narratives reveals the deep, historical connections between the two families, as well as the role of food in shaping their individual and collective identities. As the narrative progresses, food becomes a recurring motif that not only binds the characters but also serves as a conduit for exploring their respective cultural heritages.

Food can serve as a complex language for communicating love, memory, and exile while also revealing the possibility of imagining blended identities and traditions. Similarly, in *TBOI*, food becomes a unifying thread that reflects the characters' distinct cultural backgrounds and facilitates the healing and reconciliation process. The novel's intergenerational narratives further enrich its exploration of food as a cultural talisman. Shafak's skilful juxtaposition of younger characters, such as Asya Kazanci and the Dipsomaniac Cartoonist, with older ones, creates a tapestry of perspectives that challenge and interrogate received notions of cultural and ethnic identity. As the characters navigate the complexities of their personal and familial histories, food emerges as a touchstone that bridges the divide between them, allowing them to forge new connections and understandings.

Ultimately, Shafak's *TBOI* is a masterful exploration of the ways in which food can serve as a unifying force, transcending the boundaries of culture, class, and ethnicity. By weaving the culinary experiences of the Kazancis and the Tchakhmakchians into the larger narrative, the author crafts a poignant and thought-provoking work that invites readers to consider the power of food to heal, connect, and transform.

Meanwhile, TFRL's exploration of love spans a wide spectrum, from the passionate and mystical love between Shams and Rumi which is introduced by the book *Sweet Blasphemy* to the more nuanced and complex relationship between Ella and her husband. From the chronicles of the lives of Shams and Rumi, Ella is confronted with the realisation of the lack of love in her own life, prompting her to re-examine her own relationship and seek a deeper connection with herself and face the bitter truths she hated to confront. The depiction of Sufi mysticism and the concept of love in the novel is particularly noteworthy. This approach not only adds depth to the narrative but also serves as a means of exploring the religious significance of love, as seen through the Sufi lens. TFRL delves into the universal themes of love, spirituality, and personal growth, offering readers a captivating and thought-provoking exploration of the human experience.

Ottoman-Turkish historiography claims that during the Republican era from 1923, foreign food has influenced Turkish gastronomy. Turkish culinary customs have become more diverse as a result of this impact, with different areas absorbing and modifying distinct culinary traditions. For instance, different regions of the Black Sea, Marmara, the Aegean Sea, and the Mediterranean, as well as Eastern and Southeastern Anatolia, have different cuisine cultures that are impacted by their geographic position, climate, and other factors as well as their historical contexts. The diverse range of culinary experiences in Elif Shafak's novels is enhanced by these geographical variations in Turkish cuisine. TBOI and TFRL both demonstrate how important food is to Turkish society. The stories examine the function of food in fostering cultural identity. The protagonists in TBOI utilise food to maintain their ethnic identity and establish a connection to their ancestry, especially the Turkish and Armenian families. For instance, the *manti*, a sort of dumpling stuffed with meat and served with yoghurt, is a classic Armenian meal that the book's Armenian characters assemble around to eat and discuss. The *manti* is a sign of their Armenian history and a means of preserving their cultural traditions regardless of the difficult historical conditions their community has endured. In a similar vein, Elif Shafak illustrates how important food is to the lives and relationships of her characters in TFRL. For example, Ella Rubinstein, the main character, is a wife and mother. Her kitchen, cooking, and membership of the Fusion Cooking Club with fifteen other women who share similar lives to hers; and her strong connection with food are essential to the story. Throughout the first part of the book, the tastes, smells, and textures of her homecooked foods profoundly affect her, giving her comfort—the only true comfort she has. Her husband is having an affair, and her older daughter is planning to marry with or without her parents' consent. Her other daughter is anorexic. Therefore, Ella's otherwise superficially perfect life is just a façade, which she creates with her food. She realises this only when she tries to read an assignment manuscript. As she travels on a spiritual and romantic journey of transformation and comes into contact with Rumi's teachings through Aziz Zahara's book *Sweet Blasphemy*, she learns the delights of Turkish food, especially bread. The frequent mention of 'dough-based' (pasta) dishes such as *babuko*, *düğürçük*, *erişte*, *haşıl*, *hungel/hengel*, *keşkek*, *makarna*, *manti*, *tutma ç* and *herise* in poems indicates the Turks' preference for such dishes and shows that bread is the main staple in the Turkish diet. A meal without bread is unthinkable to Turkish poets. Note Ali Abbas Çınar's (2024) translations of three poems by three poets in which bread is mentioned:

