
Implications of Socio-Cultural Norms on Individual Behaviour in Elif Shafak's *The Bastard of Istanbul*

Rabia Sabir

Visiting Lecturer at International Islamic University, Islamabad

Email: rabiasabir111@gmail.com

Muhammad Shehzad Khan

Lecturer In English, Govt Shahbaz Shareef College, Rawalpindi

Email: shahzadnasirkhan@gmail.com

1. Introduction

Cultural psychology, as the name suggests, helps us study the effects and changes that a culture has on its people and vice versa. The culture of a country and its people are interdependent and affect each other immensely. Culture moulds the minds of people living under it, their sense of morality and influences responses to a certain situation. Similarly collective wisdom of people continuously updates culture and its traditions. Our intellectual and behavioral characteristics, and culture are interdependent, as they evolve and influence each other simultaneously and this cycle continues. Novels like *The Bastard of Istanbul* by Elif Shafak (2006) revolve around the dilemma of the struggle between an individual and the effects of society.

1.1 Background and Concept

Cultural psychology as the name suggests, is an amalgamation of various fields of studies, namely psychology, anthropology, linguistics and philosophy. Its focus is to study how human psychology and culture influence each other.¹ Cultural practices, traditions and institutions influence the personality development and psychological tendencies of people living in that society². Cultural psychology according to most of its practitioners does not limit itself as a branch of psychology. It employs a variety of expertise from different disciplines to influence psychology and studies carried out in social sciences.

With the advent of 21st century, remarkable advances in the means of transmission of information has made the world come closer and has made it easier for people to reach out and express themselves and subsequently display the individuality of their culture. This has caused literature to evolve, making it more open and accepting of the individual and cultural differences in expression of people that come from various regions of the world. Electronic and Print media; making it easier for

contemporary writers to come forward, has led to the beginning of discussions on topics like socio cultural differences and how the individuals living in a certain culture are affected by it.

The story of *The Bastard of Istanbul* by Elif Shafak revolves around the nineteen years old Asya, an illegitimate child. Like any teenager, Asya feels alienated from society and this alienation has filled her with anger. Everyone around her, the not so bright aunts and the pressures of society play an important role in the development of her rebellious personality. There is a significant age gap between her and the characters (her aunts and grandma), when combined with their strange personalities makes it hard for her to conform to the ways of her elders. Also, Zeliha (her mother) happens to have chosen her ways to live her life, and did not adhere to any rules that her mother or siblings or culture for that matter implied on her. Her mother's rebellious behavior also plays a factor in the way Asya develops her personality.

Asya's illegitimacy is a double-edged blade whose effects are quite clear in her behavior. Firstly, the unacceptance of an illegitimate child that she has had to face all her life brings a resentment that turns to anger, with her prolonged struggle to find her place in society. Secondly, she is unaware of the whereabouts of her father. This natural curiosity makes it hard for her to get over it. This has made her cling to the past and unable to move on. These worrisome thoughts become more frequent as the stepdaughter of her only uncle, that lives in America for the past 20 years, Armanoush, comes to Istanbul in search of her Armenian roots. Armanoush like many Armenians was raised listening to the stories of the atrocities that the Turks committed against her ancestors. She wants to understand herself, especially her Armenian side by visiting the very place where her ancestors had to face deportations and massacres in the early 1900s. This city that acts as a bridge between the Middle East and Europe; having infused vibes from the two opposing cultures has a complex environment. Asya and Armanoush while searching for the latter's Armenian roots, get to explore the city and create a bond of friendship over the period.

Elif Shafak has opted for a narrative style of writing, and she explains in detail the struggles of Asya a girl from Istanbul (who is trying to live without a past) and Armanoush a girl from America (who like her fellow Armenians is holding on to the past). Every character has a story to tell, of how sometimes the worst of events can help us grow and be the person that we are to become. Elif Shafak's has shown an in-depth depiction of the contrasting cultures and has presented us with the bold and complex characters in the novel. This makes the novel an appropriate

choice to apply theories of cultural psychology to observe and analyze the cultural implications on the behavioural patterns of people.

