

Sea, Memory, and Identity: A Blue Humanities Approach to The Bastard of Istanbul

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Abstract

The emergence of the Blue Humanities has significantly expanded literary scholarship by repositioning aquatic environments as dynamic sites of history, memory, identity, and cultural exchange rather than passive geographical settings. While Elif Shafak's *The Bastard of Istanbul* has been extensively studied through the lenses of postcolonialism, feminism, memory studies, and diaspora, its maritime imagination and the narrative significance of the Bosphorus remain comparatively underexplored. The objective of this study is to examine how the Bosphorus functions as a maritime archive that shapes historical consciousness, migration, identity, and ecological memory in the novel. The study employs an interdisciplinary theoretical framework combining Blue Humanities, Memory Studies, Postcolonial Ecocriticism, and Hydrofeminism. Using close textual analysis and interpretative literary analysis, the research examines selected episodes, narrative descriptions, and recurring maritime imagery to investigate the relationship between water, memory, and identity. The findings reveal that the Bosphorus is not merely a geographical landmark or symbolic boundary but an active narrative agent that preserves collective memory, mediates historical trauma, facilitates intercultural encounters, and reflects the fluid nature of identity. The analysis further demonstrates that the women of the Kazanci family serve as important custodians of cultural memory, while the maritime landscape itself functions as a living repository of transgenerational remembrance and ecological consciousness. The study contributes to literary scholarship by offering a Blue Humanities reading of *The Bastard of Istanbul*, extending existing criticism on Elif Shafak beyond dominant postcolonial

and memory-based interpretations, and broadening the application of Blue Humanities to contemporary transnational fiction centred on historically significant waterways such as the Bosphorus. In doing so, it highlights the potential of aquatic environments to function as active participants in literary representations of history, memory, and cultural reconciliation.

Keywords: Blue Humanities, Elif Shafak, The Bastard of Istanbul, Bosphorus, Memory Studies, Postcolonial Ecocriticism, Hydrofeminism, Maritime Memory.

Introduction

The twenty-first century has witnessed a significant shift in the humanities towards environmental and spatial approaches that challenge conventional, land-centred modes of literary interpretation. Among these emerging approaches, the Blue Humanities has gained considerable prominence for reimagining oceans, rivers, seas, and other aquatic spaces as dynamic sites of history, memory, mobility, and cultural exchange rather than as passive geographical settings. Moving beyond traditional ecocriticism, which has largely focused on terrestrial landscapes, the Blue Humanities foregrounds water as an active force that shapes human experience, historical consciousness, political boundaries, and literary imagination. Scholars such as Steve Mentz (2009),

Hester Blum (2010), Elizabeth DeLoughrey (2019), Katie Ritson (2020), and Stacy Alaimo have argued that maritime spaces possess their own epistemologies, enabling scholars to rethink questions of identity, migration, ecology, and collective memory through fluid rather than fixed spatial paradigms. Consequently, the sea is no longer viewed merely as a backdrop to human action but as a living archive that preserves, transmits, and transforms histories across generations.

Within this growing body of scholarship, the concept of maritime memory has become particularly significant. Water functions simultaneously as a medium of movement and remembrance, carrying traces of migration, exile, colonial encounters, cultural exchanges, and

historical violence. Unlike national archives that often privilege official narratives, oceans and seas preserve submerged histories that resist political erasure. Derek Walcott's *The Sea Is History* conceptualises the sea as an archive of forgotten histories, while Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* demonstrates how maritime spaces facilitate both cultural hybridity and historical trauma. Similarly, Elizabeth DeLoughrey argues that oceanic spaces destabilise linear historiography by revealing interconnected histories of colonialism, displacement, and ecological transformation. These perspectives have encouraged literary scholars to examine water not simply as metaphor but as an epistemological framework through which narratives of belonging, loss, and identity may be reconsidered.

Such theoretical developments provide an especially productive framework for examining the fiction of Elif Shafak, one of the most influential contemporary writers of transnational literature. Her novels consistently interrogate questions of memory, identity, gender, migration,

religion, and cultural hybridity through narratives that transcend national boundaries. Situated at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, her fiction frequently portrays Turkey as a space of intersecting histories where multiple ethnic, linguistic, and religious identities coexist, conflict, and negotiate belonging. Critics have widely examined Shafak's works through postcolonial theory, feminism, multiculturalism, memory studies, and diaspora studies. However, comparatively little attention has been devoted to the role that water and maritime geography play in shaping these narratives.

Published in 2006, *The Bastard of Istanbul* exemplifies Shafak's sustained engagement with contested histories and fragmented identities. The novel narrates the intertwined lives of the Turkish Kazancı family and the Armenian Tchakhmakhchian family, revealing how the legacy of the Armenian genocide continues to shape both individual lives and collective consciousness. Through the character of Armanoush, an Armenian-American searching for her ancestral roots, and Asya Kazancı, who questions the

historical silences surrounding her own society, Shafak exposes the enduring effects of historical denial, inherited trauma, and cultural displacement. Rather than presenting history as a completed narrative, the novel portrays memory as fragmented, contested, and continually negotiated across generations.