I cannot begin without a soft loaf of bread, Who looks at an apple or a pear? (Kaygusuz, Gâkyay)

A loaf it must be, a loaf of bread! As I entered the neighbourhood, it smelled of fresh bread. (Konyalı Şerife Soykan)

Ah, those lavash breads, such breads there were!

My mother used to make rapata on the face of a pillow. And noisily we cracked off crispy pieces. (Âşık Reyhanî)

Bread plays a vital role in TBOI: it is a favourite of Auntie Banu, a woman of great appetite who has stopped eating and drinking anything but bread and water. She determinedly clings to her devotion and her dry bread (Shafak, 2006).

Auntie Banu's evident love for bread comes up many times as the story progresses. In TFRL, Ella follows her mother-in-law's instructions: "Nothing reminds a man of home like the smell of freshly baked bread," she had said. "Never buy your bread. Bake it yourself, honey. It will work wonders." (Shafak, 2009, p. 63). Bread is the common factor linking the modern world to the thirteenth century world of Rumi and Tabrez. The dervish Shams of Tabriz prefers to have soup and bread or milk and bread. Rose the harlot's fondest memories are of baking breads with her parents—until her mother dies in childbirth and life is never the same again. Rumi's second wife Kerra narrates, 'All of a sudden, without thinking what I was doing, I started molding a shape out of a ball of dough. I sculpted a small, soft Mother Mary. My Mother Mary. With the help of a knife, I carved her long robe and her face, calm and compassionate' (Shafak, 2009, p. 260). In both the stories bread is considered as a binder of families and relationships both past and present. It is connected to fond memories of the past and tries to retain the good terms in the present.

Elif Shafak utilises food in both TBOI and TFRL to examine her characters' cultural identity and ancestry as well as to provide readers with a sensory experience. These descriptions of food and its influence on the characters elicit feelings of nostalgia, cultural richness, and emotional attachment among readers. Food is important in the creation of identity and cultural relationships. Shafak's depictions of food examine diverse aspects of Turkish culture as well as Turkish people's capacity to overcome boundaries and establish relationships across different populations. Recent cosmopolitanism theories provide insight into how people cross cultural barriers and embrace transnational affinities via everyday actions. According to these theories, in the age of globalisation, people deal with the blending of cultures and boundaries, and food becomes an important medium for negotiating their identities and connecting with others. Culinary traditions and food consumption play an important role in forming identities and building bonds among people. Literature on the relevance of food in developing identities and on establishing connections among people provides a useful foundation for studying the function of food.

The representation of Turkish cuisine in Elif Shafak's books may be interpreted via the lens of gastronomic tourism. Sahin's (2015) article delved into the relationship between gastronomy and tourism in the country. The article highlighted how Turkey's distinctive cuisine has the ability to attract tourists and stand out in the destination marketing sector. Shafak's description of Turkish cuisine in her books is consistent

with the findings of Sahin's (2015) essay, which emphasises the value of exploiting distinctive culinary traditions to sell a region.

Human and social studies on food emphasises the relationship between food and identity development. Food can be a symbol of personal identity, group affiliation (Bisogni et al., 2022), and cultural identity (Fischler, 1998). This field of study contends that food intake is critical for the construction of new subjectivities and identities. In Shafak's works, too, food intake serves as a method for characters to develop and express their Turkish identities. Furthermore, Shafak's narratives depict the eating and preparation of Turkish food. As characters eat traditional Turkish meals, they not only replenish their bodies but also strengthen their ties to their history. Cooking and eating these foods becomes a ritual that connects the protagonists to their cultural heritage, offering a feeling of continuity and belonging in an ever-changing world.