1.2 Research Objectives

The objectives of this study are:

- To analyze the socio-cultural norms that affect the lives of an individual
- To identify cultural practices that lead to the struggles of an individual³

1.3 Research Questions

- How does Elif Şafak bring forth the culture as a dominant force in the lives of the characters?
- To what extent, the characters in “The Bastard of Istanbul” are influenced by the dominant practices⁴ of culture in a society?

1.4 Research Statement

The conflict between individual traits of a person and that of social norms has existed from the very beginning of recorded history. Studying the effects of culture on the individuals living under it is of great importance in explaining behaviour of the people of society in response to different situations. The Bastard of Istanbul by Elif Shafak is a depiction of how socio-cultural norms affect people’s behaviour in general.

1.5 Delimitation

Since the topic of my research is Implications of Socio-Cultural Norms on Individual Behaviour in Elif Shafak’s The Bastard of Istanbul; the current study is delimited to the exploration of the theme of socio-cultural influence on the character of Asya Kanzaci in Elif Shafak’s The Bastard of Istanbul.

Significance of Study

This study tries to give an insight into the novel and influences the upcoming writers to highlight the subject of individuality and socio-cultural conflicts. It helps us to understand how the culture of a country affects the behaviour of its people. This study is also important in understanding the concept of cultural psychology. This work allows the readers and fellow researchers to critically analyze culture and its effects on the personality development of its people. A better understanding of the interdependence of culture and its people brings forth a positive change in their culture.

2. Literature Review

Literature acts like a mirror in portraying people’s lives in a society. The literature of a society is a true reflection of that society (Defoe).

An individual’s mental growth is highly dependent on the immediate environment (both social and cultural) that he grows up in, and this assumption can be verified through various literary, fictional and

research work. How culture and people have affected each other, and transformed over the period, and culture's influence on the psychological and behavioral patterns has been a fascinating subject for many authors and psychologists.

Different works of anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists and related literary material has been observed to find out the implications of cultural psychology on the individual's behavior in the depicted environment⁵ of the selected work of Elif Shafak.

Every now and then, researchers have made valuable efforts related to understanding the personality or the individual's behavior based on his cultural or traditional background. Some interesting insights on said topic are presented in a research paper coauthored by Gorodnichenko and Roland, as they try to relate the psychological tendencies of an individual and the principles governing them with his/her native culture. One of the main ideas discussed in their research is, the individualistic and collective cultures and the stark differences in how they affect an individual, provides useful insights to better understanding of the effects of culture on an individual from different perspectives such as economic, psychological, institutional and literary. (Gorodnichenko 213-236)

An individual and his or her native culture has a symbiotic association, Evans and Schaumberg in their research publication, *Childhood Poverty, Chronic Stress, and Adult Working Memory* have tried to explain the effects of changes in the traditions and cultural practices. They suggest that culture significantly influences the psyche, behavior and the thought process of an individual, but through intellectual growth an individual can transform cultural conditions and ultimately cultural effects. According to Schaumberg, Cultural conditions control an individual's behavior to the extent of structuring it, but this control is controllable by the individuals living under that culture. (Evans 49).

According to Richard Shweder, one of the leading researchers of this field, the main objective of cultural psychology is to analyze the effects of cultural traditions and social practices on expression and the transformation of the human psyche. And how these factors contribute to lessening the overall similarity of human psyche, while increasing deviancy of mind on ethnic basis, self and emotions. (Shweder)

As E. Adamson Hoebel views the concept of culture as a system that encompasses the behavioral patterns learned over time, that become an important part of the character of the members of society... (Hoebel 23), which infers that culture is something that is 'out there' that can be learned by humans but is not a part of us; that answers the cultural differences in different areas. Shafak displays these concepts in her

writings, how the characters in their transition from childhood to adolescence and finally to adulthood show behavioral changes. Their loss of innocence, feeling of alienation from society as they grow up in restrictive, conservative and religious societies.

