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FRAGMENTED BELONGINGS: A BHABHAIAN READING OF IDENTITY CRISIS IN SHAFAK'S *THERE ARE RIVERS IN THE SKY (2024)*

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Abstract

This study explores the complexities of identity formation and crisis in Elif Shafak's *There Are Rivers in the Sky* through the lens of Homi Bhabha's postcolonial concepts of hybridity, mimicry, and ambivalence. Shafak's novel presents characters who navigate transnational and diasporic spaces, negotiating the tensions between inherited cultural traditions and the pressures of assimilation in host societies. Employing a qualitative hermeneutic approach, the study interprets how the characters inhabit Bhabha's "third space," a liminal site where cultural negotiation produces hybrid identities that are neither fully aligned with their original culture nor entirely integrated into the dominant society. The analysis demonstrates how mimicry, through language, behavior, and social norms, functions as a strategy for survival and social mobility, while simultaneously highlighting the ambivalent psychological and social tensions experienced by diasporic subjects. Furthermore, the research emphasizes that hybridity is not a simple blending of cultures but a dynamic and sometimes contradictory process, where adaptation coexists with resistance and self-reflection. By foregrounding the intricate interplay of belonging, otherness, and selfhood, this study illuminates how diasporic and postcolonial contexts challenge fixed notions of identity, illustrating the fluid, negotiated, and multifaceted nature of contemporary human experiences across borders.

Keywords: *Identity Crisis, Diaspora, Hybridity, Mimicry, Ambivalence, Postcolonial Theory, Transnationalism, Cultural Negotiation, Third Space.*

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1. Introduction

All diasporas are unhappy, but every diaspora is unhappy in its own way. Diaspora refer to people who do not feel comfortable with their non- hyphenated identities as indicated on their passport. Diasporas are people who would want to explore the meaning of the hyphen, but perhaps not press the hyphen too far for fear that this would lead to massive communal schizophrenia. They are precariously lodged within an episteme of real or imagined displacements, self- imposed sense of exile; they are haunted by specters, by ghosts arising from within that encourage irredentist or separatist movements. (Mishra, 2005, p. 1)

Diaspora refers to the dispersion or scattering of a people from their original homeland to multiple other regions or countries, often resulting in the formation of communities that maintain connections — cultural, emotional, or political — with their place of origin. It encompasses not just physical displacement but also the social, cultural, and psychological experiences of living away from one's homeland. Diasporic communities often negotiate dual or multiple identities, balancing the traditions and values of their homeland with those of the host society. Diaspora refers to "any ethnic group or community that is forced or induced to leave their original homeland for another place in the world" (Dapke, 2022, p. 1), resulting in a population dispersed and disconnected from its nation. It also encompasses "the traditions and culture that these people develop throughout time away from their original countries" (Dapke, 2022, p. 1), reflecting the evolving identity and cultural expressions of displaced communities. Diaspora creates a complex dilemma, leading to the formation of a hyphenated identity, as immigrants face challenges on multiple levels — physical, mental, and psychological (Qasim et al., 2024, p. 596).

Diasporic Literature is written by authors who live outside their homeland; and is characterized by alienation, nostalgia, loneliness, search for identity and constant displacement of the self. It deals with emigrant sensibility and focuses on the lives of immigrants and their internal and external conflicts in an alien land. (Samuel & Pulizala, 2023, p. 136)

Elif Shafak's *There Are Rivers in the Sky* offers a nuanced portrayal of characters whose identities are continuously negotiated amid migration, exile, and cultural hybridity. The novel foregrounds the experiences of individuals caught between inherited cultural traditions and the expectations of new sociocultural environments, revealing the tensions that arise from being neither fully part of their homeland nor entirely accepted in their host society. Central to these experiences is the notion of fragmented belonging, where

diasporic subjects inhabit a "third space" that allows for creativity and negotiation but also generates ambivalence, uncertainty, and identity conflict. Viewed through Homi Bhabha's postcolonial framework — particularly his notions of hybridity, mimicry, and ambivalence — Shafak's (2024) narrative highlights the ways in which characters continually negotiate and reconfigure their identities amid intersecting cultural, social, and political forces. Such a lens highlights the complexities of cultural assimilation, the psychological tensions inherent in diasporic existence, and the delicate balance between preserving individual authenticity and conforming to collective expectations. In doing so, the textual analysis of the novel reveals the fractured yet dynamic character of diasporic identity in contemporary contexts.

