

Sharing an exotic meal as a trigger of intercultural dialogue

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Elif Shafak's novel *The Bastard of Istanbul* (Turkish title: *Baba ve Piç*) tells the captivating story of a Turkish and an American-Armenian-Turkish patchwork family, both female dominated. Coming from very different cultural backgrounds, the characters' mentalities often seem incompatible. The religious Banu lives under the same roof as her atheist sister Zeliha and their Kemalist mother Gülsüm... and yet they somehow get along and even love each other in this household full of contradictory world views. The serious issues dealt with in this novel are numerous: the role of collective amnesia and individual memory, patriarchy and women's rights, incest, identity. Among these topics is also the relationship between food experiences and intercultural dialogue.

It might seem trivial but eating habits tell us a lot about other cultures and identities. After all, "we are what we eat," as the slogan says. When it comes to the search for identity, the universal language of food can indeed play an essential part. In their article "Food, Identity and Immigrant Experience", Koç and Welsh analyze this link between culinary culture and identity in detail. Among other aspects, they state that "food security is part of 'feeling at home'" and that "the multicultural cuisine may offer a glimpse of widening notions of identity, self and belonging" (Koç & Welsh, 2002, p. 47). The confrontation with exotic food can trigger a sensation of otherness and together with it all kinds of negative reactions (which is, by the way, also now and then illustrated in Zadie Smith's novel *White Teeth* or in Gish Jen's *Mona in the Promised Land*). There are a few cases in which references to food are used to illustrate the narrow-mindedness and prejudices of "insular souls" (as Elif Shafak calls them) and their inability to communicate with those whom they regard as "different". For instance, Armanoush's Armenian grandmother in *The Bastard of Istanbul* does not tolerate any artificial flavors in her kitchen, which she associates with American people whom she consequently avoids, and Armanoush's American mother Rose bans all exotic ingredients from her kitchen, exclaiming: "No more weird ethnic food!" (2007, p. 39), staying at the same time away from those who cook it. Here, the characters behave like "separators" (cf. Berry et al., 1987, p. 66) who prefer to keep their own culinary habits and do not eat dishes they are not familiar with. Taking their derogatory statements into account, Kim's "us against them" theory could again be applied which is a hindering factor for intercultural dialogue. Matsumoto, Leroux and Yoo's

also claim that dealing with other cultures can lead to “anger, frustration, or resentment” (Matsumoto et al., 2005, p. 16).

While some of Elif Shafak’s characters are divided into Turkish, Armenian and American food lovers or haters, global souls like Armanoush speak the universal and uniting “language of food” and thus are engaging in intercultural dialogue. They neither put a national label on what they eat nor do they put labels on people who are different. Unlike her mother Rose who, after her traumatic experience with the Armenian culture needs American food to (re-)create a sense of belonging, Armanoush enjoys exotic flavors without feeling emotionally unstable. Different kinds of dishes correspond to her different identities: the Armenian food to Armanoush which indirectly allows her to communicate with another culture; the American food to the U.S. citizen Amy; and everything in between to her My-Exiled-Soul chatroom personality through which she can communicate across any ethnical, religious or linguistic boarders. When she, for example, eats an Asian dish with a Caribbean influence, this act of eating exotic food turns into a metaphor for her desire to create bridges between various cultures through conversation around a dinner table. All her eating habits taken together stand for Armanoush’s “global soul” identity (Shafak) or her “patchwork identity” (Keupp).

We see Shafak’s characters sit down together for dinner, bringing their contradictory mentalities and ideas with them. Food here can sometimes make them forget all their differences and help them understand the Other’s views without feeling threatened. Armanoush’s statement in this novel underlines this phenomenon: “I do not speak the Turkish language, unfortunately, but I guess I speak the Turkish cuisine” (2007, p, 156). She utters these words at the dinner table of Mustafa’s family in Istanbul, when she realizes that Turkish and Armenian eating rituals and dishes are very similar, including *mantı*, *pastırma* or *sucuk* (p. 114). Certain of these dishes almost make us smell and taste the beauty of traditions (as is also the case in Mario Levi’s *Size Pandispanya Yaptım*). After all, the highly emotional act of eating together in *The Bastard of Istanbul* eventually opens new perspectives on society, history, identity and religion, making a constructive conversation possible.

The dessert *aşure* with its various ingredients reflects Armanoush’s idea of cultural coexistence. The concepts of cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism are illustrated by this originally Armenian sweet dish called *anuschabur*. The recipe’s particularity consists in the fact that all ingredients need to be cooked separately. Even though they taste delicious on their own, the unique flavor of *aşure* can only be achieved by mixing them all. In a figurative sense, a similar observation can be made for the novel’s characters: They all have their particular personalities, and despite their differences manage to live side by side, sometimes even under

the same roof. The more they try to interact and “mix,” the richer and more fascinating become their lives. Intercultural dialogues over a shared meal can thus help to create global souls who do not feel the need to choose between an “either-or” but will always opt for a “both-and.”

Wierlacher (2008) rightly states that the act of eating might turn into a means of becoming aware of other cultures, as it can create a bond between culinary habits and cultural awareness. Armanoush’s “culinary vocabulary” (p. 252) is rich, and she uses it to communicate with people whose native language she does not understand. In her life, people from different cultures are allowed to coexist just like different kinds of cuisine, including American, Armenian, Asian-Caribbean and later also Turkish dishes. Just like the various ingredients of the sweet dish *aşure*, Elif Shafak’s characters illustrate that various cultural identities can also be united in harmony in one single person. The result could be described as the sensation of sometimes being “displaced but not placeless” (p. 255). Neither in a conversation around a fictional table, nor anywhere around the real world.

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