In the late 1900s John and Beatrice Whiting researched on the different facets of humans, especially behavior of young ones and published their findings in Handbook of Cross-cultural Psychology: Theory and Method. In which they suggested:

Whenever individuals (especially young children) were to be analyzed, living under a specific culture, many behavioral responses were considered as natural and therefore couldn't be classified as variables. It was only when it was realized that human behavior and what was considered normal changed from culture to culture. That is how one group of people living in one culture did not behave as people living in a different culture, this showed that the concept of human nature should be considered variable. (Whiting 39)

The psychological and behavioral tendencies and the development of personality a character goes through in stories of Shafak, can be effectively analyzed by understanding the effects of individuals and the cultural environment around them. "The Bastard of Istanbul" by Elif Şafak presents a perfect mix of characters with individual traits woven into the two cultures (American and Turkish), that makes it an appropriate choice for this study of the principles of cultural psychology⁶.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Method and Design

As the proposed research is based on a literary work (novel), for that reason the research is Qualitative in nature. As discussed earlier, the characters and the depictions of a society in the novel are to be focused, so the method of research is descriptive. Society and characters depicted in "The Bastard of Istanbul" by Elif Shafak is focused upon and is analyzed through textual analysis. Textual analysis is a method used by researchers to analyze the structure, content and hidden messages in the text.

3.2 Theoretical Framework

A theoretical framework illustrates how the research would be carried out. Principles of Cultural Psychology will be applied to the study of The Bastard of Istanbul. One of the leading contributors to Cultural Psychology Theory is Richard Shweder (1991). The theory explains how cultural traditions and social practices affect the human psyche and their behavioural patterns.

“Cultural psychology is the study of how psychological and behavioural tendencies are rooted in and embodied in culture” (Heine).

Cultural psychology revolves around the relationship between mind and culture, how they are interdependent i.e. how culture can affect the psychological and behavioral characteristics of an individual and vice versa.

According to Richard Shweder, one of the leading researchers of this field, the main objective of cultural psychology is to analyze the effects of cultural traditions and social practices on expression and the transformation of the human psyche. And how these factors contribute to lessening the overall similarity of human psyche, while increasing deviancy of mind on ethnic basis, self and emotions.

(Ratner 7-31)

There are three predominant schools of thoughts in cultural psychology, which are as follows:

The Symbolic Approach

As the name suggests, this school of thought of cultural psychology considers culture as a system that constitutes of shared ways of interaction i.e. symbols etc., shared ideas, meanings and common language or languages. This shared concept of culture is socially constructive in nature, for these practices are adopted by most individuals of a society. Cultural symbols are of great importance in stimulating psychological growth and personality development of an individual. The common method of application of this approach is to classify and analyze information and then categorize responses in a particular order. (Ratner 7-31)

Activity Theory

Activity theory is the second approach used in cultural psychology. Followers of this approach consider the psychological and behavioral development of an individual to be an effect of the activities he/she takes part in socially. These theorists think that activities carried out in a society are of primary influence on cultural psychology. An activity theorist focuses mainly on highlighting the effects of organized real activities, i.e. the effects of such activities in the form of the social consequences that lead to the formulation of social regulations and systems. This approach of analyzing social activity and its effects on psychological and behavioral development of an individual makes it different from the symbolic approach and other traditional schools of thoughts of cultural psychology. (Zinchenko 42-43); (Vygotsky 200-201); (House 525-561).

The Individualistic Approach

In comparison to the other approaches in cultural psychology, the individualistic approach is quite recent and emphasizes the effects of

individualistic characteristics on the formation of culture. This approach formulates that culture absorbs and transforms through individual creativity. This approach tries to infer that individuals can affect and their psychological and behavioral response help in the evolution of culture. This approach negates the concept of culture transforming psychological tendencies, rather it sees individuals as the constructors of the cultural system. (Ratner 7-31)

Proposed research tries to view the subject at hand through these different schools of thought to understand better the effects of culture on personality development and behavior in general. For many years culture was identified as something that was 'outside', something to be shared by groups of people and conform to; but now through the ideas like "social construction" culture and the people in it are thought to be mutually dependable, people can form and influence the culture as much as the culture influences them, although culture evolves very slowly.

3.3 Procedure

Asya Kazanci from "The Bastard of Istanbul" is analyzed by the application of Principles of Cultural Psychology Theory. And the results determine the effects of culture on the behaviour and personality development of Asya Kazanci.