Food is used as a catalyst for human growth and self-discovery. In *TFRL*, Ella embarks on a voyage of self-discovery and spiritual enlightenment as she cooks meals from scratch for her family. The voyage introduces her to new viewpoints and ways of interpreting herself and the world around her. The same happens with the character of Rose in *TBOI*, who is recently divorced cherishes going back to her previous food choices, her own secret act of vengeance and in the supermarket looks with hatred at the ingredients of traditional cuisine of her past family she finds her new love and new hope in the same supermarket reviving her hopes for a future

She stole a nervous glance at the jars of eggplant dips and cans of salted grape leaves. No more patlijan! No more sarmas! No more weird ethnic food!... From now on she would choose their daily menu from Southern cuisine, hot spicy chili or smoked bacon ... or ... garbanzo beans.(Shafak, 2006, p. 38)

Food has been increasingly depicted in modern literature, especially in the writings of women authors. The rise of the postfeminist and third-wave feminist groups, which viewed food and culinary activities as essential to women's traditional spheres, was responsible for this narrative change. These literary works frequently illustrate the numerous phases of the food production cycle, from the creation of recipes to the steps involved in preparation, eating, and cleaning up. In *Gastro-Politics in Hindu South Asia*, Appadurai (1981) examined the three primary settings—the home, the temple, and public gatherings—where food takes on societal significance. People in South Asian homes are assigned distinct duties at meals according to their age, gender, or relationship to one another.

To learn more about the influence of food on the Turkish characters in Elif Shafak's books, I consulted a variety of sources investigating the relationship between culinary culture and identity building. McGee's (2004) study highlighted meal preparation's cultural and symbolic relevance. According to McGee, cooking is not just a humdrum task; it is a basic part of the human mind and language. Food is important in forming individual and social identities in Elif Shafak's books, notably *TBOI*. Shafak describes Turkish food as more than just a collection of recipes; it also serves as a tool for examining ethnic identity, conserving tradition, and opposing erasure. In *TBOI*, Grandma Shushan's culinary abilities serve as an act of resistance against the erasure of her Armenian heritage. Cooking allows her to honour her relatives' memory and assert her Armenian identity in a culture that frequently rejects or marginalises the Armenian Genocide. Similarly, in *TFRL*, Ella uses food to connect with her spiritual and emotional self. This food serves as a tool for examining characters' ethnic identity, conserving their traditions, and opposing erasure.

The exploration of food in fiction serves as a means for women writers to assert their gendered subjectivity and negotiate their racial, national, and ethnic identities. As culinary metaphors and practices become embedded within these narratives, they often challenge the connection between identity and food, foregrounding food as an empowering agency (Gaul, 2019). The relationship between food and literature has a long-standing history, with food writing dominating books and periodicals on cooking, diet, and gardening. (Lamberti, 2015). However, the seemingly mundane ritual of food preparation and consumption was previously considered too trivial to be portrayed in the grand narratives of the phallogocentric literary tradition (Aguilar, 2021). The importance of food in fiction has since been amplified as contemporary women writers have embraced the kitchen as a site for articulating their gendered experiences and negotiating broader questions of identity. The symbiotic relationship between women and food stems from their traditional role as nurturers who prepare food to give and sustain life. Some theorists have argued that cooking is a form of service work performed by women, not for themselves but to meet the needs of others, particularly men (Devasahayam, 2005).

One key aspect of this intersection is the notion of the 'imperial-colonial chronotope', a term Bakhtin coined to describe the unique temporal and spatial configurations that emerged from colonial and imperial experiences. As Orhan Pamuk, Afanasy Mamedov, and Andrey Volos demonstrated in their works, the colonial and imperial histories of various nations have shaped the ways in which writers from these traditions engage with the concepts of time and space, creating complex chronotopes that reflect the subjectivities of their inhabitants (Tlostanova, 2007). It is important to understand how Orhan Pamuk, the Turkish writer and 2006 Nobel laureate, uses food in his literature. He and other prominent Turkish writers have used food as an important aspect of their work. In his book *My Name is Red*, a character says, 'I love social gatherings because I can eat to my heart's content, and at the same time, forget that I'm the black sheep of the crowd. I love the baklava, mint candy, marzipan bread and fruit leather of the holidays; the pilaf with meat' (Pamuk, 2002, p. 262). Despite the fact that 'to see' sensation of sight, dominates the book's sensory universe, the sensation of taste is always evoked in the presence of food. The utilisation of food allows characters to travel across centuries to a time when Istanbul's inhabitants were familiar with the flavour and salt of ancient bread (Pamuk, 2002, p. 16) as well as rice and savoury foods. The books readers its readers navigate the city in several dimensions. The food's importance throughout the novel is explained at length in Nazlı Ökten's (2006) article. Food and desserts play an important role in connecting and unifying society. In Pamuk's book, one of the storyteller's first demands while disguised as a lady is to cook for this world. Shekure's pen and paper are hidden under the pot cabinet and the bread board, respectively. The killer conceals his riches in the kitchen of an