2. Literature Review

Diaspora refers to populations dispersed from their homelands, maintaining cultural and emotional ties while adapting to new societies. Diasporic identities are shaped by both belonging and marginalization, often producing "hyphenated" identities. In literature and cultural studies, diaspora is seen as a space of negotiation and cultural reconstruction, where communities creatively navigate historical, political, and social challenges. Diasporas are "dispersed networks of peoples who share common historical experiences of dispossession, displacement [and] adaptation" (Clifford, 1994, p. 309). "Diaspora discourses" are "experiences of displacement, of constructing homes away from home, while remaining rooted in specific, discrete histories" (Clifford, 1994, p. 302). Diasporas are "transnational, spatially, and temporally sprawling socio-cultural formations of people, creating imagined communities whose blurred and fluctuating boundaries are sustained by real and/or symbolic ties to some original homeland" (Ang, 2005, p. 25).

Diaspora should not be framed in terms of cultural essence or purity but must instead be understood through its inherent heterogeneity and diversity. Central to their argument is the concept of hybridity — the idea that cultures are not monolithic, but rather constructed through the interaction of numerous influences and identities. This framework challenges the possibility of identifying any singular or "authentic" cultural identity (Hall & Rutherford, 1990). Diasporic identity occupies a central position in postcolonial theory, as it gives rise to a constellation of interrelated issues such as identity crises, otherness, stereotyping, mimicry, religious and class distinctions, geographic displacement, ethnic differentiation, and cultural hybridity (Saqib et al. 2022). "Cultural hybridity in diasporic literature challenges traditional notions of authenticity and purity in cultural representation. Many authors reject the idea of a monolithic or essentialized identity, instead embracing the complexities and contradictions inherent in multicultural experiences" (Bah 2024, p. 109).

"Diasporic literature deals with alienation, displacement, existential rootlessness, nostalgia, quest of identity. It also addresses issues related to synthesis or disintegration of cultures, as they are torn between the two places, cultures and often languages" (Samuel & Pulizala, 2023, p. 137). Gaur and Mahawar (2023) state that Jhumpa Lahiri is recognized as a prominent Asian American author whose works focus on the Indian diaspora, particularly the experiences of immigrants navigating life in a new country. Her novels depict the challenges of balancing cultural expectations from India with those of the host country, often highlighting issues of identity, belonging, and generational conflict. Through her portrayals of expatriate life, she documents the nuances of immigrant psychology, behaviors, and cultural negotiation, making her stories both relatable and insightful reflections on the diasporic experience. "Her stories are not only fictional works that we read; they are actual accounts of the expatriate community in which they live"(Gaur & Mahawar, 2023, p. 144). Raj and Tiwari (2023) point out that *The Inheritance of Loss* intricately engages with themes of diaspora, globalization, cultural displacement, and colonialism. It not only portrays the lived realities of individuals shaped by these historical and socio-cultural forces but also situates itself within broader debates on cosmopolitanism and diaspora. As a diasporic text, it navigates the tensions between home and host societies, reflecting Desai's own position within a cosmopolitan elite that transcends national boundaries. "Desai reimagines the Indian diaspora in relation to various diasporic groups, as well as in the context of global capitalism" (Raj & Tiwari, 2023, p. 77).

While previous studies have explored identity crisis in postcolonial contexts, few have analyzed how Bhabha's framework illuminates the intersection of migration, cultural displacement, and psychological negotiation in Shafak's *There Are Rivers in the Sky.* Additionally, existing scholarship often emphasizes political or historical readings, leaving a gap in examining the nuanced, everyday lived experiences and fragmented identities of diasporic characters in her novel. This study addresses that gap by focusing on the micro-level processes of cultural adaptation, hybrid identity formation, and the ambivalence inherent in navigating multiple cultural spheres

3. Research Methodology and Theoretical Framework

This study uses a qualitative, hermeneutic, and interpretive approach to examine *There Are Rivers in the Sky* by Elif Shafak. Guided by Homi Bhabha's postcolonial framework, it focuses on hybridity, mimicry, and ambivalence to explore diasporic identity formation. Data are drawn from textual excerpts, dialogues, and narrative descriptions that reveal characters' struggles with cultural displacement, adaptation, and psychological negotiation. Through close reading, thematic coding, and critical analysis, the study

interprets how Shafak (2024) portrays fragmented identities and the tension between inherited cultural values and host society norms.