4 Textual Analyses

With time the concept of culture has been defined differently. Firstly, culture was thought of as something "external" that can be seen, analyzed and described. Then, culture was considered as the common way of living of people that interact socially with each other. Culture was seen as the shared knowledge which was passed on from one generation to another, through enculturation and socialization. In recent times, as more cognitive approaches have been developed in different branches of psychology, holism has given way to individualism. Now study of individuals is of great importance in cross-cultural psychology, as individuals are seen not as mere victims but cognizes, appraisers and interpreters of culture. While, from the "social construction" perspective (Misra 225-243), culture isn't external, but it is a product of the everyday interactions between individuals and their environment. Cultural psychology, as Shweder defines it, to comparatively study culture and psyche, how they form and affect each other. (R. A. Shweder 497-527), lays emphasis on how culture is constructive and infers that culture is not something that is external to an individual, where it influences their behavior, but "as an inter-subjective reality through which worlds are known, created, and experienced"⁷ (Miller 103). A perspective in which culture and the self are seen as

interdependent (Miller 88-89) has been a part of cross-cultural psychology for some time⁸.

Asya Kazanci is a complex character, in the sense that she has quite pronounced ideals, which are almost always contradicting to the ways of living that the people around her (family) are accustomed to. She despises her past to the point that she wants no part of it and does not allow herself to dwell too much in it. Mainly because she does not know who her father is, and if she were to let her curiosity get hold of her, then this seemingly endless quest to find her lost identity will make it impossible for her to live a normal life. The only source for her to know the truth about her father is her mother (of whom she calls Aunt) Zeliha, but Asya knows her mother well to know that she will never tell her about him. As much as she wants to run away from her past, to try and move on and live a normal life, she is constantly reminded of it. Grandma Gulsum, in one of altercations with Asya, reminds her that she is a “Bastard” child; born out of wedlock. This idea of lost identity, of her unknown past makes it harder for Asya to concentrate on her present, that’s why she chooses to not push for the answers to her queries; she decides to move on and not indulge into the “irrationality” that runs in her family and instead keeps to “her own rational, analytical mind (Shafak 64).

Asya Kazanci never got to fully understand the concept of birthdays, and the way people got excited about it; she hated birthdays, and this hatred had always been there. Maybe one important reason for her devout hatred of birthdays came from the repeated tradition of baking the same cake every year, ever since her childhood - A caramelized triple layered apple cake (too much sugar) having a frosting of whipped cream (too sour). (Shafak 60)

In another incident from Asya’s childhood, Grandma Gulsum uttered the word Bastard. The calm with which she spoke the word, it made Asya not realize that this word was for her and not the flower. At the time of incident Asya did not know the meaning of the word, and she only managed to know the meaning when she was nine years old, when someone from her school called her by that name. (Shafak 61-62)

In the novel *The Bastard of Istanbul*, Elif Shafak (the writer) has opted for a narrative style of writing. And the passage describes one of the events that portrays the alienation that Asya feels living among the dysfunctional family of hers. Her inability to relate with and express herself in front of her family, shows in her everyday life and the ways she formulates her thoughts. She’s embarrassed of her up-bringing and the monotony that comes with it, having grown up without a father figure and four aunts (including her mother to which she responds to as Aunt) and two elderly

women (Grandma and Petite-Ma). She has no one of her age group to confide in, to speak freely, also having so many motherly figures in her house; their tendency to over-protect her, suffocates her personal freedom and the way she wants to live her life.

Family plays a fundamental part in one's personality development, and Asya has a dysfunctional family, it molds her into a person filled with rage." Current studies show that family can be defined as the special environment in which an individual forms his/her personality and learns basic behavioral norms. Which makes family a vital component in personality development from early childhood to adolescence (Berry).

