Depiction of Postmodern Culture in Elif Shafak's "The Bastard of Istanbul"

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Abstract

Postmodern culture or postmodernity speaks of social, economic or cultural conditions which made an appearance in western society after the modern age. It functions opposite to the modern outlook. This research has been carried out to represent postmodern culture in contemporary social structure through "The Bastard of Istanbul" written by a Turkish author Elif Shafak. The novel has been investigated deeper keeping in view the concept of postmodern culture. The results unfold that the author exhibits pop culture, social hypocrisy, dual standards, social follies and wavering personalities in the novel. This research concludes that the author has, by incorporating postmodern elements in the novel, highlighted social and cultural issues which are a reflection of our contemporary society.

Keywords

Postmodern culture, Postmodern literature, Technology, Society, Social issues, Pop culture

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Introduction:

The term “postmodern” was coined in 1940s by Arnold Toynbee, a famous historian. To understand postmodernism, one needs to understand modernism. Modernism is the cultural movement to which postmodernism provides counter arguments. Modernity is usually linked with Eurocentric perspective; a perspective dealing with intellectual and technological shifts emerged during European Enlightenment.

To distinguish postmodernism from modernism is one of the major problems. In various areas, one can see postmodern artists and theorists continuing certain threads of modernism, such as applying self-consciousness, parody, irony, fragmentation, generic mixing, ambiguity, simultaneity, and breaking down between two forms of expression i.e., high form and low form. In this matter, postmodernism can be seen as an extension of modernism. But there are certain things which distinguish postmodernism from modernism.

One point which differs postmodernism from modernism is extreme self-reflexivity. Postmodernists take self-reflexivity to more playful event in irrelevant manner. It can be found in pop-culture.

Besides, postmodern artists and theorists tend to be more parodic than modern artists and theorists. Questioning of grand narratives is also present in postmodernism. Jean-François Lyotard is of view that breakdown of the narratives is a vital characteristic of the postmodern condition. Artists of postmodernism employ pop and mass culture in their works. Pop culture plays with traditional concepts of temporality, religion, and subjectivity.

Sarup (1993) is of the view that the culture of modernity is known as Modernism while the culture of postmodernity is called Postmodernism. Most important contributions to sociological thinking relating to postmodernity initiated from some scholars by the late 1970s, some of them considered themselves postmodernists. Michel Foucault, Jean Baudrillard, Jacques Derrida, Jean-François Lyotard and Fredric Jameson are considered most important postmodernists.

The Bastard of Istanbul (2007) is story of a nineteen-year-old girl named Asya. Her mother (Zehila) runs a tattoo parlor. Banu (Asya’s aunt) having two djinns as her slaves is a clairvoyant, Cevriye who is widow is a teacher and Feride is a hypochondriac. Asya’s uncle Mustapha lives in Arizona. His wife has a daughter ‘Armanoush’ with her ex-husband. Armanoush travels to Istanbul and comes to live with Asya and her family. The parted brother and his wife return to Istanbul and all of them unites.

Literature Review:

McHale (2004) takes into account beauty of silence and pop art. He critically investigates elements of long poems and describes postmodern features in them. He takes a deeper look on interference, overlapping and reinforcement in these long poems and how these elements are further reassured to make a heterogeneous whole.

Postmodern ideas infused in ethics, politics and artwork of a particular period are evaluated and examined by Butler (2003). He takes into account how these postmodern elements have become a non-separable part of postmodern culture.

Ruland and Bradbury (1992) focus on the questions of cultural and literary nationalism by presenting American literature in short. They take excerpts from different pieces of literature and point out that American literature is modern in the beginning mirroring diverse political and cultural scenarios in works of literature. Their work considers American literature, modernism and postmodernism.

Foster (2002) discusses introduction of postmodern art, culture and criticism in detail. His essays are a collection of ideas and concepts related to postmodern culture and contemporary art.

Jameson (1991) explains Postmodernism, defines its cultural, political and social implications, field of architecture and variegated forms of cultures that spring out of it. According to him, Postmodernism can easily be considered as a product of late capitalism. He also suggests disparate elements in Modernism as well as in Postmodernism subject to dissimilar cultures. In opinion of Vassileva (2010), "This is a world of instant messaging and streaming media, of digital technology and mass communications landscapes, of powerful computers and enticing billboards - a world of mesmerizing technological developments that has defined every aspect of our lives, including poetic production. In this highly sophisticated technological reality of Western postmodern society, it has become impossible to extricate poetry from the complex information networks that determine it".