Central to this negotiation is the Bosphorus Strait, a geographical space that assumes profound symbolic significance throughout the novel. Historically separating and connecting Europe and Asia, the Bosphorus functions as more than a physical waterway; it emerges as a liminal space where histories converge, identities remain fluid, and suppressed memories repeatedly surface. The movement of its waters parallels the movement of memory itself—never static, constantly shifting, and resistant to complete containment. The Bosphorus embodies what the Blue Humanities identifies as the fluidity of historical consciousness, demonstrating how aquatic spaces simultaneously connect cultures while exposing the fractures produced by political violence and historical erasure.

Through repeated references to the Bosphorus, Istanbul's waterfront, and the city's maritime landscape, Shafak transforms water into an active narrative presence that participates in the construction of identity and remembrance.

Although previous scholarship has extensively examined *The Bastard of Istanbul* through the lenses of postmodernism, multiculturalism, feminist criticism, diaspora studies, and memory studies, the novel has rarely been analysed from the perspective of the Blue Humanities. Existing studies primarily treat the Bosphorus as a geographical setting or a symbolic backdrop, overlooking its function as an active archive of historical consciousness and ecological memory. Likewise, Blue Humanities scholarship has predominantly focused on explicitly maritime texts such as Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*, Shakespeare's sea plays, and North Atlantic narratives, leaving Shafak's fiction largely unexplored within this emerging field. This absence reveals a significant interdisciplinary gap in contemporary literary criticism.

Addressing this gap, the present study examines *The Bastard of Istanbul* through the interdisciplinary framework of the Blue Humanities by bringing it into dialogue with memory studies, postcolonial ecocriticism, and hydrofeminism. Adopting a qualitative close textual analysis, the paper argues that the Bosphorus functions simultaneously as a maritime archive, a witness to historical violence, a liminal border, and an active narrative agent that shapes the circulation of memory, trauma, identity, and belonging. Rather than treating water merely as metaphor or setting, the study demonstrates how maritime space actively participates in the reconstruction of Turkish and Armenian historical consciousness. In doing so, it contributes to the expanding field of Blue Humanities by extending its application to contemporary world literature and offers a new interdisciplinary reading of Shafak's novel that foregrounds the centrality of water in negotiating memory, identity, and cultural reconciliation.

Literature Review

Since its publication in 2006, Elif Shafak's *The Bastard of Istanbul* has attracted considerable scholarly attention for its nuanced engagement with memory, identity, history, gender, diaspora, and cultural hybridity. Literary critics have consistently regarded the novel as one of Shafak's most politically significant works because of its exploration of the Armenian genocide, Turkish national identity, and the complex relationship between official history and personal memory. Existing scholarship has largely interpreted the novel through postcolonial theory, memory studies, feminism, multiculturalism, and postmodern narrative techniques, establishing it as a significant text in contemporary transnational literature.

A substantial body of criticism examines the novel as a representation of collective memory and historical trauma. Scholars argue that Shafak interrogates Turkey's selective remembrance of the Armenian genocide by juxtaposing official historical narratives with personal memories preserved within families and diasporic communities. These studies demonstrate

that memory in the novel is never singular or stable but negotiated through multiple voices, fragmented histories, and intergenerational experiences. Rather than presenting history as an objective record, Shafak foregrounds memory as a contested cultural process through which individuals reconstruct identities while confronting inherited silences.

Another major area of scholarship focuses on diaspora and identity formation. Researchers have analysed Armanoush's journey to Istanbul as a symbolic search for ancestral belonging and cultural reconciliation. Her movement between America, Armenia, and Turkey reflects the complexities of diasporic identity, illustrating how migration reshapes personal and collective understandings of homeland. Similarly, the Kazancı family's experiences reveal how historical denial influences national identity within contemporary Turkish society. These studies frequently employ postcolonial frameworks to examine questions of displacement, exile, hybridity, and belonging.

The novel has also received extensive attention from scholars interested in postmodern narrative strategies. Akbar, Majeed, and Karori argue that Shafak employs fragmented chronology, multiple narrators, irony, and metafictional elements to represent the instability of historical truth and cultural identity. Their study demonstrates that the novel's non-linear structure reflects postmodern anxieties surrounding memory, nationalism, and historical authenticity. Rather than privileging a single authoritative version of history, Shafak constructs a polyphonic narrative in which competing voices negotiate the meanings of trauma, identity, and belonging.

Feminist scholars have further explored the novel's representation of women, highlighting the predominantly female Kazancı household as a challenge to patriarchal structures within Turkish society. Through characters such as Zeliha, Banu, Feride, Cevriye, and Asya, Shafak portrays women as custodians of cultural memory while simultaneously questioning inherited traditions and gender norms. Drawing upon feminist theory, these

studies argue that female experiences become central to preserving histories that official institutions often suppress, thereby positioning domestic spaces as alternative archives of memory.

More recent scholarship has expanded these discussions by situating Shafak's fiction within broader debates on transnationalism, cosmopolitanism, and cultural reconciliation. Critics increasingly recognise that the novel destabilises rigid national identities by foregrounding intercultural dialogue and shared histories rather than exclusive narratives of victimhood or nationalism. The cosmopolitan landscape of Istanbul itself emerges as a character that reflects centuries of cultural exchange, migration, and coexistence, complicating binary distinctions between East and West, self and other.