"In the list of features that Asya considered admirable, her almond-shaped fawn eyes remind her of Auntie Banu, a high forehead brings up Auntie Cevriye to her mind, and the lose temper which made her prone to sudden eruption but also gave her a feeling of being alive seemed to be the presence of Auntie Feride. But she resented the fact that with every passing year she was resembling more and more of her family members that she so devoutly despised. (Shafak 64)

In the passage from the novel, the author tries to draw the similarity of certain genetic and behavioral traits of Asya with her family members. From her facial features to her lose temper are quite telling of how her family influences Asya both biologically and psychologically. Although genetic traits are permanent and one can and does learn to live with them, the psychological traits are induced from our environment (family/people around us that we interact regularly among other factors).

Relvas considers family as a system composed of smaller units, with an individual being the smallest unit. (Relvas)

Family is an absorbent system that is affected by the circumstances, but the magnitude of this effect varies depending upon how that family is organized. Every family has a spatial pull of forces (dynamism), giving it a unique anatomy and a sense of particularity. Here the elders i.e. Parents affect their young ones and vice versa. With time a family and its members evolve which ultimately brings about the change in dynamism of the family. (Shaffer 60-64, 536-547)

"As Asya turns seventeen, her sense of alienation from the people and the society around her has led her to believe that she didn't belong to

Istanbul, she feels that here existence is not significant enough, and compares herself with a ROAD UNDER CONSTRUCTION or BUILDING UNDER RESTORATION sign that municipality employees put in whenever needed, and once its task is done it becomes meaningless. She feels that her existence is meaningless, and it won't matter if she didn't exist. (Shafak 62)

The very next year, exactly two days before her eighteenth birthday, Asya tries to commit suicide, although unsuccessful, by swallowing the capsules she found in the pillbox. (Shafak 62).

By the time of her nineteenth birthday, now that Asya was entering adulthood, she wanted to be authoritative and independent and to express herself she had become rebellious in her behavior. (Shafak 63).

Excerpts from the novel show Asya's struggles with herself in her adolescence years. They show how personality development does not happen overnight but is a slow and gradual process. Asya's approach toward life changes significantly in her adolescence. It is in human nature to socialize, to have a sense of belonging to, to be recognized; Asya as she's growing older realizes a sense of not belonging to the people and the city around her. This sense of belonging makes her grow even more distant from the people around her; being alone with her lonesome thoughts and having no place to express herself worsens her already overly pessimistic attitude toward life. She eventually decides to take her life, which leads to an unsuccessful attempt at suicide. From there onwards, the rebellious, non-compliant side of her personality takes over, now by the time she turns nineteen, her form of expression of her individuality seems to revolve around her non-conformity to the environment around her. ⁹

This kind of behavior is quite common in children raised in a dysfunctional family. Such children find it hard to lead a successful social life, as they have been exposed to a toxic life environment at a young age, hence their mental growth is quite different from a child with a normal family that has had no emotional scarring¹⁰. Asya's upbringing in a dysfunctional family, shows in her personality, and how she conducts herself, she's always angry and the odd one out; it shows her inability to conform and create meaningful relationships. She's skeptical and bitter of the people around her, and that takes her further apart from society; her loneliness aggravates her depression, and these negative thoughts fill her with rage. From her relationship with the dipsomaniac cartoonist, to her initial disliking/skepticism of Armanoush, use of alcohol, heavy smoking, and lose temper they all are signs of her difficulty to live a normal life, to be a regular person in a society that conforms to the norms of the society. And these hardships are a result of the way she was brought up and how her personality developed in such an environment.

Adults with troubled childhood in search of ways to be free from the agony and misery that their past traumas often indulge in self-harming and somewhat deviant behavior. These may include excessive use of alcohol, use of drugs and this repetition of behavior indicates to the rough past to which they were exposed. Some of these people experience anxiety,

temper or having difficulties comprehending and expressing what they feel. They find it difficult to socialize and create bonds of friendship or any relationship and even when they do it's an uphill task to sustain such relationships. Positive self-esteem issues are common, they find it hard to trust people, have trouble in expressing their own feelings which forces them into a state of self-denial and constant feeling of distress and loss of control. On the other hand, most healthy families bounce back to normal functioning once the troubling times or life crisis has passed. While, in dysfunctional family even the temporary problems take a longer time to get resolved and to move on from such problems. Because the young ones that have grown up in a split family lack the essential psychological growth that a functional family would have provided for them. (BA)