Research methodology:

Elif Shafak's *The Bastard of Istanbul* (2007) has been analyzed from the perspective of postmodern culture or postmodernity. It is a qualitative research. The data taken for this study will be analyzed from some postmodern elements presented by Jean Baudrillard in *For a Critique of the Political Economy of a Sign* (1981), Linda Hutcheon's listed elements of postmodernism in *The Politics of Postmodernism* (1989) and Jameson's identified postmodern features in *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991).

Research questions:

This study will answer the questions which are the following:

- I. Can the society depicted in *The Bastard of Istanbul* be considered a postmodern society?
- II. Can the society depicted in *The Bastard of Istanbul* be considered a reflection of our present-day cultural state or condition of society?

Analysis

Postmodern literature focuses on the point that how people try to survive in a hypocrite society. In the *Bastard of Istanbul* society depicted has a patriarchal system. In the novel, Zeliha faced lustful gaze of men when she was on her way to hospital. The objectification of women is clear from the incident when a taxi driver was listening 'Like a Virgin'- Madonna's song. He saw Zeliha and went after her. He started commenting: "I'll have some of that!"

"But why walk when I could give you a ride?"

"You wouldn't want that sexy body to get wet, would you?" (5)

In the novel, Zeliha is a rebellious character. In Istanbul, a norm which women followed was “When harassed on the street, never respond, since a woman who responds, let alone swears back at her harasser, shall only fire up the enthusiasm of the latter!” (5). Zeliha against this norm started cursing the taxi driver. In her culture, women were forbidden for nose piercing. However, Zeliha herself pierced her nose and defied that rule. She was considered immoral and lustful after that act. In Istanbul, women smoking on street were considered as women having low moral value but Zeliha broke this rule as well.

Another example of patriarchal society discussed in the novel is that single mothers are always blamed by the society as morally corrupt women. Mood of receptionist, who was cheerful at first, suddenly changed when Zeliha told her appointment is related to abortion. Zeliha did not tell receptionist that she came late because she faced harassment earlier as this would add a stigma to her character. When she was telling about her abortion, she could feel the gazes on her. When Zeliha informed everyone at her home that she wouldn't go for abortion, her mother commented: “Shame on you! You've always brought disgrace on this family”.

“Look at your nose piercing... All that makeup and the revolting short skirts, and oh, those high heels! This is what happens when you dress up... like a whore! ... you should be grateful that there are no men around in this family. They'd have killed you” (29).

While Armanoush and Asya were playing loud music, Zeliha commented that they are slightly intoxicated. Gulsum replied her “...Is it not enough that you always bring disgrace to this family? ...The dish towels in the kitchen are longer than your skirts!”

These citations make it clear that women are always blamed by people. No one tried to feel what Zeliha was going through or who was the rapist of Zeliha. Even her mother used to taunt her way of living. She considered Zeliha responsible for the rape.

The oppression on women by the opposite gender can also be seen in this novel. Gulsum's husband used to oppress her. He used to beat her as well. Levent Kazanci never “hesitate to use his belt to discipline his wife and children...” (217). Levent asked Msuatfa not to cry like a female when he was circumcised. He further told him to “behave like a man” (313). Gulsum was pressurized multiple times to produce sons. In patriarchal society, sons are regarded more as compared to daughters. That's why Mustafa was valued so much in the house. He was the only son so he was considered precious, king at home.

Oppression from in-laws is discussed in the novel as well. At one point in the novel, Rose thought that if some incident might occur with her daughter, then result would be that her mother-in-law will “file suit for the custody of her grand-daughter” (37). For Armanoush's name, Rose felt repugnance. She was of the view that Armanoush is a mature name and does not suit a child but she was forced by her in-laws to name her so. That's why Rose called her daughter 'Amy'. When it became evident to Shushan that Rose is in relationship with a Turk, she announced that Rose can marry anyone she wants but her family will keep Armanoush.