Despite these significant contributions, existing scholarship remains largely grounded in postcolonial theory, feminism, memory studies, postmodernism, and diaspora studies. While these approaches illuminate the novel's engagement with historical trauma and cultural identity, they

generally interpret the Bosphorus as a symbolic backdrop or geographical setting rather than as an active narrative force. Consequently, the maritime imagination that permeates the novel has received comparatively little sustained scholarly attention. This omission becomes particularly significant when viewed alongside the emergence of the Blue Humanities, a field that repositions seas, rivers, and oceans as dynamic agents in the production of history, memory, and identity rather than passive landscapes. The absence of such an approach reveals an important critical space that the present study seeks to address.

Blue Humanities: From Maritime Space to Oceanic Memory

The emergence of the Blue Humanities marks one of the most significant developments in contemporary environmental humanities, challenging the long-standing terrestrial orientation of literary and cultural studies. While traditional ecocriticism primarily privileged forests, mountains, wilderness, and rural landscapes as sites of ecological inquiry, Blue Humanities redirects

scholarly attention to oceans, rivers, seas, lakes, and other aquatic environments that have historically shaped civilizations, trade, migration, memory, and cultural exchange. This shift reflects a broader recognition that nearly three-quarters of the Earth's surface consists of water and that human history has been profoundly influenced by maritime spaces. Consequently, Blue Humanities reconceptualises water not as a passive geographical backdrop but as an active material, cultural, and historical force that participates in the production of knowledge, identity, and ecological consciousness. Recent overviews of the field further emphasise its interdisciplinary nature, bringing together literary studies, maritime history, environmental humanities, geography, anthropology, and cultural studies to rethink human–water relationships in an era of ecological crisis.

The intellectual foundations of Blue Humanities were established through the pioneering works of Steve Mentz, Hester Blum, Patricia Yaeger, Margaret Cohen, and Stacy Alaimo, each of whom challenged the land-centred assumptions

that had shaped ecocritical discourse.

Steve Mentz argues that the sea should be understood as a dynamic environment that continually unsettles stable categories of nation, history, and identity. Rather than functioning merely as a setting, maritime space generates new forms of ecological thinking by exposing human vulnerability, mobility, and interconnectedness. Similarly, Hester Blum's concept of Blue Cultural Studies rejects the treatment of oceans as empty or peripheral spaces and instead positions them as central archives of cultural production, historical exchange, and political imagination. Patricia Yaeger likewise urges literary scholars to recognise the sea as a repository of ecological histories and submerged narratives, while Stacy Alaimo's work on material ecocriticism foregrounds the agency of water in shaping relationships between human and non-human worlds. Collectively, these foundational interventions transformed oceans from marginal literary settings into epistemological spaces through which history, ecology, and culture can be reinterpreted.

Building upon these foundational studies, Katie Ritson proposes the influential idea of "seeing from the sea," arguing that maritime perspectives fundamentally challenge nation-bound literary criticism. Instead of interpreting literature through fixed territorial borders, Ritson advocates an oceanic comparative method that foregrounds circulation, mobility, and relationality. Such an approach recognises that seas simultaneously connect and divide cultures, functioning as routes of migration, commerce, exile, and cultural encounter. Consequently, maritime spaces become productive sites for analysing transnational identities and shared histories that exceed political boundaries. This perspective is particularly relevant to contemporary world literature, where narratives increasingly foreground migration, displacement, and intercultural negotiation rather than stable notions of homeland.

Blue Humanities has also expanded through its engagement with memory studies and postcolonial theory. Elizabeth DeLoughrey argues that oceans function as repositories of colonial histories,

environmental violence, and cultural memory that cannot be adequately represented through land-based historiography. Rather than preserving memory in static monuments or national archives, maritime spaces retain traces of migration, slavery, imperial expansion, ecological degradation, and displacement that continue to shape contemporary identities. Similarly, Derek Walcott's poetic formulation of "The Sea Is History" reconceptualises water as an archive that safeguards histories erased from official records, while Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* demonstrates how maritime routes produce hybrid identities that transcend national and ethnic boundaries. These interventions have significantly influenced contemporary literary criticism by establishing water as an active participant in historical consciousness rather than merely a symbolic landscape.

Recent scholarship demonstrates that the Blue Humanities has evolved beyond maritime representation to address pressing concerns surrounding climate change, environmental justice, decolonial knowledge systems, and the

Anthropocene. Serpil Oppermann's *Blue Humanities: Storied Waterscapes in the Anthropocene* (2023) argues that aquatic environments should be understood as "storied waterscapes" whose material and cultural histories challenge anthropocentric models of environmental thought. By integrating environmental humanities with marine sciences and material ecocriticism, Oppermann emphasises that water possesses its own ecological agency and narrative force, encouraging scholars to think with water rather than merely about water.