Postcolonial theory is a critical framework that examines the social, cultural, and political effects of colonialism and imperialism, particularly in the context of European colonization of the Global South. It is concerned with exposing and challenging how colonialism has shaped and continues to shape the world, as well as advocating for the rights and agency of formerly colonized peoples. (Sharma, 2024, p. 19)

The term 'postcolonial' was created first "to identify the period immediately after decolonization. It was a periodizing term, a historical and not an ideological concept. Erstwhile colonial territories that had been decolonized were just postcolonial states" (Lazarus, 2004, p. 9). It encompasses all cultures and societies that have been shaped by the historical processes of colonization, extending from the colonial era into the present (Ashcroft et al., 2007). Postcolonial theory serves as a critical lens for examining the historical and cultural consequences of colonization, highlighting the division between the imperial center and the colonized periphery (Castle, 2013). It highlights the challenges "encountered by marginalized communities subjected to poverty and cultural upheaval due to colonial domination" (Qasim et al., 2024, p. 600).

Identity crisis is a central theme in postcolonial theory and literature, often explored through the lens of cultural hybridity. As Acheraïou (2011, p. 17) notes, "Cultural hybridity has received a great deal of critical attention in both cultural and postcolonial studies," emphasizing that cultural purity is largely a myth, and that all cultures exist as hybrid formations to varying degrees.

Homi K. Bhabha's concepts of cultural and identity hybridity have profoundly shaped postcolonial scholarship by highlighting the fluid and contested nature of identity formation. Bhabha (1994) frames hybridity not as a simple mixture of cultures but as a dynamic, negotiated site arising from unequal power relations between colonizers and the colonized. In this view, identity and culture are continuously reshaped through interaction, contestation, and mutual dependence, challenging rigid colonial binaries and notions of cultural "purity". "Hybridity, for Bhabha, signifies the cultural mingling and interaction that happens in colonial and postcolonial settings, bringing about the rise of new, hybrid identities that cannot be deftly classified" (Al-Qassab, 2025, p. 313). Rather than viewing hybridity as a neutral fusion, Bhabha (1994) emphasizes its critical function in subverting dominant narratives and revealing the constructed nature of identity. This conceptualization positions cultural and social liminality as a productive force rather than a deficit, highlighting the agency of those inhabiting the "in-between" spaces.

Closely tied to hybridity is the concept of mimicry, wherein the colonized adopt the behaviors, language, and customs of the colonizer in pursuit of acceptance. Yet, this imitation remains imperfect, producing slippages and differences that simultaneously expose and destabilize colonial power structures. Ambivalence, in turn, reflects the dual impulse of attraction to and resistance against the dominant culture — the tension of desiring inclusion while struggling to preserve one's own identity. These dynamics unfold within what Bhabha (1994) terms the "third space," a conceptual realm where hybrid identities are negotiated and cultural meanings are constantly rearticulated. "Bhabha also comes up with the notion of the "third space," which implies the in between, liminal space where overriding accounts and identities are undermined and novel likelihoods arise" (Al-Qassab, 2025, p. 313). Within this space, social and cultural collectives — such as nations, ethnic groups, and diasporas — become inherently hybrid, shaped by historical processes of cultural exchange, negotiation, and resistance. Hybridity, therefore, functions as both a mode of resistance and a tool for deconstructing colonial ideologies, affirming pluralistic, evolving, and non-essentialist forms of identity (Saqib et al., 2022). By emphasizing the ambivalent and contradictory processes that constitute cultural identity, Bhabha (1994) provides a framework for understanding the complexities of postcolonial subjectivity and the in-between spaces inhabited by diasporic communities.

4. Textual Analysis

"Shafak raises thought-provoking questions about the nature of identity and the deep-rooted struggles faced by those who grapple with a sense of rootlessness, displacement and a fragmented sense of self" (Zehra & Mohsin, 2023, p. 395). *There Are Rivers in the Sky* by Shafak offers a rich site for examining the complexities of identity formation within diasporic and marginalized communities. Shafak's (2024) narrative foregrounds characters whose identities are persistently negotiated within contexts of displacement, persecution, and cultural hybridity. At the heart of the novel lies the motif of fractured belonging, which encapsulates the tensions experienced by individuals suspended between inherited traditions and the demands of unfamiliar sociocultural terrains. This fragmentation emerges not only from geographical exile but also from the psychological dissonance produced by inhabiting multiple linguistic, cultural, and social frameworks at once. The trajectories of characters such as Narin, a young Yazidi girl uprooted by conflict, and Zaleekhah, a multiracial hydrologist in London, exemplify these dynamics. Narin's experience illustrates how displacement operates as both rupture and renewal — severing ties with cultural memory while simultaneously engendering novel modes of affiliation. By contrast, Zaleekhah embodies the complexities of second-generation diasporic subjectivity: despite her integration into a cosmopolitan milieu, she

