



**The Problem of East-West Relations in the Prose of  
Elif Shafak and Orhan Pamuk**

**Shorena Makhachadze**

Batumi Shota Rustaveli State University  
Professor of Department of Georgian Philology  
Georgia, 6610, Batumi, Sherif Khimshiashvili st. №9  
+995577727263. shorena.makhachadze@bsu.edu.ge  
ORCID: <https://orchid.org/0009-0008-5655-0462>

**Abstract**

The article analyses the problem of dialogue between Eastern-Western cultures in the era of globalization and information - communication revolution. The aim of the research is to discuss this important issue on the basis of works of contemporary Turkish writers: Elif Shafak and Orhan Pamuk. Showing inconsistent relationship between the East and the West is one of the main themes of their literary works. The study is conducted by using comparative analysis and hermeneutic methods.

The two writers have much in common: nationality, personal contacts (education, immigration) with the West, thorough knowledge of the two worlds, but it should be noted that their approach to the issue is different. Elif Shafak's world vision and manner of writing are feminist. Besides, the author depicts the East from the point of view of an immigrant. This is the world perceived from the position of the observer standing "outside." The author also depicts an objective picture of the West experienced by an Eastern immigrant.

The approach of Orhan Pamuk to the same topic is absolutely different. He rises from distant history, draws the picture of "Unique

East” and marks the readers’ attention to the spiritual connection with the ancestors. He shows the history of the country and makes the readers feel the sadness of Istanbul obsessed with the fear of alteration.

The relevance of the research is to show how important it is to study similarities and differences between Eastern-Western cultures in the modern world. Breaking the borders between the counties, activation of transnational factors, mobility of education led to the formation of a new cultural picture of the world. But it does not mean that traditional confrontation between the members of the binary opposition weakened. In some cases, these objections worsened because the mechanism of defense against the “foreigner/stranger” was developed. These problems have always been and are still relevant in Georgia. The best representatives of Georgian literature (M. Javakhi-shvili, K. Gamsakhurdia, Gr. Robakidze, O. Chiladze, Aka Morchiladze, etc.) discussed the same issue in their literary and publicist works and even made some conclusions. Thus, it is interesting for us what is the Turkish writers’ position towards this topic. Turkey is our neighboring country with whom we have much in common: history, commitment to traditions, great aspiration for the EU and the desire to find a balance between the two worlds.

The novelty of the research is that it is the first modest try in Georgia to make a comparative analysis of the works of two great Turkish writers - Elif Shafak and Orhan Pamuk and to study their writing peculiarities of depicting East-West relations.

On the basis of analysis, we came to the following conclusion: in the process of globalization, in multicultural, multilingual and digital environment, people try to maintain their identity on the one hand and to acquire a tolerant attitude towards foreign cultures on the other hand. To adopt a foreign culture is impossible without understanding it.

**Keywords:** The West; The East; Culture; Dialogue; Understanding; Reception.

## **Introduction**

In the twenty-first century, the study of similarities and differences between Eastern-Western cultures is especially important, because process of globalization, breaking the borders between the countries, activation of transnational factors, mobility of education, information and communication revolution led to the formation of a new cultural picture of the world.

The world community is developing dynamically, changing its face every day. Under such circumstances, it is vital for the people of different cultures to achieve a high degree of mutual understanding and cross-cultural communication. But it is impossible to do without knowing and respecting each other's culture or cultural identity.

The idea of East-West incompatibility is not new. It was formulated in the nineteenth century by Rudyard Kipling who wrote: 'East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet.' This view has partially changed in recent years, but it has not been completely revised. A number of its relapses are found in both political reality and fiction. It is interesting to note that popular Turkish writer Orhan Pamuk repeats the quotation of R. Kipling and adds: "Both of them are created by Allah." (Pamuk, 2014:178)

Based on the literary works of Nobel Prize winner Orhan Pamuk and the world-famous writer Elif Shafak, we will try to discuss the issue of East-West relations and see how the authors tried to depict and solve the problem of East-West relations through artistic images. The issue is interesting for Georgians as well because the problem of Eastern-Western orientation has always been and is still relevant in Georgian politics and fiction. However, it should not be forgotten that this dilemma in the field of culture was decided in the twelfth century by Shota Rustaveli, who wrote the poem "The Knight in the Panther's Skin," the poem having eastern form and western ideas.

## **Method**

The study is conducted by using comparative analysis and hermeneutic methods. Literary texts are not static and are open to the readers any time. Besides they allow the readers to make different

interpretations. In this paper, we will try to study specific parts of the texts, present a unified picture of the problem and come to specific conclusions.

### **Discussion**

Cultural division between the East and the West is quite old. The division is conditioned not only by geographical location, but also by different methods of cognition of the world, the traditional value system, the basic worldview, the social-economic, political structures and religion.

