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# Representation of Ottoman Culture and Istanbul as an Ingress to Opportunities in *The Architect's Apprentice* by Elif Shafak and *The Oracle of Stamboul* by Michael David Lukas

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper analyzes the representation of Ottoman culture and Istanbul as pathways to diverse opportunities within the realm of literature through the novels *The Architect's Apprentice* by Elif Shafak and *The Oracle of Stamboul* by Michael David Lukas. Writers throughout history have portrayed the Ottoman Empire and Istanbul as a fundamental ground of tradition, which is deeply intertwined with modernity in its architecture and customs, which provides an essential platform for growth and exploration. Along with its rich cultural tapestry, the novels also depict how Istanbul becomes a destination for character development and identity formation for the protagonists. The paper also aims to represent the rich culture of Istanbul through the concept of historical realism.

**KEYWORDS:** Istanbul, Character Development and Identity Formation, Tradition, Modernity, Architecture, Historical Realism

## I. INTRODUCTION

In order to understand the extensive and substantial representation of Istanbul in literature, it is essential to have knowledge about its historical significance and its inclusion of artists and workers from various countries and regions during the Ottoman Empire. Istanbul, was initially known as Byzantium, which lasted until 330; then it was named Constantinople by the Great Emperor Constantine, and it came to be recognized as the Byzantine Empire. It was during this era that the city began to flourish to a great extent in terms of its opulence, extension of its boundaries, as well as the construction of the marvelous Hagia Sophia by Constantine I, Constantine II and Justinian. It is also repeatedly mentioned by Elif Shafak in *The Architect's Apprentice* regarding its construction and historical and religious significance. It has also found its mention in *Inferno* by Dan Brown, in which it serves as a clue destination in the popular mystery novel. Agatha Christie, the well-received murder mystery novelist, has mentioned the Hagia Sophia and several other Turkish destinations in her novel *Murder on the Orient Express*. Fortunately, Istanbul has had a tactical placement between Europe and Asia, which included the Roman and Greek Mediterranean civilizations, as well as the Eastern-Asian empires. It became a flourishing urban and commercial center, along with rich cultural and political affluence.

*"Fatih wished his mosque to be the most majestic building ever raised. That included the Hagia Sophia."* (Shafak. 145)

### Istanbul: An Ingress to Opportunities and Representation of its Rich Culture in Literature through Historical Realism

With the fall of the Byzantine Empire and the invasion of the Turks in 1453, Istanbul went through a major cultural, religious and political transfiguration from Christianity to Islam. This era witnessed the conversion of many cathedrals, including the Hagia Sophia into mosques and creation of new Ottoman architectural structures. What is even more interesting is the presence of architect and engineer, Sinan, who was responsible for the construction of the three mosques of the Sultans, Suleyman I and Selim. This is the same Master Sinan mentioned by Elif Shafak in *The Architect's Apprentice*. The novel also mentions about the construction of these mosques and the detailed discussions with the above-mentioned Sultans in a fictional narrative. This depiction of historical realism by Shafak elevates the verisimilitude of the story, creating a blurring narrative of fiction and reality for the readers, immersing them into a whole different setting altogether from their own reality.

*"He had commissioned Sinan to build a mosque for his deceased son. In a fleeting world, where everything was here*



*today and gone tomorrow, the endowment for the beloved Prince would be solid marble, solid stone.*" (Shafak, 133)

Another example of historical realism in the novel is that of the mention of Michelangelo in Rome. Sinan decides to send two of his four apprentices to Rome in order to observe, learn and record its architecture for varied influence. It is there that Jahan and Davud, the other apprentice, meet Michelangelo, who hands them a letter addressed to Sinan. Shafak even goes into the depth of mentioning Urbino, a recorded apprentice of Michelangelo. This narrative of historical fiction nowhere confirms the reality of whether Architect Sinan and Michelangelo knew of each other or were there any such letters exchanged between them. However, the story also mentions Michelangelo being addressed as "Il Divino", which is historically correct. Such examples further confirm the argument.