In an incident where Asya and her mother are about to get ready to pick Armonoush up from the Airport, they get into an argument regarding Asya to be accommodating to her new guest. Like every other forced decision, she tries to resist and in the heat of the moment reminds her mother of how she had her out of wedlock when Zeliha was nineteen, right about the age Asya was at this time. In her rebellious efforts she sometimes said things that she regretted saying and this was one of them. (Shafak 123-124) Aforementioned passage, represents one of the many incidents in which Asya's compliant rebellious nature is on display. Her inability to communicate with her family members comes out as rage, even when she doesn't realize or doesn't want to show her angry side, she does feel the rage brewing inside her.

The Dipsomaniac cartoonist, losing his subtlety inquired Asya about her Ballet class, and how she was supposed to be there instead of the Cafe. His eyes flickered with consideration—a sign that was noticed by all but his wife. Asya as she stuffed the rolling paper with tobacco replies sarcastically that she was at her Ballet class and how she was about to perform one of the most difficult jumps, meeting my calves in the air between forty-five and ninety degrees—cabriole!” “Wow!” The cartoonist smiled. “Then I make a turning jump,” Asya continued. “Right foot front, demi pli , jump up!” She grabbed the leather tobacco pouch and held it in the air. “Turn a hundred and eighty degrees”—she ordered as she rotated the pouch, sprinkling some tobacco on the table— “and land on left foot!” The pouch perched next to the bowl of cashews. “Then repeat the whole thing one more time to go back to the starting position. Embo t !” (Shafak 83)

Every person needs a place/ people where they can be themselves and understood without being judged; when or if they don't find a way to let out it generally leads to deviant behavior. Asya is a heavy smoker, drinks whenever she gets the chance to as she visits Caf  Kundera. Her

family forced her to join ballet classes, which she regularly skips to go meet his friends at the Café. One of the main reasons she likes going to Café Kundera is that she feels comfortable sharing her thoughts and ideas without the fear of being judged or shunned upon. With her friends in Café, she gets to be herself, she can smoke and drink and rant about her problems, the narrator describes one of the incidents in which Asya sarcastically describes her ballet routine, she describes them perfectly which shows that she isn't a poor student, but she has no interest in learning Ballet. She skips classes regularly to enjoy their group conversations at the Café, the Café seems to be a place where she feels most comfortable and free, a hideout from her over-protective family.

From her suicide attempt at the age of eighteen, to her ever-growing rage filled in compliance with the norms of her family, it can be inferred that a child's personality is greatly affected by the kind of environment they have around, especially on the functionality or lack thereof, of the family. And it gets increasingly harder for children growing up in highly dysfunctional families, to lead a socially successful life as an adult, it affects their thought process, how they bond/form relationships with other people, all the way to their self-esteem and how they perceive themselves.

Conclusion And Recommendations

The kind of person one will be in the future has much to do with the kind of circumstances and environments we are exposed to in our early years. A child's personality is greatly affected by the immediate environment he/she is exposed to and grows up in. In most cases that immediate environment is family. How functional or dysfunctional a family is will influence a child's personality, as he/she grows up to adulthood. The normality of his/her behavior highly depends upon the emotional and intellectual growth in their adolescence age. In most cultures families are the primary institutions, which inculcate the morals and the norms of a society from one generation to the next generation¹¹. Culture and people affect each other profoundly. If we are to study culture and how it affects human behavior, one of the ways will be to consider it as a family of families. Comprehensive studies are required to better understand the working dynamics of families in different cultures, Comparative analysis of dysfunctional families in different societies/cultures may lead to better understanding of the psychological issues that a person faces growing in such an environment¹².

In a South Asian country like Pakistan, our society is family centric. And to truly understand culture and its effects in shaping of an individual's behavior, the dynamics of family as an institution should be

focused¹³. Future researchers can apply similar techniques to Pakistani culture, to understand better the socio-cultural dynamics. Based on functionality or dis-functionality of a family, researchers can classify and find better ways to accommodate people with a victimized past. Researchers can also apply these approaches of cultural psychology to highlight the effects of culture on the behavior of Pakistani women¹⁴.

Refrances

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