Though there are some scientists who believe that such kind of division, or the so-called opposition 'East-West' is made up by Europeans; it is a myth and has not much in common with reality. Much fairer and more correct will be the dichotomy: "The West and the rest" (Huntington, 2003:25-35). The West creates a culturally and mentally unified space; The same cannot said about the East, where the constituent countries / civilizations (Arabian, Indian, Japanese, Chinese, African) differ radically from each other in terms of religion, culture, public relations and lifestyle in general. We too need to share this opinion of an American scientist and when analyzing the East-West binary opposition, we should specify which cultural space we talk about.

The object of our interest, as mentioned above, is the literary works of contemporary Turkish authors - Nobel Prize winner novelist Orhan Pamuk and world - famous woman writer Elif Shafak.

Turkey, like Georgia stands at the crossroads between two worlds – East and West. Georgia has much in common with Turkey: long historical connection, commitment to traditions, pursuit of understanding Western civilization, desire to join the EU, fear of losing identity. In the literary works of both Turkish novelists, these and many other problems are artistically depicted, many interesting questions are asked and answered. The authors have much in common: origin, communion with Western/American culture and adaptation with it. Despite similarities between the authors' style of writing, there are differences as well. First of all, Elif Shafak's prose is feminist. It

focuses on feminism and gender equality. Her literary works depict events, subjects, and people through the eyes of a woman. In addition, it is, the world seen from the eyes of an immigrant. This world is quite remote both physically and spiritually for the author. Elif Shafak's prose is unique as the author sees the world from two different angles: on the one hand she depicts the life of Turkey from the point of view of a person who is an immigrant and lives in a foreign country; on the other hand, she paints a picture of the West (Europe/America) from the point of view of the Turk who represents Eastern culture. In both cases, it is a vision of the outsider. As for Orhan Pamuk, he has a different style of narrating. He perceives Turkey and the East differently. It is an inward gaze. The narrative vector is vertical, it comes from the roots and rises to the surface. He knows the history of his country and has spiritual connection with the ancestors.

Orhan Pamuk is ironic when he talks about oriental views of Europeans. He believes that the West makes a forceful influence on the East. The author characterizes a foreign country with simulacra and creates a picture that is far from reality.

In Orhan Pamuk's novels the comparative psychological pictures of Europeans and Turks are drawn ironically/parodically. Let us recall the comic characters of Hoja and Venetian from his novel "The White Castle." These two characters are alike but do not see each other (Pamuk, 2011). Elif Shafak talks about mental differences between Englishmen and Turks: "Englishmen express their ideas indirectly, unlike Turks they never show their disgust or anger" (Shafak,2022:182).

What makes Eastern and Western cultures different?

From world history it is known that the origin of Western ideals is in Ancient Greece and Ancient Rome. In Ancient Greece citizens had to participate in solving the issues important to society. The civil sovereignty of a person was established in Ancient Rome. In contrast, the specifics of Eastern culture, norms and traditions are based on the peculiarities of the life of the community structures of the agrarian Asian community.

The Eastern worldview is built on human self-isolation from the outside world. It focuses on internal, spiritual life. This type of worldview is characterized by a passive subordination of a person to a natural origin that is actively sacralised. The Eastern worldview is well depicted in Elif Shapak's 'The Forty Rules of Love.' The novel is about relationship between mystic poet Jalal-Ud-Din Rumi and his companion Shams Tabrizi. The author explains the essence of the mystical doctrine of Islam, Sufism, the purpose of which is the spiritual perfection of man. The motto of sufism is: "When you know your own 'self,' you will know the God too." (Shapak, 2020:2:51). The greatest of the greatest artists, the so called 'Shakespeare of the East,' Jalal-Ud-Din Rumi belongs neither to the East nor to the West. He belongs to the world of love, belongs to the one he loves (Shapak, 2020:2:226).

The Western worldview, unlike the Oriental is aimed at understanding the outside world by man and actively influencing it. The West gives priority to the transformative power of man, liberalism, utilitarianism, the ability to persuade. Eastern culture values silence, self-delusion, conservativeness, traditions. Accordingly, the model of Western life implies dynamic development, revolutionary jumps, an accelerated rhythm of life, which is strongly opposed to the evolutionary, inertial model of the development of Eastern society.