remains circumscribed by the racial, gendered, and cultural markers that render her perpetually "other." Through such figures, Shafak (2024) interrogates the psychological, social, and political dimensions of diasporic identity, revealing its inherent instability and multiplicity. Diaspora appears "not as a homogeneous, unified, monolithic, harmonious form of sociality, but as heterogeneous and conflictual" (Werbner, 2010, p. 77).

Identity has been defined as "unitary" or "multiple", "real" or "constructed", "stable" or "fluid", "personal" or "social", and in many other ways that often seem to contradict each other (Vignoles et al., 2011). Shafak (2024) presents identity not as a fixed individual attribute but as a dynamic construct shaped by intersecting historical, social, and political forces. This complexity is exemplified in the figure of Narin, a nine-year-old Yazidi girl whose formative years are marked by trauma, displacement, and systemic exclusion. Her reflections underscore the entanglement of personal identity with collective history and lived experience, as captured in her assertion that "life made me what I am, even if it is painful" (Shafak, 2024, p. 45). Narin's struggle for self-understanding thus extends beyond individual experience to embody the collective anxieties of the Yazidi community, whose history is defined by cycles of persecution, marginalization, and forced migration.

As Hall (1996) argues, cultural identity is not a fixed essence but an ongoing process of "becoming" that links past, present, and future. It is fluid and continually reshaped by social, cultural, and political conditions (Hall, 1996, p. 222). Narin's trajectory in Shafak's (2024) narrative exemplifies this conception, as she negotiates her sense of self amid the genocidal violence of the Islamic State and the consequent loss of family, community, and homeland. Her Yazidi faith — once a marker of collective pride — becomes a site of ambivalence, intensifying her struggle to articulate an identity within a hostile environment. Guided by her grandmother, Narin begins to engage with her cultural and religious inheritance, learning to reconcile the traumas of her present with the traditions and historical memory of her people. Her grandmother's insistence that "Yazidis have been misunderstood, maligned, and mistreated" (Shafak, 2024, p. 45) highlights the intergenerational transmission of both suffering and resilience. This process of reclaiming and reinterpreting heritage constitutes a critical moment in Narin's negotiation of hybridity, as she attempts to weave inherited values into the fractured realities of diasporic life. Through Narin's journey, Shafak (2024) illuminates the contested and constructed nature of identity, foregrounding the complexities faced by marginalized communities in postcolonial and diasporic contexts.

Shafak (2024) portrays the violent impositions and societal prejudice faced by the Yazidi community. "Yazidis suffered multiple waves of forced displacement (known to scholars as Arabization), which aimed at changing the demographics of the region,

strengthening the central government's dominance, and suppressing the Kurdish nationalist movement" (Oliaei, 2023, p. 3) . The Yazidi identity is situated within a complex socio-political hierarchy, functioning as a secondary tier in the proto-ethnos nationalist conflict between the Iraqi government and the Kurdish movement. In the case of Narin and her family, societal prejudice has labeled the Yazidi minority as impure, resulting in dispossession of homes and exclusion from public recognition. Narin encounters derogatory remarks labeling her people as "devil worshippers" (Shafak, 2024, p. 44), illustrating the external pressures that compound internal identity struggles. These experiences highlight the tension between maintaining cultural identity and navigating the challenges of displacement and modern life. Narin's story exemplifies the complexities of diasporic and minority identities, revealing the enduring effects of historical, social, and religious marginalization on individual self-conception. Narin recalls her grandmother reflecting, "The attitude of people toward us has been part of my life from the beginning" (Shafak, 2024, p. 236). Her grandmother narrates early experiences of communal interaction, describing how, as a child, she maintained a friendship with a Muslim neighbor. Despite their close ties, tensions emerged subtly and overtly; on one occasion, a woman refused the family's hospitality by discarding offered watermelon and lemonade, highlighting the embedded social marginalization experienced by the Yazidis. By weaving together the stories of displaced Yazidis, multiracial professionals, and migrant communities, Shafak (2024) highlights how identity is constructed at the intersection of individual memory, collective trauma, and global structures of inequality.