abandoned cabin. When the miniaturists come together, they celebrate the lovely days spent in the lodge's kitchen. When all of this is considered together, it is easy to see why Pamuk deemed the book 'my most optimistic novel'. In an interview, he elaborated that it 'has a heart: [the] kitchen' (Öteki Renkler, 1999, p. 157). Therefore, the senses are employed not only to amuse readers but to function as critical parts of the narrative, demonstrating Pamuk's mastery of the novel form. In an interview in 2015 with Tobias Carroll, Pamuk stated,

There are two kinds of writers: melodramatic writers, dramatic writers; funny writers, serious writers; and so on. There's one distinction that I always make: the writers who talk about and write about food with relish, and writers who don't mention it. You can't see any food in Dostoevsky, while Thomas Mann enjoys going into the details of food. I am that kind of writer. I like talking about food, first of all. Second, and primarily, I made my protagonist a street vendor. Eighty percent of vendors in the last eighty years are selling yogurt. My character sells yogurt, ice cream, boza, chicken with rice, and so forth.

In Shafak's novels, the characters' relationship with food symbolises their connection to their Turkish identity and functions as a sort of resistance against cultural disappearance. The protagonists in Shafak's novels utilise food to establish their cultural identity and heritage and oppose the erasure of their history. Their culinary abilities and determination to create traditional Armenian foods function as acts of resistance. Their claim that food represents cultural legacies allows characters to express their cultural identity and sense of belonging. The literature review and discussion of this paper emphasised the significance of food in historical construction and cultural identity projection. It may be contended that food is inextricably tied to sensory experiences, notably taste and smell, which play an important role in moulding cultural memory and creating historical narratives.

The examination of food in literature acts as a way for female authors to negotiate their racial, national, and ethnic identities and to claim their gendered subjectivity. Food is foregrounded as an empowering agency, challenging the essentialist relationship between identity and food as culinary metaphors and practices become ingrained in their tales. A certain cuisine may metonymise a group -where something is described using a word that describes one of its qualities or features and uphold essentialist ideas of identity in today's globalised society. However, modern fiction by women writers subverts this essentialism, utilising food as a vehicle to examine the complexities of culture and community (Dejmanee, 2018; Dharline, 2020; Ojwang, 2011; Pandey & Bhattacharya, 2020). Scholars have taken an interest in this 'culinary mystery' genre, exploring the relationships among food preparation, crime, and investigation (Pandey & Bhattacharya, 2020). Food plays a deeper role in writing than just celebrating gendered experiences. It is a potent metaphor that emphasises a community's cultural and religious values, reinforcing its identity through the routine act of eating. Fiction's culinary narratives serve as a platform for negotiating and portraying a variety of lived experiences as long as women authors continue to examine the relationships among food; identity; power; their racial, national, and ethnic identities, food becomes a platform for displaying and negotiating these varied facets of their identities. In modern literature, the culinary narrative has emerged as a key arena in which women authors navigate the nexus among identity, food, and power while portraying the varied real-life realities of their communities.

"There are four kinds of food in books," says Adam Gopnik (2012) "food that an author serves to characters who aren't supposed to taste it; food that an author serves to characters in order to convey their identities; food that writers prepare for their characters so they may share it together; and, finally (and most recently), food that writers prepare for characters but ultimately serve to the reader."