There is one more factor that distinguishes Eastern and Western cultures: In the East, the idea of community, the unity of the people was important in all epochs and public orders. It is no coincidence that even Perry, a disciple of Professor Azure, educated at Oxford, when it comes to the prestige and culture of his country, feels that he is "a representative of a collective union." (Shafak, 2022:1:277)

Orhan Pamuk's postmodernist prose characters also consider themselves to be an integral part of collective society. They are melancholic, prone to philosophical judgment, with a doubled consciousness. These characters appear to be stuck between faith and disbelief, collective and individual, East and West. The same idea is developed by Elif Shafak who says: 'We are somewhere between East and West,

Past and Future. On the one hand, we have modernists, on the other hand, we have ordinary traditionalists.’ (Shafak, 2022:1:100)

It is interesting to note, that character splits/dualism are familiar to Georgian writers. Classic example of it is Konstantine Savarsamidze (from K. Gamsakhurdia’s novel ‘The Smile of Dionysus’) whose archetype is Dionysus. The main character of the novel “The Smile of Dionysus” shares the Western values on the one hand and Oriental-Georgian traditional values on the other hand. He is stuck between paganism and Christianity. He says: ‘I am always at crossroads. When I go far, I cannot decide how to travel - by sea or by land. When I am in the shop, I like two different items. I am a friend of two at the same time. I am always in love with two women’ (Gamsakhurdia,1992:79). Internal contradictions are characteristic to Tamar Emkhvari, the protagonist of K. Gamsakhurdia’s novel “Kidnapping the Moon.”

Like K. Gamsakhurdia, Turkish novelists - Orhan Pamuk and Elif Shafak are well aware of both cultures, so the pictures depicted by them are realistic and exactly show the similarities and differences between East and West. It is interesting to note, that the place where two different cultures, two different world visions and civilizations meet is Istanbul. It is the city of contrasts. It is a crossroads where the dialogue and resistance of cultures are clearly visible. ‘If London were sweets, it would be an iris candy – rich, impressive and traditional. As for Istanbul, it is more like cherry licorice, a mixture of various flavours, sour sweet at the same time.’ (Shafak, 2022:93).

Shafak’s original simile reminded us of Tbilisi, painted by a talented Georgian immigrant writer Nino Kharatishvili: ‘From that room there was a magnificent view over Tbilisi. The Eastern and the Western Worlds join here; here they are connected. This city was so strong that neither West, nor East could defeat it.’ (Kharatishvili, 2015:271).

Georgian postmodernist writer Aka Morchiladze has quite different opinion about this issue. ‘Tbilisi will not become Paris. They will never meet each other.’ (Morchiladze, 2001:49) As we see, there is a huge similarity between the problems of the peoples living in the countries and cities standing at the Europe-Asian crossroads.

In Orhan Pamuk's novels Istanbul is obsessed by the fear of losing identity. The city, where the author spent his sweetest years of childhood and youth, is preserved only in black and white engravings. Modern Istanbul is more and more like 'a dream city of a foreign country' (Pamuk, 2013-1:413). In other words, the city loses its uniqueness and colour.

Artistic image of Istanbul is especially impressive and expressive in Elif Shafak's novels. The city is absolutely differently perceived by the characters. For some characters it is an illusion, for some it is a dream, for others it is an old historical city where Dervish and fortune-tellers wander. For some, it is an ultra-modern urban giant stretching over a huge area with its new shopping centers, skyscrapers and chaotic traffic jams. Istanbul is a multifaceted Janus, there is nothing permanent in it, because here and in this particular place, special games planned by history or destiny were held: 'Imperial Istanbul confronted Plebeian Istanbul; Global Istanbul - Provincial Istanbul; Cosmopolitan Istanbul - Philistine Istanbul; Heretic Istanbul-God fearing Istanbul; Masculine Istanbul - Feminine Istanbul...' (Shafak, 2020:3:275).

Elif Shafak believes that there is one more Istanbul. It exists in the memory of immigrants and is created from their idealized, messianic aspirations. Such diversity of perception and feelings is not surprising. The author believes that cities are reflections of the heart, soul, and thought of their inhabitants.

Even Turks claim that their favourite city is split in two and constantly trying to resolve the dilemma: 'Istanbul was located next to Europe. Such kind of proximity meant something. Europe was close and Turkey had a single foot in its gate, trying to penetrate it with all its might. But the entrance was narrow and Europe was closing its door. Whatever Istanbul was trying to do, it would not enter the gate.' (Shafak, 2022:1:13).

It is true that in the period of globalization and multiculturalism, territorial boundaries between different cultures are broken, but the fact is that the difference between cultures does not disappear but



intensify. New problems arise associated with the integration of "foreign" culture into an already established society. Both cultures intensify their defensive instincts. That is why Orhan Pamuk says: 'It is disastrous to be a copy of someone else. It is not useful for either side; It only leads to a crisis of self-determination, a feeling of confusion and an activation of hostility' (Pamuk, 2013-2:); (Pamuk, 2013-3:).