More recent studies further demonstrate the widening scope of the field. Das and Manjusha's narrative review of Blue Humanities (2025) identifies a clear movement from descriptive maritime studies toward interdisciplinary investigations of literature, ecology, climate, and cultural history. They argue that current Blue Humanities scholarship increasingly incorporates non-Western perspectives and calls for greater attention to the intersections between literary studies, environmental ethics, and contemporary ecological challenges.

Likewise, Mohammed Muharram (2025) contends that Blue Humanities now functions as an important bridge between climate science and the humanities by translating ecological knowledge into compelling cultural narratives that foster environmental awareness and public engagement. His work expands the field beyond literary criticism by demonstrating its potential for addressing global ecological crises through narrative and cultural representation.

Another important development within contemporary Blue Humanities is its increasing emphasis on decolonial and transoceanic perspectives. Rather than privileging Atlantic or Eurocentric maritime histories, recent scholarship calls for greater attention to the Indian Ocean, the Mediterranean, the Pacific, and other aquatic worlds as spaces of interconnected histories, Indigenous knowledge systems, migration, and ecological resilience. This broader geographical orientation reflects an effort to diversify the epistemological foundations of Blue Humanities and to recognise multiple oceanic traditions beyond Western maritime narratives. The

establishment of the peer-reviewed journal

Blue Humanities further illustrates this shift by explicitly encouraging interdisciplinary and globally diverse research on human–water relationships, aquatic cultures, and environmental justice.

Despite these significant theoretical developments, the application of Blue Humanities to Elif Shafak's fiction remains remarkably limited. Existing studies have predominantly focused on canonical maritime texts such as *Moby-Dick*, *Sea of Poppies*, Shakespeare's sea plays, Caribbean literature, and Atlantic narratives, while contemporary novels situated around semi-enclosed seas and straits have received comparatively little attention. Although *The Bastard of Istanbul* is deeply embedded within the maritime geography of the Bosphorus, scholars have largely interpreted the waterway as a symbolic setting or cultural landmark rather than as an active archive of memory, ecological consciousness, and historical negotiation. Consequently, an important interdisciplinary opportunity remains unexplored. Reading Shafak's

novel through the Blue Humanities not only extends the geographical scope of the field beyond its traditional Atlantic orientation but also demonstrates how a strait such as the Bosphorus functions as a living site where memory, migration, ecology, and identity continuously intersect. This overlooked dimension provides the foundation for the research gap addressed in the present study.

Memory Studies, Ecocriticism, and Environmental Humanities

The interdisciplinary nature of contemporary literary criticism has encouraged increasing dialogue between memory studies, ecocriticism, and the environmental humanities. Although these fields emerged from distinct intellectual traditions, they share a common concern with understanding how human experiences are embedded within material, spatial, and cultural environments. Recent developments suggest that memory should no longer be understood solely as a psychological or historical phenomenon but as a process that is mediated through landscapes, objects, ecosystems, and environments. Consequently, literary

scholars have increasingly recognised that natural environments are not passive settings in which memories unfold; rather, they actively participate in preserving, transmitting, and reshaping cultural remembrance. This shift has become particularly significant with the emergence of environmentally oriented memory studies, which investigate the reciprocal relationship between ecological spaces and collective memory.

The theoretical foundations of memory studies were established through the works of Pierre Nora, Jan Assmann, Aleida Assmann, Paul Ricoeur, and Marianne Hirsch, whose scholarship transformed memory into a major field of interdisciplinary inquiry. Pierre Nora's concept of *lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory) argues that memory becomes attached to physical locations, monuments, rituals, and cultural symbols whenever living traditions begin to disappear. Jan Assmann extends this argument through his notion of cultural memory, suggesting that societies preserve their identities by transmitting shared memories through narratives, institutions, and symbolic

practices across generations. Unlike communicative memory, which depends upon direct personal experience, cultural memory survives through texts, rituals, landscapes, and collective acts of remembrance, enabling communities to negotiate relationships between past and present. Contemporary reviews of memory studies continue to identify Nora's and Assmann's theories as foundational to understanding how collective identities are constructed through material and symbolic environments.

Among contemporary memory theorists, Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory has become particularly influential in literary analyses of inherited trauma. Hirsch argues that traumatic experiences can be transmitted across generations even when subsequent generations have not directly witnessed the original events. Rather than functioning as simple recollection, postmemory operates through stories, photographs, silences, family narratives, and cultural practices that shape descendants' understanding of historical violence. In literary texts dealing with genocide, migration, colonialism, and

displacement, postmemory reveals how the past continues to influence identities long after the original events have ended. Recent developments in literary memory studies further expand Hirsch's work by advocating interdisciplinary approaches that integrate literature, trauma theory, environmental humanities, and cultural history, reflecting the increasingly dynamic character of the field.

Similarly, Paul Ricoeur's philosophy of memory emphasises that remembrance is not a passive recovery of historical facts but an interpretative process shaped by narrative, ethics, and historical representation. His work demonstrates that memory and forgetting coexist in complex ways, producing competing versions of historical truth rather than objective reconstructions of the past. This understanding has become particularly valuable in literary studies concerned with contested histories, where fiction often provides alternative narratives that challenge official historiography. Contemporary scholarship increasingly views memory as mobile, multidirectional, and transcultural, moving beyond nation-

centred models toward more fluid understandings of remembrance that circulate across communities, media, and geographical spaces.