Religious difference further exacerbates the Yazidis' identity crisis in *There Are Rivers in the Sky*. As Uncle Elias remarks, "Life is not easy for Yazidi people" (Shafak, 2024, p. 138), his words encapsulate not only the existential burden of marginalization but also the deep-seated ignorance, prejudice, and hostility directed toward their faith. Shafak (2024) illustrates how the Yazidi struggle is not confined to geographical displacement but is also intensified by misrepresentation and stigmatization in dominant cultural discourses. Narin, in particular, wrestles with this religious mischaracterization. Her preference to identify as Ezidi rather than Yazidi reflects a conscious act of self-redefinition against centuries of misunderstanding that falsely link her people to Yazid, the infamous figure associated with the killing of Imam Hussain, the grandson of Prophet Muhammad. By reclaiming the term "Ezidi," Narin asserts a counter-narrative, challenging the dominant historical misreadings and imposed identities that have marked her community as deviant or heretical. Her reflections juxtapose Yazidi identity with that of Muslims, not in antagonism but in an attempt to illuminate the asymmetries of power, recognition, and belonging. In doing so, she exposes the mechanisms of exclusion that operate within diasporic and host societies — where religious minorities are pushed to the margins,

silenced, or forced into perpetual defense of their existence. The narrative captures the psychological toll of such encounters, as Narin internalizes external judgments that brand her people with derogatory labels: “Your fathers are pagans, and your mothers are kafira. Some of your forefathers are infidels and sinners, whereas you and your people worship” (Shafak, 2024, p. 386). This condemnation illustrates the enduring stereotypes that inscribe Yazidis within a discourse of unbelief, effectively denying them legitimacy in both religious and sociopolitical spheres.

By foregrounding these struggles, Shafak (2024) emphasizes how Yazidi identity is shaped by a double displacement — from their homeland through persecution and from broader society through misrecognition. Narin’s experiences exemplify the intersection of religious identity and diaspora, revealing how spiritual difference becomes entangled with ethnic, cultural, and gendered forms of marginalization. As Grandma reflects:

Well, this world is a school and we are its students. Each of us studies something as we pass through. Some people learn love, kindness. Others, I’m afraid, abuse and brutality. But the best students are those who acquire generosity and compassion from their encounters with hardship and cruelty. The ones who choose not to inflict their suffering on to others (Shafak, 2024, p. 41).

The above perspective of Grandmaillustrates how Yazidi spirituality transforms suffering into moral resilience, enabling identity to be reimagined through compassion rather than solely through trauma. “ The history of Yezidies is a “history of pain and persecution. Seventy two times we (Yezidies) have been massacred” (Shafak, 2024, p. 41). At a broader level, the novel critiques the systemic forces — colonial histories, sectarian politics, and exclusionary nationalisms — that perpetuate such marginalization. Thus, through Narin’s perspective, Shafak (2024) situates the Yazidi plight within a larger discourse on diasporic identity formation, minority representation, and the politics of recognition, echoing Bhabha’s notion (1994) that identity is always in flux, constituted within historical and cultural contexts rather than rooted in essentialist categories.

Language, closely intertwined with culture, plays a pivotal role in shaping perceptions, transmitting memory, and preserving cultural values. Within diasporic contexts, language becomes more than a tool of communication; it is a site of negotiation, through which individuals articulate belonging, convey respect, and assert communal identity. In *There Are Rivers in the Sky*, linguistic expression functions as a medium for reconciling the divided self, enabling characters to articulate otherwise silenced experiences and achieve a measure of psychological integration. Storytelling, oral tradition, and artistic expression emerge as acts of resistance against erasure, allowing marginalized voices to reframe trauma and reclaim agency. In this sense, Shafak (2024)

illustrates how language is inseparable from the diasporic subject's struggle to maintain continuity amidst rupture, displacement, and cultural hybridity.