*"... they went to Il Divino's house. Finding its location was easy. Even the children knew where the great man lived."* (Shafak, 180)

Further continuing on the concept of historical realism, in the second chapter of *The Oracle of Stamboul*, readers find a mention of Abdulhamid II, the Sultan of the Ottoman Empire (1876-1909), in the same time period the story is set in. The narrative continues with descriptions of a vivacious ambience and the tout and deeper of a Turkish *oud* being played in a distant room. The author inculcates an interesting fact through the flowing thoughts of the Sultan about how a Muslim scholar known as al-Farabi who corresponded about the invention of the *oud* as an instrument by Noah's grandfather in an unpretentious manner.

*"It was al-Farabi, if he remembered correctly, who related the story of the oud's invention, its bowed neck inspired by a skeleton hung from a carob tree. Whose skeleton it was Abdulhamid couldn't recall-Lamech or possibly one of Noah's sons. In any case it was an ancient instrument with roots in grief."* (Lukas, 16)

Lukas has very intelligently presented an interwoven narrative of myth, reality and history in his story, further adding depth to other characters as well. By imitating certain aspects of the real world, such as the mention of the fictionalized assassination of the cousins of Abdulhamid II- Ibrahim I, Murat II and Mustafa Duzme, among whom Ibrahim I was indeed the Ottoman Sultan, only in a different time period ( from 1640 to 1648 ) shows how the author has very finely blurred the distinction between reality and fiction through manipulation of time periods and occurrence of certain events. For example, the novel mentions that Ibrahim I was assassinated by his barber, but in reality, he was executed through the petition of the new Grand Vizier and was strangled to death. This also shows that the author has not only centered the story with the journey of his protagonist, Eleonora Cohen, but has also depicted a detailed account of other characters and their journeys that prompted the story of the former further.

Furthermore, Lukas also mentions about the Russo-Turkish war, lasting from 1877-1878. The narrative inculcates within it the fall of Pleven, which was an essential trade center for the Ottoman Empire and also acted as a key fortress for safeguarding its Bulgarian culture. The story further gets more complex when Lukas dives into the psyche of Abdulhamid wherein he depicts the shame that the character would endure upon his own loss of control that would lead to these *"Great Powers circling his house like wolves."*<sup>1</sup> The presence of such a narrative allows the readers to dive deeper into the political and cultural panorama of the then Ottoman Empire, adding a layer of representation for the readers to emerge themselves into, and how Pleven becomes historically essential to the plot and the setting of the story itself, prompting the unfolding of possible future events in the story. The character exploration of Abdulhamid through his insecurity and emotional mindset makes his character more humanistic and relatable.

Elif Shafak has also employed intertextuality in *The Architect's Apprentice* by mentioning the book *De Architectura*, published as a division of *Ten Books on Architecture*, written by Vitruvius, whose principles are said to have influenced the architecture of Istanbul, during the Byzantine and the Ottoman empires. Istanbul was a flourishing architectural center during the above mentioned eras and showcased a harmonious blend of the elements of classical, Islamic and Byzantine architecture, gathering their influence from Vitruvius' book in the construction of palaces, mosques, churches and many more structures.

*"He spotted De Architectura by Vitruvius, which he removed and held for a while, the book that had travelled from Buda to Istanbul."* (Shafak, 383)

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<sup>1</sup> Lukas, M. D. (2011). *The Oracle of Stamboul*.



Another such example of intertextuality within the novel is the mention of texts such as *On War against the Turk* by Martin Luther, *The Book of the Governor* by Thomas Elyot, and *La Divina Commedia* by Dante. He also finds a scroll showcasing the Selimiye Mosque's design, which was in reality built by the Ottoman Architect Mirar Sinan in 1575. Jahan lands upon these books while surfing through the bookshelf after the death of Master Sinan. This not only indicates the readers that Sinan as a character in the book was well read on political, societal and geopolitical matters, but also forms an opinion in the readers about the vast knowledge and intelligence the Turks had during the then Ottoman Empire. This again creates a fusion of what is real and what is not and leaves the readers in a state of an illusionary reality.