Parallel to these developments, ecocriticism has undergone a profound transformation. Early ecocritical scholarship concentrated primarily on representations of nature and environmental ethics within literary texts. However, later developments, particularly those associated with material ecocriticism, posthumanism, and the environmental humanities, challenge the rigid distinction between human culture and the natural world. Scholars such as Graham Huggan, Helen Tiffin, and Stacy Alaimo argue that environments possess material agency and should be understood as active participants in social, political, and cultural processes. Alaimo's concept of transcorporeality, for instance, demonstrates that human bodies remain inseparable from the material environments through which they move, highlighting continuous exchanges between ecological systems and lived experience. Such perspectives encourage

literary scholars to analyse rivers, forests, seas, and oceans not merely as symbolic landscapes but as dynamic forces that shape human existence.

Recent developments within the environmental humanities have further complicated this relationship by integrating ecocriticism with Anthropocene studies, environmental justice, and posthumanist philosophy. Contemporary scholarship increasingly questions anthropocentric models that position humans as the sole agents of history, instead recognising non-human environments as active participants in cultural memory and historical transformation. Reviews of ecocritical scholarship published in recent years demonstrate a growing emphasis on Indigenous ecologies, multispecies perspectives, climate narratives, and material environments that challenge conventional understandings of environmental representation.

These developments have created productive intersections between memory studies and Blue Humanities. If memory studies traditionally explored archives,

monuments, museums, and commemorative rituals, Blue Humanities expands this understanding by recognising rivers, coastlines, seas, and oceans as living archives capable of preserving cultural memory. Water does not merely reflect historical events; it becomes one of the media through which histories circulate, disappear, and re-emerge. Rather than viewing memory as fixed within national boundaries, Blue Humanities conceptualises aquatic environments as fluid spaces where migration, colonialism, ecological change, and cultural exchange intersect. This perspective aligns with the emerging "environmental turn" in memory studies, which argues that environments themselves function as active carriers of memory rather than passive settings.

This convergence is especially relevant for interpreting *The Bastard of Istanbul*. The Bosphorus cannot be understood solely as a geographical landmark or symbolic backdrop; it functions as an environmental archive in which personal memories, national histories, and transgenerational trauma continuously interact. The waterway mediates encounters between

Turkish and Armenian histories, while simultaneously embodying ecological, political, and cultural transformations that exceed national boundaries. Through this perspective, the Bosphorus emerges as a material participant in remembering rather than simply a location where memory unfolds. Integrating memory studies with ecocriticism and Blue Humanities therefore offers a more comprehensive framework for understanding how Shafak reimagines the relationship between water, history, and identity.

Taken together, these developments indicate that the intersection of memory studies, ecocriticism, and Blue Humanities has opened new possibilities for literary interpretation. Nevertheless, this interdisciplinary convergence has rarely been applied to Elif Shafak's fiction. While previous studies have examined memory, trauma, and identity within *The Bastard of Istanbul*, few have investigated how the novel's maritime environment itself functions as a medium of remembrance. This absence points directly to the research gap that the present study seeks to address by examining the Bosphorus as an active

environmental archive through which memory, identity, and historical consciousness are continually negotiated.

Research Gap

Existing scholarship on Elif Shafak's *The Bastard of Istanbul* has predominantly examined the novel through the perspectives of postcolonialism, memory studies, feminism, diaspora, multiculturalism, and identity politics. These studies have provided valuable insights into the representation of the Armenian genocide, intergenerational trauma, cultural hybridity, and the politics of remembering and forgetting. However, they largely interpret the Bosphorus as a symbolic backdrop or a geographical setting rather than as an active participant in the construction of memory and identity.

Similarly, the rapidly expanding field of Blue Humanities has redefined seas, rivers, and other aquatic spaces as dynamic sites of history, ecological consciousness, migration, and cultural exchange. Foundational scholars such as Steve Mentz, Hester Blum, Elizabeth

DeLoughrey, and Katie Ritson, along with recent studies (2021–2025), have demonstrated how maritime environments function as living archives that preserve and transmit historical and cultural memory. Nevertheless, Blue Humanities scholarship has primarily focused on canonical maritime texts and oceanic narratives, with comparatively little attention paid to contemporary transnational fiction centred on inland waterways and straits such as the Bosphorus.

This study addresses these intersecting gaps by offering a Blue Humanities reading of *The Bastard of Istanbul*. It argues that the Bosphorus is not merely a geographical feature or symbolic bridge between East and West but a maritime archive that actively shapes memory, trauma, migration, and identity. By bringing Blue Humanities into dialogue with memory studies, postcolonial ecocriticism, and hydrofeminism, the study extends existing scholarship on Elif Shafak while broadening the application of Blue Humanities to contemporary world literature. In doing so, it demonstrates how

aquatic spaces function as active agents in negotiating historical consciousness, cultural belonging, and transgenerational memory.