Shafak (2024) portrays trauma as both suffering and transformation. Zaleekhah, a hydrologist of mixed heritage in London, embodies this paradox: English fluency enables mobility but estranges her from her roots. Her identity reflects diasporic ambivalence, where language empowers yet dislocates. Further, personal traumas — her uncle's misconduct and parents' death — compound her struggle for selfhood and resilience. This struggle surfaces even in subtle moments of intimacy, as when "Zaleekhah hands him a steaming mug, her sleeve rides up.. 'You have a tattoo now?'" (Shafak, 2024, p. 402), a small gesture that signals the visible marks of hidden pain and survival inscribed on her body. Yet, with the emotional support of Nen, she gradually finds avenues for healing. Through shared memory, intimate dialogue, and communal care, Zaleekhah learns to reconstruct a fractured identity, weaving together fragments of her past with the demands of her present. Her journey as an immigrant in England illustrates the precariousness of belonging in diasporic life, where individuals are perpetually negotiating between assimilation and preservation, vulnerability and resilience. Zaleekhah's narrative demonstrates that identity in exile is not static but processual, shaped by encounters with trauma, cultural negotiation, and the pursuit of recognition in societies that often withhold acceptance. This precariousness is evident in moments of domestic unease, as when she remarks, "Well, you must buy furniture — and a burglar alarm!" only to be reminded by her uncle's reply, "It's a safe place." Her retort, "Is anywhere in London safe anymore?" (Shafak, 2024, p. 117), highlights the constant negotiation of belonging in environments marked by uncertainty.

Groups in diaspora are confronted with new realities and new opportunities – and new challenges. But whether a displaced or dislocated group can seize the possibility of remaking itself is, in the first instance, a question that begs for an appreciation of the materiality of power. (Goodman, 2006, p. 1)

Diasporic communities struggle to balance integration with cultural preservation. Migration transplants traditions, languages, and values into new contexts, yet the process is uneven. Some assimilate, risking cultural loss, while others resist erasure by maintaining ancestral practices. This tension between assimilation and preservation defines the fluid, contested nature of diasporic identity. Shafak (2024) reflects these dynamics through the recurring phrase "people like us," a refrain that gestures toward a collective diasporic identity encompassing immigrants, exiles, refugees, and newcomers. However, the boundaries of this identity remain ambiguous, pointing to the plurality of diasporic experience — a shared condition of dislocation and negotiation that nevertheless manifests differently across cultural, religious, and generational lines. In emphasizing this ambiguity,

Shafak (2024) captures the heterogeneity of diasporic subjectivity, resisting homogenizing narratives that often subsume diasporic groups into a singular category. The intergenerational dimension of identity further complicates this negotiation. As Shafak (2024, p. 74) observes, children born to uprooted parents are inevitably shaped by their ancestral histories, even when such influences operate unconsciously. This idea resonates with Hirsch's (2008) concept of "post memory," which suggests that the traumas, memories, and cultural inheritances of one generation can profoundly shape the subjectivities of subsequent generations.

Shafak (2024) situates diasporic identity as both continuity and rupture — anchored in ancestral legacies yet reshaped by the sociocultural demands of host societies. Through the interplay of hybridity, intergenerational inheritance, and cultural negotiation, Shafak (2024) highlights the complex, dynamic, and often precarious nature of belonging within diasporic contexts. Yezidism, a monotheistic yet syncretic religion, exemplifies the hybrid cultural formations that emerge through centuries of cross-cultural contact and negotiation. "The Yezidis are a very small ethnic-religious minority, who, due to the drawing of political borders in the aftermath of World War I, were spread over several Middle Eastern countries" (Maisel, 2008, p.1). Rooted in the ancient religious traditions of Mesopotamia, Yezidism embodies a syncretic faith that integrates elements of Islam, Christianity, Zoroastrianism, and pre-Islamic belief systems, reflecting the fluidity of religious identity. At its theological center, Yazidis worship a single supreme deity, Xwede (Khuda), and venerate seven angels, foremost among them Tawsi Melek, the Peacock Angel, whose contested interpretation has often led to misrepresentations. Yazidis are ethnically and linguistically Kurdish, with the Kurmanji dialect serving as a vital marker of identity and a medium for oral traditions, hymns, and prayers. Culturally, men wear white garments symbolizing purity, while women's colorful attire with headscarves enacts communal cohesion. Socially, Yazidi life is organized into a caste system of Sheikhs, Pirs, and Murids, regulating marriage and authority. Their religious calendar combines Islamic observances like Eid al-Fitr with uniquely Yazidi festivals such as Eid al-Nour, Choleneroz, and the Yazidi New Year, affirming continuity amidst displacement.