Gossips, rumors and lame suggestions prevail in almost all cultures on the earth. Petite-Ma married to Riza Selim Kazanci. From his first wife Riza Selim Kazanci had a son, named Levent Kazanci. Levent Kazanci never gave the respect of a mother to Petite-Ma. Riza Selim Kazanci and Petite-Ma had no children together. The reason behind it was that when they got married

Petite-Ma was too young to have a baby and later Riza Selim Kazanci was too old. Their childlessness was the talk of town. People tried to pressurize Riza to marry once again but he refused to do so. Rumors spread quickly in any society. In the novel, it was rumored in Istanbul that Banu (a woman) did not ask for money from needy customers, instead she ask them to bring a handful of hazelnuts. That's why people used to call her 'Mother Hazelnut' and 'Sheikh Hazelnut' instead of her real name.

The novel also put light on ignorance of police, municipal administrations, doctors and politicians. At one point in the novel, receptionist informed Zeliha that Zeliha shouted a lot and she pondered why did not police come to rescue. In her mind Zeliha answered that it did not happen because it is police of Istanbul not police of any American movie. Gulsum was of the view that politicians are rascals and lie all the time. According to her, when they are elected, they don't remember the promises they made to people before election. Zeliha was informed by Feride that some doctors forgot to take a pair of scissors outside the body of a nine-year child who had a surgery due to appendicitis.

Issue of traffic is discussed in this novel. This issue is termed as a mess. This novel also put light on social evils. Mustafa was a gambler and used to bet on various sports. He went to a brothel once but returned immediately. Dilemma of poverty has also been discussed in the novel. There were people who collects garbage in the novel and they were putting heaps of garbage on the carts. Banu was informed by Asya that she is a vegetarian now and will not consume meat. In return Banu commented: "There are people in this country so desperately poor that they wouldn't even know what red meat tastes like, if it weren't for the alms benevolent Muslims give them during the Feast of Sacrifice... You should be grateful for every morsel of meat put on your plate, ..." (74).

In the novel, Istanbul is portrayed as a city of broken hearts. The business of tattoo parlor of Zeliha expanded as people with broken hearts visited her parlor more often in a try to forget their ex-lovers. Their ex-lovers were banished from their lives but still people failed to stop loving them. That's why they came to get tattoos of various animals to forget their ex-partners fully.

Nonnationalist Scenarist of Ultranationalist Movies was called a hypocrite by Asya. Reason behind this was that he used to make a series which was also his source of income but he also used to mock it. Asya remarked "...You write those screenplays for the masses. You write and sell and earn huge amounts of money. And then you come here, take cover in this intellectual café, and join us to mock those movies. Hypocrisy!" (212)

Photography, films, music, dance and capitalism are all part of Postmodernism (Hutcheon; 1989). Jameson (1991) is of the view that drugs intake is also a feature of Postmodernism. Media culture and capitalism have been identified as the elements of Postmodernism by Baudrillard (1981). These features of Postmodernism are also present in Elif Shafak's *The Bastard of Istanbul* (2007).

The novel discusses various kinds of alcohol, such as beer and raki, consumed by people. Zeliha used to smoke cigarettes. In a café, named Kundera, Asya along her friends used to indulge in smoking cigarettes and drinking beer. The Cartoonist used to drink a lot. Due to this, he slept at different places unknowingly. At one point in novel, he got his consciousness from a

mosque's stone, on which perished people were being washed. Apartment of the Cartoonist was full with the smell of sex, raki and marijuana. Armanoush commented that Asya "smokes like a chimney" (183). During a cyber chat, Lady Peacock discussed that in Armenia many people are dying because of smoking.

Various elements and issues of pop culture are also depicted in the novel under study. These elements and issues are related to traffic problems, restaurants, dieting, various kinds of clothes, music and food. The novel begins with portrayal of issues of traffic and Zeliha going in hurry towards a clinic for an appointment. High heels wore by Zeliha, her colorful miniskirts along with tight fitting blouses, her stockings made up of nylon, finger nails properly manicured come under the depiction of pop culture. She puts much effort in making her hands presentable because of her field as she is the owner of a tattoo parlor. Style and color of Feride's hair varied according to her temper. Asya put light on various diseases, such as hepatitis and blood poisoning, resulted because of tattoos and different procedures like surgery, skin peeling and laser treatment which can be used to remove them.

