

Sanctuary in a sweet disguise: the bastard of istanbul by elif shafak

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In her novel *The Bastard of Istanbul*, Elif Shafak tells the story of Mustafa, a Turkish man who has led a troubled childhood dictated by an abusive father and later goes on to rape his sister.

Due to his painful childhood experiences, Mustafa is left in search of a medium to free himself from the physical and emotional pain he faces everyday. As a child, he relies on a Turkish sweet called ashure to escape from both his internal conflicts as well as those with his father. Ultimately, the plethora of unpleasant experiences in Mustafa's life leaves him with an incessant desire to forget his past and begin anew. Shafak uses her chapter titles as a motif for all the ingredients of ashure, coming together to represent how Mustafa's effort to escape from his past ultimately leads to his downfall when reality comes crashing down on him. All of Shafak's chapter titles are ashure ingredients, used to emphasize and develop the motif of the dessert.

Throughout the novel, each chapter is named after a food or drink item, except for the last chapter, Potassium Cyanide. The title of each chapter individually represents an incident occurring in the story, but they all come together in Chapter 16 to form the ingredients of ashure. Even Potassium Cyanide represents an ashure ingredient—in fact, it is the crucial ashure ingredient which ultimately causes Mustafa's death. Shafak develops the metaphor of pomegranate seeds, for instance, to represent Mustafa's lack of understanding of his past. “[Asya] grabbed a handful of pomegranate seeds to sprinkle on the still-undecorated bowls to the side. She scattered the seeds evenly, as if leaving behind a trail of marks to guide some star-crossed fable child homeward.

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" (p. 306) Shafak is referring to the fact that Mustafa has always run as far away as possible from his homeward path. Asya's desire to leave a homeward path for a child through pomegranate seeds is a metaphor for Mustafa. Throughout the novel, Shafak emphasized Asya's skepticism of the fact that Mustafa never visited the Kazancis and had barely even acknowledged that he had a family in Istanbul. Now, however, as the time of Mustafa's arrival in Istanbul – as well as his death – nears, she constructs a path for him to reconnect with the people and the place he has deliberately forgotten. Shafak's image of pomegranate seeds is one of the individual representations of an ashure ingredient which symbolizes a significant aspect of Mustafa's life.

Essentially, this is one of the individual ideas eventually brought together as part of the whole ashure dish which ultimately leads to Mustafa's downfall. Shafak uses ashure as a representation of all the Mustafa's past, allowing him to swallow their memories up altogether. Each ashure ingredient represents a memory in Mustafa's past, which he is desperate to forget and move on with his life. Such an ingredient is present the day he raped Zeliha, which is the most crucial of the memories Mustafa is desperate to forget, the memory which leads him to his death. " Next to the bed stood a razor blade she shaved her legs with and a bottle of rosewater lotion she had applied afterward to soothe her skin. ... ' What did you do with my razor blade? ... You sneak into my room, steal my razor, shave your legs so that you can show them to all the men in the neighborhood.

..” (p. 310) By emphasizing the fact that Zeliha kept the razor blade “ next to the bed,” Shafak is adding a suicidal intention behind Zeliha’s actions.

However, she goes on to show that Mustafa deliberately ignores this fact and accuses Zeliha of showing off her shaved legs to the men in the community.

The rosewater represents Zeliha’s attempt to free herself from the pain she is inflicting upon herself, much as the ashure works for Mustafa. Shafak implies that to Mustafa, rosewater comes to represent his lack of attention to Zeliha’s problems as an older brother, as well as his abuse of her. Later in Chapter 16, Shafak brings all the elements and motifs of the novel together, showing that the same ingredient used in Zeliha’s lotion – rosewater – is present in the ashure Gulsum makes for Mustafa in celebration of his return. Clearly, ashure is a representation of all of Mustafa’s memories and a metaphor for his swallowing them away into the past as if they never happened. Essentially, the motif of ashure is a metaphor for Mustafa’s desire to escape from the harsh realities of his past. Throughout his childhood, Mustafa consistently escapes from his problems to take refuge in ashure.

At one point, Shafak describes Levent Kazanci’s bitter attitude toward his children. For Mustafa, his father had always been the harsh one who would beat him, while his mother pampered him. “ Where father would leave bruises, Mom would rub in a speck of ashure, as if the dessert was some sort of an ointment.” (p. 314) Clearly, Shafak explains that ashure is Mustafa’s cure to his “ bruises” and associates it with something as soothing as “ ointment.” Mustafa’s father was the intimidating figure in the household, the only one who could overpower him.