According to Media Theory (2024), "Cultural Hybridity encompasses not only the fusion of various cultural elements but also the negotiation of identities within these hybrid spaces." (para. 5). Shafak (2024) foregrounds the experiences of Narin and the Yazidi community in negotiating the complex realities of cultural hybridity under conditions of displacement. She underscores not only the transnational but also the spiritual dimensions of Yazidi identity, as articulated in Leila's assertion that every Yazidi should have a spiritual brother or sister, irrespective of geographical location (Shafak, 2024, p. 339). This statement highlights the communal resilience of Yazidism, suggesting that diasporic

belonging is not merely anchored in physical proximity but sustained through spiritual kinship and ritual continuity, even across national borders. The migration of Narin's uncle to Hanover, Germany, exemplifies the challenges of navigating hybridity in a transnational setting. Upon arrival, Yazidis were subjected to reductive classification, first identified as "Turkish" and later as "Kurdish," thereby erasing the specificity of their cultural and religious identity (Shafak, 2024, p. 138). This misclassification reflects the broader diasporic dilemma of misrecognition, where host societies often subsume minority groups into larger, more legible categories, denying them the right to self-definition. In this way, hybridity becomes not only a creative space of cultural synthesis, as Bhabha (1994) theorizes, but also a site of erasure, where complexity is flattened by bureaucratic and social frameworks that privilege simplified, homogenizing labels.

Shafak (2024) further emphasizes how Yazidi culture is misrepresented, stereotyped, and deemed inferior within dominant narratives. Grandma recounts painful experiences of discrimination, recalling myths deliberately constructed to delegitimize Yazidi traditions and demonize their faith. She remembers her younger brother returning home from school in tears after being attacked by peers — an incident that illustrates how stigmatization is internalized and perpetuated across generations (Shafak, 2024, p. 267). Grandma points out the worth of memory in acknowledging identity: "For us , memory is all we have. If you want to know who you are, you need to learn the stories of your ancestors" (Shafak, 2024, p. 41). These descriptions reveal the psychological toll of cultural stereotyping, where the weight of prejudice fosters shame, alienation, and fractured selfhood. By interweaving personal testimonies with collective memory, Shafak(2024) highlights how Yazidi identity is persistently negotiated at the intersection of diaspora, hybridity, and misrecognition. She demonstrates that diasporic existence is not only a matter of geographic displacement but also of symbolic displacement — where communities struggle against the distortions imposed by outsiders while striving to preserve their distinct cultural voice.

Julie Gardner's account of Arthur in London exemplifies the practical and emotional difficulties of sustaining a hybrid identity. His personal relationships and social affiliations are not isolated from but rather deeply entangled with historical and cultural legacies, illustrating how hybridity is lived not only at the level of individual selfhood but also in the interpersonal and societal realms. The burden of negotiating such entanglements underscores hybridity as both enabling and destabilizing: it creates new possibilities for cultural expression while simultaneously producing uncertainty and dislocation. Similarly, Narin's narrative highlights the enduring importance of preserving cultural heritage in the midst of identity formation. For Narin, hybridity is not a passive state of cultural blending but an active process of negotiation, in which ancestral memory, community belonging,

and personal aspirations must be held in fragile balance. Her story demonstrates how cultural survival in the diaspora requires conscious effort — resisting erasure while simultaneously adapting to new sociopolitical environments. Ultimately, Shafak (2024) portrays hybridity not as a seamless synthesis but as a dynamic and contested process. By foregrounding the role of language, memory, and narrative, the novel positions hybridity as both a site of vulnerability and a source of creativity, reflecting Bhabha's (1994) assertion that the "third space" of cultural encounter generates new, transformative possibilities for identity.

"Among the important basic features of the religion are beliefs, myths, texts, and social rituals" (Maisel, 2008, p. 2). Shafak (2024) further highlights Yazidi cultural distinctiveness through myth and religious narrative. The creation story, as recounted in *God Made Human – Adam and Eve*, presents a unique cosmology in which Yazidis trace their lineage solely to Adam, independent of Eve (Shafak, 2024, pp. 90-91). This origin myth distinguishes Yazidis from other Abrahamic traditions — Christian, Jewish, and Muslim — and asserts a separate genealogical and spiritual identity. By embedding such narratives in the novel, Shafak (2024) highlights how myth functions not only as a cultural marker but also as a site of hybrid negotiation, where identity, history, and belief systems intersect in contested and dynamic ways.