It is necessary to develop the relationships among food, memory, and stories of individual and societal cultural/social identities to support the idea that food memory may function as a sense that complements the other senses. Food's sensory and emotional properties offer memory pathways for events to be embodied. When taken as a whole, they provide a means by which individuals may give meaning to their individual and collective subjectivities. The sensory and affective elements ingrained in the material and symbolic social and cultural functions of food are the primary mediators of the relationship between food and memory, or the distinguishing factor that creates memories associated with food. Important channels for memory cues include sensory experiences and emotional reactions. According to neurologist Gordon M. Shepherd (2013), 'neurogastronomy' investigates how the brain interprets and processes flavours and how this neurological process affects memory. According to Shepherd's (2013) research, the same brain circuits process sensory/emotional experiences and memory preservation. In *The Omnivorous Mind*, neurologist John S. Allen expanded on this relationship by describing how the hippocampus—the region of the brain responsible for the creation of explicit memories—also controls emotions and drives. This study offered the physiological foundation for comprehending how food influences people's memories and stories.

To comprehend how the sensory and emotional components of food generate an embodied social and cultural experience that is kept in memory, scholar like Ortíz Cuadra (2013) studied the notions of 'synesthetic memory' and 'palate memory'. Food memories, for example, might include the particular sensory elements of a cooking environment, such as fish slices or lingering scents. Similarly, unlike the commercialised versions of these meals, the addition of edible plants and vegetables to homecooked food can elicit multimodal food memories.

Food memories are notably characterised by their social and cultural origins, working on both individual and community levels. Food exposure affects cognitive memory. People's histories, narratives, and concepts influence their sensory interactions with food. Habitual memories also play a role because the repetitive physical activities involved in food preparation and sharing become imprinted in memory. Food experiences are given personal and social importance through these diverse memory formats, forming both individual and collective identities.

Using a knife on a cutting board or rolling out dough on a marble slab are learnt skills that require recall of prior knowledge to be performed. People and groups establish their identities and show that they are a part of certain cultural and social settings by incorporating these food-related experiences into their individual and collective narratives (Rangil, 2013; Schifferstein et al., 2020).

Çınar (2024) says that –

One area in which sweets and their names do not appear is that of curses. I believe this stems from the unpleasantness of the subject itself. Sweets serve as a source of pleasure, and have specific functions in societal life. Sweetness is one of the four chief tastes – sweet, sour, salt and bitter.

Note these lines from TBOI: ‘A sweet, soothing smell filled the room as Cevriye poured rice pudding from a huge cauldron into tiny bowls’ and ‘Ashure was the symbol of continuity and stability, the epitome of the good days to come after each storm, no matter how frightening the storm had been’ (Shafak, 2006, p. 32, 277). Auntie Banu hands Mustafa, the brother who has returned from the United States, a bowl of ashure: “‘Here, my brother,’ Banu said as she handed him a bowl of ashure, decorated with pomegranate seeds. ‘You know, Mom has cooked a huge pot of ashure for you.’ Her serious face broke into a smile. ‘I must say, she is the cook but I am the one who decorated the bowls.’” The sweet food serves to reveal the secret and sin that had been committed so long ago and kept hidden. Later, Banu scanned the dinner table, feeling more and more guilt-ridden at the sight of each bowl of rice pudding now canopied by coconut flakes. Then, without turning her gaze, she murmured in a voice so gracefully soft, it didn’t sound like her at all’ (p. 33). Mustafa is the only son of the family. When he comes back to Turkey from the United States, he brings other memories along with the foods and fragrances of his home. He also returns to a past crime that he had long tried to forget. He tries not to look back, but his past is exactly where he had left it. Zeliha, her boyfriend, and the clairvoyant Banu know only too well what he did.

There had been many times in his life when Mustafa had been swept away with a sudden urge to confess to his wife that what she saw in him was not the whole of him.. (Shafak, 2006, p. 334).

It felt so relieving to walk out on his past and his future at once. (Shafak, 2006, p. 344) It felt so good to walk out on life. He remembered the little piece of paper he had stuck in the stone wall at the shrine of El Tradito. “Forgive me,” he had written there. “For me to exist, the past had to be erased.” (Shafak, 2006, p. 336)

The bowl of ashure that was left on his side table by Banu, proves to be his last desert.