Methodology

This study employs close textual analysis to examine Elif Shafak's *The Bastard of Istanbul* through the interdisciplinary framework of Blue Humanities. The analysis focuses on the novel's representation of the Bosphorus and other aquatic spaces to investigate how water functions as a medium of memory, identity, migration, and historical consciousness. Rather than treating maritime space as a passive geographical setting, the study interprets it as an active narrative element that shapes the experiences of individuals and communities across generations.

The primary text for this study is *The Bastard of Istanbul* (2006), selected because of its sustained engagement with themes of historical trauma, diasporic identity, cultural memory, and the symbolic significance of the Bosphorus. Although the novel has frequently been

examined through postcolonial, feminist, and memory studies perspectives, its maritime imagination remains comparatively underexplored. This makes the text particularly suitable for an analysis informed by Blue Humanities.

The interpretative framework integrates concepts from Blue Humanities, memory studies, postcolonial ecocriticism, and hydrofeminism. The study draws upon the works of Steve Mentz, Hester Blum, Elizabeth DeLoughrey, Katie Ritson, Stacy Alaimo, and Astrida Neimanis to understand water as a material, cultural, and ecological force. These perspectives are read alongside memory theorists such as Pierre Nora, Jan Assmann, Marianne Hirsch, and Paul Ricoeur to examine how the novel represents collective memory, postmemory, and historical silences through the maritime landscape of Istanbul.

The textual analysis focuses on selected episodes, narrative descriptions, character interactions, and recurring maritime imagery that illuminate the relationship between water, memory, and identity. Particular attention is given to the

symbolic and material presence of the Bosphorus, the experiences of the Kazancı and Tchakhmakhchian families, and the movement of characters across geographical and cultural boundaries. These narrative elements are examined in relation to the broader historical contexts of the Armenian genocide, migration, and the politics of remembering and forgetting.

By combining these theoretical perspectives, the study offers an interdisciplinary reading of *The Bastard of Istanbul* that foregrounds the Bosphorus as a maritime archive where ecological space, historical memory, and cultural identity intersect. This methodological approach enables a deeper understanding of how Shafak reimagines water not merely as a metaphor or setting but as an active participant in the construction and transmission of historical consciousness.

Theoretical Framework

Blue Humanities

The Blue Humanities has emerged as a significant interdisciplinary field that reorients literary and cultural studies from a predominantly terrestrial perspective

towards the study of oceans, seas, rivers, lakes, and other aquatic environments. Moving beyond conventional ecocriticism, which has traditionally privileged landscapes and forests, Blue Humanities recognises water as an active cultural, historical, and ecological force. Rather than viewing maritime spaces as passive settings, it understands them as dynamic sites that shape human mobility, collective memory, political histories, and cultural identities.

Steve Mentz is widely recognised as one of the pioneering scholars of Blue Humanities. He argues that the sea challenges fixed notions of territory, identity, and historical continuity by embodying movement, uncertainty, and interconnectedness. Similarly, Hester Blum's concept of Blue Cultural Studies positions oceans as archives of cultural production and historical exchange, emphasising that maritime spaces preserve stories of migration, trade, colonial encounters, and displacement that often remain absent from official historical narratives. Patricia Yaeger further extends this perspective by arguing that oceans

should be understood as repositories of ecological and cultural memory rather than merely symbolic landscapes.

Recent developments have considerably broadened the scope of Blue Humanities. Elizabeth DeLoughrey emphasises the relationship between oceanic spaces, colonial histories, and environmental justice, while Katie Ritson advocates a maritime perspective that moves beyond nation-centred literary criticism to examine the fluid networks connecting cultures across waterways. Contemporary scholarship (2021–2025) has further expanded the field by engaging with climate change, environmental justice, decolonial maritime studies, and Indigenous oceanic knowledge, demonstrating that aquatic environments are active participants in historical and ecological processes rather than passive geographical features.

Within this theoretical framework, the Bosphorus in *The Bastard of Istanbul* is understood not merely as a physical strait separating Europe and Asia but as a maritime archive that stores, transmits, and reshapes historical memory. The Blue

Humanities therefore provides an appropriate lens for examining how Shafak transforms water into an active narrative presence that mediates memory, migration, identity, and cultural belonging.

Memory Studies

Memory studies provide the conceptual framework for understanding how individuals and communities construct relationships with the past. Rather than viewing memory as the simple recollection of historical events, contemporary theorists argue that remembrance is a dynamic cultural process shaped by narratives, places, rituals, and material environments.

Pierre Nora's concept of *lieux de mémoire* demonstrates that memory becomes attached to symbolic sites where collective histories are preserved and negotiated. Jan Assmann further distinguishes cultural memory from communicative memory, arguing that societies maintain continuity through shared narratives, traditions, and cultural symbols that extend beyond individual experience. Paul Ricoeur highlights the complex relationship

between memory, history, and forgetting, emphasising that historical representation is always interpretative rather than objective.

Marianne Hirsch's theory of postmemory is particularly relevant to the present study because it explains how traumatic historical experiences continue to shape later generations who have not directly witnessed the original events. Through inherited stories, silences, photographs, and family narratives, postmemory demonstrates that trauma remains active across generations.