There Are Rivers in the Sky intricately interlaces hybrid narratives spanning multiple times, places, and civilizations, thereby constructing dynamic and evolving traditions. It traverses the lives of characters across ancient Assyria, Victorian London, contemporary Iraq, and modern England, revealing the fluid and layered nature of identity and the cultural forces that connect individuals across temporal and spatial divides. Shafak (2024) employs a distinctive narrative device — a single raindrop linking the experiences of four central figures: the Assyrian King Ashurbanipal, the Briton Arthur Smyth, the Kurdish Yazidi girl Narin, and the Arab hydrologist Zaleekhah. The droplet operates as a powerful metaphor for the continuity of human experience, symbolizing the passage of time, the interconnectedness of civilizations, and the interweaving of personal and collective histories. Through these interconnected narratives, Shafak (2024) illuminates the diverse manifestations of cultural hybridity. Narin embodies the struggle of a persecuted Yazidi community to preserve identity amidst exile and displacement, her narrative foregrounding both vulnerability and resilience. Her story emphasizes the importance of sustaining ancestral traditions while adapting to the shifting realities of diasporic life. By contrast, Zaleekhah, an Arab hydrologist in London of multiracial background, negotiates her identity in transnational contexts. Her professional engagement with scientific rationality coexists with her cultural heritage, illustrating a modern form of

hybridity where the boundaries between tradition and modernity, East and West, science and spirituality, blur rather than remain oppositional.

Water imagery recurs throughout the novel as a central metaphor — raindrops, rivers, and tears signify the fluidity of identity, the blending of cultural traditions, and the cyclical rhythms of historical and personal experience. Narin reflects as a wave of sadness descends on her:

Hasankey will soon be flooded because of the new dam. She will no longer be able to forage for herbs and roots with her grandmother. Someday her hearing, too, will disappear — just like the land she has always known as home. (Shafak, 2024, p. 42)

Rivers in particular are described as "fluid bridges," connecting disparate worlds and temporalities, thereby collapsing linear conceptions of history and foregrounding the relationality of identity across time and space. Shafak's narrative technique exemplifies the postcolonial notion of hybridity by weaving together myth, history, and fiction into a cohesive yet polyphonic tapestry. By integrating diverse stories from different eras and civilizations, she emphasizes that identities are not fixed or essentialist but continually reshaped through cultural exchange, historical memory, and lived experience. The novel thus demonstrates how hybrid identities emerge in the "third space" (Bhabha, 1994), at the intersections of myth and modernity, displacement and belonging, memory and imagination. In this way, *There Are Rivers in the Sky* becomes not merely a story about diasporic lives but a meditation on the interconnectedness of human experience, reminding readers that cultural identities are always in flux, always hybrid, and always negotiated within the fluid streams of history.

5. Conclusion

Elif Shafak's *There Are Rivers in the Sky* dramatizes the fraught terrain of diasporic identity, displacement, and cultural negotiation, offering a fertile ground for a Bhabhaian reading of hybridity and the "third space." The novel's portrayal of fragmented belonging captures how diasporic individuals inhabit liminal positions, neither fully rooted in ancestral traditions nor seamlessly absorbed into dominant sociocultural frameworks. Characters such as Narin embody this negotiation, articulating the tensions of living "in-between" — a condition that is simultaneously a source of alienation and creative possibility. Through Bhabha's concepts of hybridity and ambivalence, the narrative demonstrates that identity is not a fixed essence but a dynamic and contested process shaped by displacement, memory, and cross-cultural encounter. The Yazidi community's struggle for recognition highlights the politics of difference, where marginal identities resist assimilation while carving out alternative modes of belonging. Shafak's narrative,

therefore, situates diasporic identity not as a resolution of contradictions but as an ongoing negotiation within cultural interstices. Ultimately, the novel highlights that fragmented belonging is not merely a symptom of exile but a generative condition that destabilizes binary oppositions of self/other, home/exile, and tradition/modernity. By foregrounding the affective weight of dislocation alongside the creative possibilities of hybridity, *There Are Rivers in the Sky* invites readers to reimagine identity as a fluid, relational, and transformative process. A Bhabhaian lens thus reveals the novel's contribution to contemporary discourses of diaspora, cultural hybridity, and the complex realities of living in the borderlands of belonging.

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