We would like to recall Georgian writer K. Gamsakhurdia who got education in Europe. Tamar Emkhvari, the protagonist of K. Gamsakhurdia's novel "Kidnapping the Moon" says: 'You, Europeans are egoists. You demand from us transformation. You want us to resemble you, to forget our native language and speak yours' (Gamsakhurdia, 1973:143). The author saw that Europeans tried to transform the peoples of different nationalities and believed that it was necessary to defend the idea of Georgian language and culture hegemony. We think that Georgian modernist author K. Gamsakhurdia and Turkish postmodernist authors O. Pamuk and E. Shafak have similar ideas about protecting national identity.

In the literary works of Turkish authors, it is shown that Eastern immigrants want to live in Western countries; On the one hand they try to adapt with the new culture, but on the other hand they try to preserve their national traditions, language, customs. This creates problems of multiculturalism and tolerance from both immigrants and Aboriginal populations. In Elif Shafak's novel 'Three Daughters of Eve' warning voice of European philosophers and intellectuals is heard: 'We need to keep Europe for Europeans. We need to shut the doors of Europe... Europe is like a home. There is no place for Muslims; They are strangers. Even a five - year - old child knows that 'a stranger/a foreigner' cannot be invited at home .... Marriage between different races and religions poses a threat to Western society.' (Shafak, 2022-1:347).

Unlike Orhan Pamuk, Elif Shafak marks the reader's attention to the other side of the medal. The author sees that not only Orientals have the problem of getting a foreign culture. Even Europeans do not show sufficient degree of tolerance: 'I am surprised why do the British

hate foreigners. They never address you directly as ‘spick’ (dirty illegal), but.....Unlike other countries, racism in Britain is not part of everyday life. It is more hidden and sophisticated’ (Shafak, 2002-2:169).

Or: ‘The Germans invited you to work in their country, not to join their society; As soon as you finished your work, you had to go back. Adjusting with their life style is like hugging the hedgehog’ (Shafak, 2022-2:184).

These quotes from Elif Shafak’s novels emphasize that the problem of understanding and accepting ‘a foreigner’ actually exists in both cultures. Moreover, the Westerners are greatly concerned in this regard and create defensive lines.

Orhan Pamuk and Elif Shafak’s novels show that people belonging to different cultures and civilizations see differently the relationship between God and Man, individual and society, citizen and state, parents and children, wife and husband. They have their own beliefs about their rights and obligations, freedom and coercion, equality and hierarchy. These differences have been formulated for centuries and have become a tradition, a custom. To forget or reject these traditions is absolutely impossible. So, a person being in a foreign culture has no other way, but to find forms of unity and get accustomed to cultural diversity. Within cultural diversity, everyone looks for a solution, sometimes comical, sometimes - serious, because: ‘international politics does not recognize ambiguity .... We have to stand in a line on the Bosphorus bridge, blow with force and push this city to the West. If it does not move, we shall try another method and see if it is possible to turn the East...’ (Shafak, 2020-1:176).

Orhan Pamuk shares the opinion that it is not easy to turn the East to the West. In his novel ‘My Name is Red’ the author discusses the art of oriental miniature and comes to the conclusion that every culture should maintain its own cultural identity: ‘The artist should not be arrogant and think about East and West. He should paint how he feels! (Pamuk, 2014:336).

'Well, the twenty-first century is not much different from the thirteenth century. Both will be recorded in history as an era of unprecedented religious confrontation and cultural incompatibility. In such an era, love is especially needed by humans' (Shafak, 2020,2:20).

Elif Shafak and Orhan Pamuk's novels assure us of the fairness of this view. Worldview, mental-psychological differences between the two worlds led to a rather problematic, contradictory East-West relationship. This issue was discussed in the texts analyzed by us. Turkish writers discuss this global issue from different angles but come to the same conclusion. These two worlds/cultures need to accept, understand and develop each other. In addition, we must condemn both fanatical, blind inadmissibility and the nihilistic denial of our own. Both cultural self-isolation and cultural intervention should be condemned. In order to maintain identity in a multicultural environment, it is necessary to recognize the right of each culture and have a dialogue with them.

### **Conclusion**

Analysis of Elif Shafak and Orhan Pamuk's novels led us to the following conclusion. While mass culture can change the outer, superficial forms of culture, it has no ability to penetrate other cultures and vanish centuries-old traditions connected with the roots of the national mentality.

Traditions of different nations, their types of thinking, mentality, peculiarities of worldview have been shaped for millennia and are difficult to eradicate them even in the era of multiculturalism and multilingualism. On the contrary, extreme conditions increase the need to protect the identity of the nations. However, this process has the other side as well. Peoples learn relationship culture, start a dialogue with people of different cultures, develop the ability to tolerate others. The need to have these skills is dictated by life's pragmatic needs. The analysis of the reflection of the East-West relations in the literary works of contemporary Turkish writers shows that in the process of globalization, human society naturally grasps the wisdom of the dialogue between cultures, learns to be tolerant to others and

understands one simple truth: accepting a foreign culture implies its understanding.

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