### Ottoman Court Life, Architecture and Turkish Culture

The representation of the Ottoman court life as well as the urban structures of Istanbul is very evidently depicted by both Michael David Lukas and Elif Shafak in their novels. One of the first examples of such a rendition is the presence of a menagerie in *The Architect's Apprentice* in the palace of Sultan Murad III, the son of Selim II or Selim the Sot, who died by slipping on a wet piece of marble in the *hamam* of the Sultan's palace.\* Shafak has very intelligently portrayed the importance of a menagerie in an Ottoman Sultan's palace and has also mentioned a variety of exotic animals within her narrative to highlight upon the fact that the presence of a menagerie often showcased the wealth and the prestige of the Sultan. It served as a symbol of cultural sophistication and entertainment for the Sultan's family and his guests as the sight of such creatures was often majestic and attracted visitors from far off lands. Such exotic animals were also exchanged as gifts between two rulers or were offered as a tribute to the Sultan's valor and grandeur, just how Chota was offered for the Sultan's menagerie by Jahan's stepfather. Possessing a variety of animals from vast lands also proved to be symbolic of the Sultan's influence on a global level, which was a representation of how the Ottoman Empire was one of the most powerful and largest empires to exist during that era and it established better relations with other kingdoms.

*"Every resident of the royal menagerie seemed to be in its place. Lions, monkeys, hyenas, flat-horned stags, foxes, ermines, lynxes, wild goat, wild cats, gazelles, giant turtles, roe deer, ostriches, geese, porcupines, lizards, rabbits, snakes, crocodiles, civets, the leopard, the zebra, the giraffe, the tiger and the elephant."* (Shafak, 5)

Another example is that of the construction of a *harem*<sup>2</sup>, this was one of Jahan's initial projects with Master Sinan.

*"Together they had also expanded parts of the harem — a necessity, since its population had grown considerably over the last years...When a consignment of tiles had been delayed, they had sealed it with unbaked bricks and clay."* (Shafak, 7)

The author also mentions specific terminologies and linguistic depictions of the local culture of the then Ottoman kingdom, besides the palace. For example, the word *kahya*, which is the Turkish word for the chief housekeeper of a residence in Istanbul. This *kahya* belongs to Master Sinan's household. There is a shift in the perspective of the story, wherein the author shows how the servant might not have any authority to question her master or the court, including the Sultan and the Grand Vizier (chief officer) in person, but she as her own frustrations regarding the health of her master, which is essential for the readers to know in order to understand the complexity of the narrative. Her character is essential to show the hierarchical characteristics in the society as she could not actively speak up.

*"While the kahya was cross at the master for not taking better care of himself, she was also cross at the Sultan and at every passing vizier for working the man so hard; and she was furious at Sinan's apprentices for not removing the extra load from their Lord's shoulders. Lazy lads!"* (Shafak,12)

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\* Murad III was the Ottoman Sultan from 1546 to 1595, the time frame with which the story begins, and was the successor of Selim II. The reason for his death as presented by Shafak in *The Architect's Apprentice* is historically true. This again stands as an example of historical realism.

<sup>2</sup> *Harem* was the private quarters in a Sultan's palace wherein his family, such as wives, female relatives, concubines and various female servants resided. The *harem* was inaccessible to men who were not in the immediate circle of the Sultan's family and was separated from the usual public spheres of the palace.

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It was essential for the visitors who had been summoned to the Sultan's court to understand its mannerisms and the courtesies to address the Sultan. An example of this has been portrayed by Michael David Lukas in *The Oracle of Stamboul* when Eleonora Cohen had been invited to the Sultan Abdulhamid's court for discussion and her advice on the current political turmoil being faced by the city. While Eleonora was on her way to the palace in a carriage, the herald (messenger of the court), threw a light upon the court's etiquettes as Eleonora was clearly oblivious of them. Highlighting the intensity of importance such mannerisms held in an Ottoman court, the herald pressed upon how entire books had been written and published on this subject. The Sultan was considered to be an individual of the highest authority in the court and was almost idolized as a God-like entity. Bowing and prostrating before the Sultan was a must to offer one's respect to him as soon as they entered the court. The herald told Eleonora the three most important rules which she had to follow in the court.