These concepts provide a valuable framework for interpreting *The Bastard of Istanbul*, where memories of the Armenian genocide continue to influence the identities of both the Kazancı and Tchakhmakhchian families. The Bosphorus becomes a space through which these memories circulate, connecting personal remembrance with collective historical consciousness.

Postcolonial Ecocriticism

Postcolonial ecocriticism examines the relationship between environmental spaces

and the historical legacies of colonialism, migration, displacement, and cultural identity. Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin argue that environmental degradation and colonial exploitation are deeply interconnected, requiring literary criticism to examine ecological and political histories simultaneously. Rather than treating nature as separate from human society, postcolonial ecocriticism recognises landscapes, rivers, coastlines, and seas as spaces shaped by imperial histories, cultural encounters, and environmental change.

Stacy Alaimo's work on material ecocriticism further develops this perspective by emphasising the agency of the non-human world. Her concept of transcorporeality highlights the continuous interaction between human bodies and material environments, demonstrating that ecological spaces actively influence cultural and historical experiences.

Applied to *The Bastard of Istanbul*, postcolonial ecocriticism reveals how the Bosphorus embodies multiple layers of political history, environmental transformation, and cultural negotiation. It

functions not only as a geographical landmark but also as an ecological space through which histories of migration, nationalism, and historical silencing continue to shape contemporary identities.

Hydrofeminism

Hydrofeminism, developed most prominently by Astrida Neimanis, challenges rigid distinctions between bodies, environments, and identities by proposing that all life exists within interconnected networks of water. Water is understood not simply as a natural resource but as a material force that links human beings across geographical, biological, and historical boundaries. Hydrofeminism therefore emphasises fluidity, relationality, and interconnectedness while questioning fixed notions of identity.

This perspective is particularly relevant to Shafak's representation of women in *The Bastard of Istanbul*. The women of the Kazancı family function as custodians of memory, preserving histories that remain absent from official narratives. Their experiences demonstrate that memory

flows across generations through storytelling, silence, emotions, and every day domestic practices. Reading these female relationships through hydrofeminism highlights the fluid and interconnected nature of identity, suggesting that memory, like water, continually circulates rather than remaining fixed within individuals or institutions.

Together, Blue Humanities, memory studies, postcolonial ecocriticism, and hydrofeminism provide an interdisciplinary framework for understanding the Bosphorus as more than a geographical setting. They enable the novel to be interpreted as a narrative in which water actively mediates historical memory, ecological consciousness, gendered experience, and cultural identity, offering a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between maritime space and human history.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts an interdisciplinary theoretical framework by integrating Blue Humanities, Memory Studies, Postcolonial

Ecocriticism, and Hydrofeminism to examine the relationship between water, memory, and identity in Elif Shafak's *The Bastard of Istanbul*. Blue Humanities, drawing on the works of Steve Mentz, Hester Blum, Elizabeth DeLoughrey, and Katie Ritson, provides the primary analytical lens by viewing aquatic spaces as dynamic sites of history, mobility, and cultural memory rather than passive geographical settings. This perspective is complemented by Memory Studies, particularly the concepts of Pierre Nora's *lieux de mémoire*, Jan Assmann's cultural memory, and Marianne Hirsch's postmemory, which explain how historical trauma and collective memory are preserved and transmitted across generations. In addition, Postcolonial Ecocriticism, informed by the scholarship of Graham Huggan, Helen Tiffin, and Stacy Alaimo, facilitates an understanding of the Bosphorus as an ecological space shaped by migration, political histories, and cultural negotiations. Finally, Astrida Neimanis' concept of Hydrofeminism highlights the fluid and interconnected nature of bodies, environments, and identities, offering a framework for

examining the role of women as custodians of memory in the novel. Together, these interconnected perspectives enable the Bosphorus to be interpreted not merely as a geographical setting but as a maritime archive through which memory, trauma, identity, and historical consciousness are continuously negotiated.

Analysis and Discussion

The Bosphorus as an Archive of Memory: History, Migration, and Fluid Identities

This section examines the Bosphorus as a dynamic maritime archive where history, collective memory, migration, and identity converge. Through the lens of Blue Humanities, the Bosphorus is interpreted not merely as a geographical strait separating Europe and Asia but as a living space that preserves and mediates historical consciousness. The discussion analyses how Shafak transforms the Bosphorus into an active narrative presence that bears witness to the Armenian genocide, cultural silences, and the politics of remembering and forgetting.

Rather than existing as a passive backdrop, the waterway functions as a repository of personal and collective memories that continue to circulate across generations despite attempts at historical erasure. Drawing upon the concepts of maritime memory proposed by Hester Blum, Steve Mentz, Elizabeth DeLoughrey, and Katie Ritson, this section argues that water possesses archival agency, enabling submerged histories to resurface through every day experiences, family narratives, and cultural interactions. The Bosphorus therefore emerges as a space where memory remains fluid, resisting fixed historical interpretations and challenging official narratives of the Turkish nation-state.