All his childhood, Mustafa is scrutinized by his father every night in a kind of regiment to judge whether he had behaved badly during the day. Shafak uses the sanctuary Mustafa finds in ashure to contrast the fear he faces in his father, portraying ashure as an escape from his harsh realities. She associates the ashure with Mustafa's mother who was always desperate for a son and favored him above all her children. Mustafa considers Gulsum to be his sanctuary from his father's harshness. Similarly, ashure is his "ointment" for his "bruises," the reality of his childhood. Obviously, Mustafa uses ashure as a reprieve from reality throughout his life.

Shafak uses the final ingredient of ashure as a metaphor for reality crashing down on Mustafa, after all the years he spent in denial and deliberate amnesia. After living in Arizona for years with Rose and Armanoush, Mustafa has trained himself to ignore his past, and forget his actions in the past. However, because of his trip to Istanbul, which proves to be a return to his past, he is forced to acknowledge it and cannot run away anymore. The ashure he once relied upon to erase his past now brings the same past back to him, which Shafak symbolizes through the addition of potassium cyanide to Gulsum's original ashure recipe. "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 willingly, he started to eat it, little by little, savoring each and every ingredient with every mouthful." (p. 337) By comparing Mustafa's "memories of a troubled past" to "a sea plain stretching as far as the eye could see," Shafak explains that Mustafa now

finds it impossible to see anything other than his past. Shafak explains that Mustafa's " memories..

. surfaced hither and thither," proving that the past he has been hiding away for years is finally surfacing again. Mustafa " knowingly and willingly" acknowledges this fact, meaning that he understands his past is coming back to him and compelling him to commit suicide. Shafak's emphasis on the fact that Mustafa eats the ashure " little by little," " savoring each and every ingredient with every mouthful," symbolizes that he recognizes each of the traumatic memories of his past tucked away in each ingredient of the ashure. Clearly, Shafak uses potassium cyanide as a metaphor for how Mustafa's trip back to Istanbul brings his past back to him, and how reality crashes down upon him after years of ignoring it.

Shafak uses the ingredients of ashure to symbolize that Mustafa could not control himself at each stage of his worsening condition and behavior because he did not understand the full extent of his desires. As a child, Mustafa is asked to deliver several bowls of ashure to many of his neighbors. Because of his failure to reveal his desire for the dessert to his family, he begins to steal from the ashure designated for neighbors. However, as Shafak demonstrates through specific ingredients, he starts out small and ended up eating all the ashure completely. " First he had nibbled the golden raisins sprinkled on each bowl, confident that if he ate just those nobody would notice.

But then he went on to pomegranate seeds and the slivered almonds for decoration, and before he knew it, he had eaten everything, consuming six

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bowls in one sitting.” (p. 288-289) By “ confident that if he ate just [the golden raisins] nobody would notice,” Shafak explains that Mustafa’s concern has always been to simply not get caught, tempting him to repeat his actions. By “ before he knew it, he had eaten everything,” Shafak recognizes the fact that Mustafa is not aware of the extent of his desires and cannot control himself. The representation of his stealing ashure is paralleled by the emotions for his sister that he has been attempting to control for years, until he is no longer able to refrain himself from going so far as to rape her.

Mustafa’s constant urge to masturbate follows the same aspect of his character, because, Shafak explains that he managed to control his urges for many years while other boys in his class would masturbate constantly. Just as Mustafa proceeds from golden raisins to pomegranate seeds, he proceeds from his constant masturbation to raping his sister, unaware that one action would lead to another. Obviously, Mustafa’s inability to understand the length of his desires leads him to commit sins stemming from less extreme actions he fails to control. Clearly, Shafak uses her chapter titles to establish the metaphor of ashure, a dessert which Mustafa relies on to escape from the harsh realities of his life, ultimately leading to his downfall. Just as Mustafa fails to control his desires and refuses to come to terms with himself, he pretends his past never occurred until reality comes crashing down upon him in the form of ashure – the very same ashure which he had always relied on as a sanctuary from his past.

Shafak develops the motif of her chapter titles to prove that one must come to terms with his or her actions and past in order to move on.