*"First, you must bow as soon as you enter the audience chamber. When you bow, touch your forehead to the ground."* (Lukas, 139)

*"Second, you must always address the Sultan, if you address him at all, as His Excellency." "His Excellency," she repeated. "Your Excellency," the herald corrected. "If you address the Sultan, call him 'Your Excellency.' If you were talking about him to a third party, which you should not do, you would say 'His Excellency.'"* (Lukas, 139)

*"Third, you must remember always to face the Sultan. No matter who is speaking to you, do not turn your back to the Sultan."* (Lukas, 140)

*"Those are the three pillars of court protocol. There are many more rules. You must never contradict the Sultan, for example. You must never interrupt His Excellency when he is speaking. And you must never offer him advice, unless advice has been explicitly requested."* (Lukas, 140)

Furthermore, the author has very elegantly wrapped Istanbul's architecture within the narrative of Eleonora's journey towards the palace. The author notes down his protagonist's observations while she looks out the carriage. Such

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<sup>3</sup> *Harem* was the private quarters in a Sultan's palace wherein his family, such as wives, female relatives, concubines and various female servants resided. The *harem* was inaccessible to men who were not in the immediate circle of the Sultan's family and was separated from the usual public spheres of the palace.



descriptions enable the readers to fully immerse in the setting of the story and enhances the plot further, evoking to the curiosity of the readers.

*“Rattling across the wooden planks of the Galata Bridge, they turned left at the Egyptian Bazaar, dispersing a crowd of pigeons set up under the exterior arches of the New Mosque. From across the water, Eleonora could see the Galata Tower leaning over the city like a stern finger. There was Beşiktaş, sprawled out languid along the shore: the pier, the Beşiktaş Mosque, and the waterfront houses, in the middle of which she could easily pick out the yellow facade of the Bey’s. She leaned closer to the carriage window, until the tip of her nose touched the glass.” (Lukas, 139)*

This description also appeals to the emotional and sensory responses of Eleonora, who, in the midst of feeling a sense of grief for her father, along with being nervous and perplexed over being taken to the court, is lost in the grandeur of this alien land, adding more depth and complexity to her character. The author attempts to represent the culturally and aesthetically pleasing land of Istanbul through the eyes of his eight-year-old protagonist. In an interview with Jaelyn Trop, Michael David Lukas talks about how he had placed his protagonist specifically in Istanbul, wherein he states about he has visited Istanbul twice, and on his second trip the city appealed to him in numerous ways. He visited an antique store in Cukurcuma and says the following:

*“At the back of a particularly cluttered store — past the spice tins, the coffee grinders, and the blue enamel tea pots — I noticed a pile of old photographs balanced in the hollow of a wide crystal bowl. There, at the top of the pile was a picture of a young girl from the 1880’s, staring out across history with a laconic, penetrating gaze. When I saw this picture, everything clicked. Here was my protagonist. It made perfect sense. The novel would be set in Istanbul, on the very streets I had been wandering for the past three days. I bought the photo, went back to my hotel, and spent most of the night writing feverishly. Seven years and seven drafts later, I had *The Oracle of Stamboul*.”<sup>4</sup> (Lukas, 2011)*

This also shows how the author has immersed himself in the city, making it an inspiration for their stories and its culturally rich history and development over three empires, makes it a solid foundation for storytelling, which is both engaging and representative.

## II. CONCLUSION

Istanbul as a city carries a vast history from the Byzantine to the Ottoman Empire. It’s relevance in terms of culture and religion has influenced various authors, especially authors of Turkish descent, to inculcate it within the literary canon, making it accessible for people and literary critiques all over the globe. The city beautifully presents itself withing the complex literary trajectories of fictional characters, further creating a captivating experience for the readers, making them inquisitive enough to visit the place and dive deeper into the cultural, historical and political depths of this land. Many authors, besides Elif Shafak and Michael David Lukas, such as Orhan Pamuk, Joseph Kanon, Jenny White and many more, have portrayed the setting of their stories in Istanbul. This has given a vast and rising platform to Turkish literature around the world.

The global platform provided to Turkish literature and the representation of the city of Istanbul in various literary works has developed an ever-increasing interest and appreciation for the Turkish culture.

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<sup>4</sup> Lukas, M. D. (2011, August 25). Interview on *The Oracle of Stamboul*. (J. Trop, Interviewer) Jewish Book Council.



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