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Assimilation and Resistance: Cultural Negotiations in Elif Shafak’s *Honour*

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Abstract

Honour by Elif Shafak intricately explores cultural negotiations within the Toprak family as they grapple with assimilation and resistance in Istanbul and London. Elif Shafak, a Turkish-British author known for her masterful storytelling and exploration of cultural complexities, brings to life characters facing the challenges of adapting to new environments while preserving their cultural identity. Shafak’s works often delve into the intersections of culture, identity and societal expectations, reflecting her keen insight into the human experience. The themes of assimilation, resistance and cultural negotiations are recurring motif in literature, reflecting the broader human experience of adapting to societal changes while maintaining cultural roots. Through characters and narratives, literature explores the tension between assimilating into dominant cultures and resisting the erosion of one’s cultural identity. This theme provides a rich landscape for examining the complexities of identity formation, societal expectations and the enduring struggle to balance tradition with the demands of a changing world. Shafak’s Honour stands as a poignant example of how literature can illuminate the nuanced dynamics of cultural negotiation, resonating with readers on a universal level.

Keywords: Cultural Negotiation, Assimilation, Resistance, Identity, Generational Perspectives, Cultural Clashes, Transformation, Kurdish Heritage, Societal Pressures and Family Dynamics.

Elif Shafak is a renowned Turkish-British author born on October 25, 1971, in France. She is celebrated for her fascinating storytelling and exploration of diverse themes, including cultural identity, gender and the intersection of East and West. Shafak grew up in Turkey and has lived in various countries, influencing the multicultural perspectives present in her work. She studied International Relations, Women’s Studies and later pursued a Ph.D. in Political Science and Political Philosophy. She has received several literary awards and honours, contributing significantly to the global literary landscape.

In *Honour* Elif Shafak intricately weaves a narrative that explores the cultural negotiations undergone by the Toprak family as they grapple with assimilation into new environments while simultaneously resisting the erasure of their cultural identity. The novel depicts the challenges, conflicts and transformative moments that arise as characters negotiate the delicate balance between

adapting to societal norms and preserving their cultural heritage.

The story begins with the Toprak family, who leave their Kurdish village in Eastern Turkey and settle in Istanbul, hoping for a better life. The family consists of the parents, Adem and Pembe and their children, Iskender and Esma.

The narrative is structured around two main timelines. The first timeline follows the family's struggles in Istanbul, where they face the challenges of being immigrants, navigating cultural differences and striving to preserve their traditions in a rapidly changing world. Adem works as a janitor in a hospital and Pembe tries to make ends meet while raising their children.

The second timeline is set in London, where Iskender, the family's eldest son, has been accused of murdering his mother's lover. This event serves as the focal point of the novel and the narrative alternates between the events leading up to the murder and the aftermath.

The complex web of family relationships is explored in-depth. Pembe, a woman with a traumatic past, struggles with her sense of identity and cultural expectations. Adem, her husband is haunted by his experiences in war and his difficulty adapting to urban life. Iskender, their son, grapples with issues of masculinity, honour and the clash between traditional values and the influence of Western culture.

Esma, Iskender's twin sister, is the novel's other significant character. She rebels against the constraints placed on her by her family and culture, embracing a more liberal and independent lifestyle. Esma's story provides a counterpoint to the traditional values upheld by her family, highlighting the generational and cultural divides within the Toprak family.

As the novel unfolds, the reasons behind Iskender's crime are revealed and the impact on the Toprak family becomes more apparent. *Honour* is a powerful exploration of the consequences of cultural expectations, the complexities of familial relationships and the ways in which individuals navigate the challenges of identity in a rapidly changing world. Elif Shafak skillfully weaves together themes of love, betrayal and the struggle for autonomy in a narrative that spans continents and generations.

The process of assimilation is a central theme in *Honour*. Characters such as Pembe and Adem, the parents of the Toprak family, find themselves navigating the unfamiliar terrain of Istanbul and later London. Their jobs, interactions with neighbours and daily lives reflect their attempts to assimilate into the dominant culture. Adem, working as a janitor in a hospital and Pembe, adapting to the pace of urban life, exemplify the challenges faced by immigrants striving to integrate into a new society.

Conversely, the novel also presents instances of deliberate cultural preservation within the Toprak family. Rituals, traditions and language become instruments through which the characters seek to maintain a connection to their Kurdish roots. Pembe's culinary skills, for example, serve as a means of preserving cultural identity, creating a space where tradition can thrive amid the pressures of assimilation.

Resistance emerges as a powerful force in the narrative, particularly through characters like Esma, who rebels against societal expectations imposed on women. Esma's rejection of traditional gender roles and her pursuit of education and independence stand as acts of resistance against cultural norms. Through her character, Shafak explores the complexities of negotiating one's identity in the face of deeply entrenched cultural expectations.

The negotiation between assimilation and resistance takes on different shades across generations. While the older generation, represented by Pembe and Adem, may see assimilation as a means of survival, the younger generation, exemplified by Esma and Iskender, grapple with the clash between traditional values and the influences of a more liberal Western culture. This generational tension becomes a dynamic force that shapes the family's cultural negotiations.

The negotiation between assimilation and resistance significantly influences the characters'

identities. Pembe, torn between her Kurdish roots and the demands of urban life, undergoes a profound internal struggle. Iskender, in his attempt to reconcile conflicting cultural influences, finds himself on a perilous path leading to a devastating act. The characters' evolving identities serve as a lens through which the reader witnesses the intricate interplay between cultural negotiation and personal growth.

Honour vividly portrays cultural clashes as characters encounter unfamiliar traditions, beliefs and societal expectations. The clashes often serve as catalysts for introspection and at times, rebellion. The novel suggests that the negotiation between assimilation and resistance is not a smooth process but is fraught with tension and conflict, mirroring the complexities of real-world cultural interactions.

External factors, such as discrimination, prejudice and societal expectations, play a pivotal role in shaping the characters' cultural negotiations. The Toprak family must navigate not only their internal struggles but also external pressures that impact their ability to assimilate or resist. Shafak skillfully incorporates these external influences to underscore the challenges inherent in the cultural negotiation process.

The intersectionality of factors like gender, religion and socio-economic status further complicates the characters' negotiations. For example, Esma's resistance is not only a rejection of cultural norms but also a challenge to gender expectations. The novel invites readers to explore how these intersecting elements contribute to the characters' experiences and decisions.

The choices made by characters in their cultural negotiations have profound and far-reaching consequences. Iskender's drastic actions, stemming from his internal conflict, serve as a tragic illustration of the potential fallout of failed negotiations. The novel underscores that the process of assimilation and resistance is transformative, shaping the characters in profound ways and leaving an indelible mark on their lives.

In *Honour*, Elif Shafak masterfully navigates the intricate terrain of cultural negotiation, offering a nuanced portrayal of the Toprak family's assimilation and resistance. Through character development, cultural clashes and thematic exploration, Shafak invites readers to reflect on the universal challenges of preserving cultural identity in the face of societal pressures. The novel serves as a poignant commentary on the complexities of cultural negotiation, urging readers to consider the diverse forces that shape individual and collective identities in a rapidly changing world.

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