In pop culture, people pay much focus on their figures and dieting. In the novel, Asya said that she does not want to have cake on this birthday and she is now a vegetarian. At that point, Zeliha remarked that Asya is worried about her weight and is dieting. When Rose was in supermarket, she was also thinking that she has gained a lot of weight. In "Healthy Living Magazine" (a magazine in novel), various body shapes such as mango-shaped, pear-shaped and apple-shaped body were discussed. Asya was forced to take ballet lessons as mothers belonging to Turkish middle-class wanted their kids to achieve things which upper-class children had.

Unnecessary shopping also exists in pop culture. Zeliha had thirty different tea sets but Zeliha bought one more, Rose was also in habit of buying things which she did not need.

Well maintained restaurants and cafés are also part of pop culture. In *The Bastard of Istanbul*, Café Kundera has been portrayed which is located in Istanbul; it was named after a renowned writer Milan Kundera. It is discussed that restaurant has frames of different photos, sketches and paintings on the walls. There were various stories related to Café Kundera. According to some people, once Kundera came to that place. He did not like the taste of cappuccino as well as of vanilla biscuit; however, he still ordered one more and continued to write. While some other people believed that café's owner is an admirer of Kundera. Matt Hassinger took Armanoush to a restaurant, Skewed Window. It was an "Asian fusion with a touch of Caribbean influence" (107). 'Skewed Window' had beautiful walls decorated by modern abstract art. Armanoush and Matt Hassinger ordered various dishes in that restaurant and those dishes were the replicas of famous paintings as well. Dish which Armanoush orderd was inspired by 'The Blind Whore' of Francesco Boretti's. Dish ordered by Matt was copy of 'Untitled' by Mark Rothko. Famous brands, Starbucks as well as Coca Cola van, are also portrayed in the novel under study. Name of various dishes like Manti, Churek, Kaburga, Bastirma, Fassoulye Pilaki, Khdayif, Tursu and Burma are mentioned in the novel. Various colors of Capitalism can also be seen in the novel. For example, in the restaurant Matt got confused about ordering wine. Then he demanded the expensive wine which he could afford as well. Asya was of the view that this world is full of "History, politics, religion, society, competition, marketing, free market, power struggle, at one another's throats for another morsel of triumph..." (166).

Pop culture consists of songs, videos, movies and magazines as well. Asya adores Johnny Cash. She had all the information related to him. Taxi driver was playing Madonna's 'Like a Virgin'. Rose was in the habit of listening music while driving. Mustafa used to play classic comedies. He also used to surf on internet for the sake of passing time. Various elements such as cartoons, classical music, punk as well as postpunk, darkwave, death metal and industrial metal, pop music, ethnic music, psychedelic, various TV Channels, novels and magazines are discussed in the novel as well. Nonnationalist Scenarist of Ultrnationalist movies, who was the creator and writer of a TV series about a national hero 'Timur the Lionheart', is a character in this novel. Different events and parties are important aspects of Pop culture. In this novel, Kevork attended many events. Those events were benefit concert, Christmas party, annual Winter Gala, a rafting race, annual picnic, Friday Night Light party and a Sunday Brunch.

Well-decorated houses are portrayed in this novel. House of Tchakhmakhchian was embellished with various rugs, antique silver and different paintings. Kazaci's house was full of various sets of tea-glass, coffee cups, velvet armchairs, oil painting and piano. His house was adorned with multiple colors, for example, sea-green, turquoise and maroon.

Modern day technology has been presented in this novel. Cars, TV, internet, KODAK camera, video cassette, video games, VCR, computer, cybercafé/chatrooms, phones, CD player, photographs and laptop are discussed in the novel.

V. Conclusion

Elif Shafak has employed many postmodern elements in *The Bastard of Istanbul* (2007). This novel incorporates postmodern elements and postmodern culture. Pop culture and hypocrisy of society is evident in the novel. It also depicts bitter realities and darker side of society. It focuses on the issues related to ignorance of police, municipal administrations, doctors and politicians, traffic issues and poverty. Thus, the novel *The Bastard of Istanbul* manifests postmodern elements in such a way that it also reflects the hypocrisy of portrayed society that is almost identical to our contemporary society. Hence, we can easily conclude that the culture depicted in the novel is postmodern and the depicted society can be considered a reflection of our present-day society. The social issues discussed in this novel can produce an evident influence on people's mentality as by reading such literature people can make efforts in order to fix their faults and can help to a great extent in shaping their ideologies.

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