Like a sea plain stretching as far as the eye could see after the tide went out, memories of a troubled past surfaced hither and thither from the ebbing waters. He reached out to the ashure. Knowingly and willfully, he started to eat it, little by little, savoring each and every ingredient with every mouthful. It felt so relieving to walk out on his past and his future at once. It felt so good to walk out on life. (Shafak, 2006, p. 344)

In TFRL Desert Rose’s brother poisons his father and step mother, in both the stories poison is employed in food items.

. I knew he had something in mind, but it never occurred to me what a horrible plan he was brewing. I wish I had known. I wish I could have prevented the tragedy. Then, one morning in spring, my father and stepmother were found dead, killed with rat poison. (Shafak, 2009, p.107)

Ella had a troubled past too, a past she tried hard to overcome-

She remembered how she had spent her teenage years holding her mother responsible for the suicide of her father. As a young girl, Ella had promised herself that when she got married, she would always make her husband happy and not fail in her marriage, like her mother. (Shafak, 2009, p. 86)

But she does fail and to bring things to a close she leaves her home, husband, children and kitchen to move on to fulfil her call, to complete Aziz’s dream. In TBOI Zeliha feels vulnerable and alone when she was going for her appointment with the gynaecologist. And then refuses to have an abortion. Going ahead with her resolve to have the daughter Asya.

Memories record these experiences, and the narrative uses interpretative language to decipher the food-based memories. Food, memory, and storytelling are all essential components of both regular activities and ceremonial or ritual ones. The set of teacups survive twenty years after Zeliha had purchased them and forgotten the cinnamon sticks her sisters needed, leaving the ashure incomplete. The ending of the story represents the survival of something fragile and the end of something permanent.

Teacups and readings of tea leaves are the basis of Banu’s predictions. She practises tasseography, the art of making predictions by reading tea leaves and coffee grounds. She understands the secret that her youngest sister had buried twenty years ago. Out of all the siblings, she is the only one with an offspring. The truth comes to Banu because of her clairvoyant practice. Another important food item that connects the entire story is pomegranates and pomegranate seeds. These are symbolically transferred as an heirloom in the shape of a ruby pomegranate brooch handcrafted by an Armenian artisan. It belonged to Mustafa’s stepdaughter’s great grandmother and the Kazanci patriarch. The item is shaped like a fruit, and it connects generations across continents and lineages. It is bound by centuries of hate. The pomegranate serves to link and finally end the process of the Ashure preparation by killing Mustafa, who connected the past to the present.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the exploration of food in contemporary fiction by women writers serves as a powerful means of asserting gendered, racial, national, and ethnic identities. The sensory and emotional experiences of food become imbued with personal and communal significance, shaping individual and group narratives that challenge essentialist notions of identity. This study is notable because it adds to the current study of food literature and food writing by emphasising the role of food, primarily Turkish food, to the growth of the story. It centres on the function of food in the narrative, whether in the foreground or background. The findings could help future scholars better grasp how not just

characters, but even food, create the story and resolve the distressing, unsolved, and unconfessed mysteries of the past. Food has been important in both works in the past, present, and perhaps in the future. Elif Shafak's comprehensive depiction of Turkish cuisine in her books not only emphasises Turkish culinary traditions and customs but also digs deeper into the emotional and psychological significance of food in the lives of her protagonists. Shafak's sensory descriptions of flavours, scents, and textures allow readers to experience the cultural complexity and historical depth of each meal. Each of the titles of the chapters of TBOI is based on the ingredients of the ashure, Mustafa's favourite dish. The novel is truly about the culmination of a long recipe-based ritual: the plot gradually cooks and each ingredient is painstakingly placed in a single pot until the end, when Mustafa's end comes. In the two stories, food serves to unite and to teach and retain historical connections. The turning point comes when the same food serves as both an act of vengeance and atonement.

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The authors Mohammad Rezaul Karim, Mohammad Jamshed, Sohaib Alam and Wahaj Unnisa Warda have contributed equally to the research and revision.

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