The section further explores how the movement of water parallels the movement of people, identities, and cultures throughout the novel. Characters such as Armanoush embody diasporic identities shaped by migration, inherited memory, and the search for belonging, while Asya's gradual confrontation with Turkey's suppressed past reflects the instability of national identity itself. The

Bosphorus, historically connecting continents, civilizations, and communities, becomes a metaphor for identities that remain relational rather than territorially fixed. The journeys undertaken by the characters, their encounters across cultural boundaries, and the recurring imagery of ferries, shorelines, and waterfront conversations illustrate that identity in Shafak's novel is continuously negotiated through movement rather than permanence. By bringing together Blue Humanities, memory studies, and postcolonial thought, this section demonstrates that the Bosphorus simultaneously functions as an archive, a border, a bridge, and an active narrative agent through which history, migration, and cultural belonging are continually reconstructed.

Ecological Memory, Hydrofeminism, and the Gendered Transmission of History

Beyond its historical and cultural significance, the Bosphorus also embodies an ecological presence that shapes the novel's understanding of memory and human relationships with the environment.

Rather than presenting nature as a passive landscape, Shafak portrays the Bosphorus as a living ecological entity that reflects centuries of urban transformation, environmental change, and cultural continuity. Through the framework of postcolonial ecocriticism and Blue Humanities, the maritime environment emerges as a participant in historical processes, revealing how ecological spaces retain traces of political conflict, migration, and collective trauma. The recurring descriptions of the waterfront, changing currents, marine life, and the sensory experience of Istanbul's coastal landscape demonstrate that memory is embedded not only within human narratives but also within the material environment itself. This ecological reading challenges anthropocentric interpretations by suggesting that the Bosphorus possesses its own historical agency, continuously witnessing and preserving the layered histories of the city.

The novel's ecological imagination is further enriched through the experiences of the women of the Kazancı family, whose roles as storytellers, caretakers, and

custodians of memory resonate with Astrida Neimanis' concept of Hydrofeminism. Their memories circulate through conversations, silences, domestic rituals, and intergenerational relationships, illustrating that remembrance flows in fluid and relational ways rather than through official historical institutions. The transmission of trauma within the family parallels the continuous movement of water, reinforcing the interconnectedness of bodies, environments, and histories. Read through hydrofeminism, the Bosphorus becomes not only an ecological space but also a metaphor for feminine continuity, resilience, and relational identity. Consequently, Shafak reimagines water as an active medium through which ecological memory, gendered experience, and historical consciousness intersect, demonstrating that the preservation of history depends as much upon everyday acts of remembrance and environmental spaces as upon written archives. By integrating Blue Humanities, ecocriticism, memory studies, and feminist theory, this section argues that *The Bastard of Istanbul* presents the Bosphorus as a living witness to both environmental and human

histories, expanding contemporary understandings of maritime literature and offering a multidimensional interpretation of memory, identity, and cultural reconciliation.

Conclusion

This study has examined Elif Shafak's *The Bastard of Istanbul* through the interdisciplinary framework of Blue Humanities, demonstrating that the Bosphorus functions as far more than a geographical setting or symbolic boundary. Rather, it emerges as a dynamic maritime archive where history, memory, migration, ecology, and identity converge. By integrating Blue Humanities with memory studies, postcolonial ecocriticism, and hydrofeminism, the study reveals that water actively participates in preserving and transmitting historical consciousness. The Bosphorus becomes a witness to cultural encounters, historical silences, and intergenerational trauma, while simultaneously facilitating the negotiation of fluid identities that transcend fixed national and ethnic boundaries. Shafak's narrative therefore reconceptualizes water not merely as a metaphor but as an active

narrative force through which the past continues to shape the present.

The study also demonstrates that the novel expands conventional understandings of memory by locating remembrance within the material environment rather than solely within human recollection or official historical records. The Bosphorus preserves traces of migration, displacement, and cultural exchange, transforming maritime space into a living repository of collective memory. Likewise, the experiences of the Kazancı and Tchakhmakhchian families illustrate how inherited trauma circulates across generations through stories, silences, and everyday relationships, while the women of the novel emerge as important custodians of cultural memory. These findings highlight the interconnected nature of environment, history, and identity, suggesting that ecological spaces play an active role in shaping cultural remembrance and historical consciousness.

By offering a Blue Humanities reading of *The Bastard of Istanbul*, this study contributes to two important areas of scholarship. First, it extends existing

research on Elif Shafak beyond dominant interpretations centred on postcolonialism, feminism, diaspora, and memory studies by foregrounding the maritime imagination that underpins the novel. Second, it broadens the application of Blue Humanities by demonstrating its relevance to contemporary transnational fiction situated around historically significant waterways such as the Bosphorus, thereby expanding the geographical scope of the field beyond its traditional focus on oceanic and Atlantic narratives. This interdisciplinary approach underscores the value of reading aquatic environments as active participants in literary narratives and cultural history.

The study opens further possibilities for research at the intersection of Blue Humanities and world literature. Future studies may explore the role of rivers, seas, and coastal landscapes in other works by Elif Shafak or examine how aquatic environments shape narratives of migration, memory, and ecological change in contemporary postcolonial fiction. Such approaches would continue to strengthen interdisciplinary conversations between

literary studies, environmental humanities, and cultural memory, reaffirming the significance of water as a vital medium through which histories are preserved, contested, and reimagined.

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