
Identity and Memory in The Architect's Apprentice

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Abstract

"In the end, it was not the Sultan's palace, nor the great mosque that would remain in history, but the memory of the people who had built them. It was the builders who had worked in silence, whose names had been erased from the walls, who were the true architects of the empire."

Elif Shafak, The Architect's Apprentice (2014)

Elif Shafak's "The Architect's Apprentice" masterfully weaves historical fiction with a deeply personal story, delving into the formation of memory and identity against the backdrop of the Ottoman Empire. The story chronicles the life of Jahan, an orphan who ascends to the role of apprentice under the esteemed architect Sinan. Amidst the empire's political and religious upheavals, Jahan's odyssey reflects the intricate process of identity development in a society influenced by power, culture, and the annals of history. This essay examines the interlaced themes of memory, identity, and historical inheritance in Shafak's work, positing that the novel employs architecture as a symbol for individual and shared recollection. Through engagement with Sinan's architectural wonders, Jahan finds harmony between his identity and the grand historical narrative of the Ottoman Empire. Additionally, the essay considers the novel's commentary on how construction, as an act of cultural articulation, can shape and preserve identities over time.

Keywords: Elif Shafak, Identity, Memory, Apprentice, Ottoman.

Introduction

Elif Shafak's "The Architect's Apprentice" (2014) offers a rich tapestry of historical fiction intertwined with a personal bildungsroman. The story revolves around Jahan, an orphan who becomes the apprentice of the celebrated Ottoman architect, Mimar Sinan. The narrative skillfully interlaces Jahan's growth with the vast political, cultural, and architectural tapestry of the Ottoman Empire, offering a distinctive perspective to explore themes of memory, identity, and legacy. As Jahan maneuvers through the intricacies of the Sultan's court, religious conflicts, and pivotal personal experiences, he confronts how one's identity is molded by history, recollections, and the prevailing cultural dynamics.

Shafak utilizes Sinan's architectural works as tangible and emblematic conduits for the edification of memory and identity. Sinan's creations are not merely enduring edifices but also repositories of communal memory and emblems of Ottoman sovereignty and cultural legacy. This thesis posits that "The Architect's Apprentice" illustrates the profound connection between individual identities, such as Jahan's, and the broader historical narratives they inhabit. Moreover, the novel's structural composition facilitates an analysis of the intricate bond between memory and history, revealing the ongoing negotiation of personal and collective identities within the ambit of historical events.

Historical Context: The Ottoman Empire and the Role of Architecture

The historical context of the Ottoman Empire, especially under Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent, forms the backdrop for Jahan's narrative. In this era, the empire saw its zenith in both political and cultural spheres. Architecture, and notably the contributions of Mimar Sinan, played a pivotal role in showcasing the empire's might and governance, leaving a legacy that persists to the present. Sinan's constructions, emblematic of the Ottoman Empire's splendor, allow Shafak's protagonist to explore how architecture can articulate both personal and sovereign identities.

Sinan's edifices, such as the Süleymaniye Mosque, are manifestations of the empire's aesthetic, spiritual, and political ethos. To the citizens, these grand architectural wonders symbolize the Sultan's power, the Ottoman faith, and the empire's enduring nature. They also act as vaults of memory, preserving the empire's heritage for posterity. Hence, the Ottoman Empire's historical milieu not only sets the stage for Jahan's tale but also profoundly influences his identity formation, intertwining his odyssey with the empire's cultural saga.

Jahan's exploration of Sinan's architectural masterpieces enables him to engage with his cultural heritage and his place within the empire. The tangible presence of these structures aids Jahan in grasping the intricacies of his identity as a subject of the Ottoman Empire, shaping his views on history and tradition.

Through Shafak's narrative, Jahan's identity is woven into a broader historical tapestry, with architecture acting as a conduit for an individual to comprehend and rise above their milieu. Shafak's delve into the construction of memory via Sinan's buildings probes the theme of identity, crafted not solely by personal deeds but also by cultural and historical inheritances that withstand the passage of time.

Jahan's Identity: Orphan to Apprentice

Jahan's identity, rooted in his orphaned status, begins with a literal and metaphorical dispossession. His formative years, marked by displacement and a deep longing for a sense of belonging, echo the essence of memory. For Jahan, memory transcends the past; it is an ongoing act of recalling and reshaping oneself in the present. His journey from a street-dwelling orphan to a student of Sinan charts his rise from obscurity to historical prominence.

Under Sinan's guidance, Jahan's transformation illustrates the impact of external forces, especially authoritative figures, on shaping one's identity. Sinan, an eminent figure in Ottoman architecture, mirrors the historical splendor of the empire, and his role in Jahan's growth highlights how historical and political elements sculpt personal identities. Jahan's identity evolves not solely from self-invention but also through his engagement with historical memory, as he maneuvers the intricate power plays of the Ottoman court and contributes to the empire's architectural legacy.

Moreover, the tension between individual will and historical inevitability is pivotal in understanding Jahan's development. His ascent within the ranks can be seen as a metaphor for the formation of identity, occasionally hemmed in by the overarching historical currents that envelop him. His bond with Sinan becomes the axis around which he cultivates his self-perception as an individual within a historical framework. Through Sinan, Jahan learns to view architecture as a means to mediate his identity and tap into a broader historical discourse.

Architecture as Memory: Constructing Identity Through Physical Form

In "The Architect's Apprentice," construction transcends mere occupation or artistry; it becomes a powerful symbol for memory and identity. Sinan's architectural creations, intended to endure and symbolize the Ottoman Empire's might, act as allegories for individual identity and heritage. Jahan's journey through architecture reflects his endeavor to forge his identity amidst imperial politics and history.

Sinan's edifices, especially his mosques and bridges, stand as tributes to the empire's splendor. These structures are icons of shared memory—lasting monuments that surpass their creators. This permanence is juxtaposed with the transitory nature of personal identity, shaped by memory and historical events.

For Jahan, collaborating with Sinan offers a way to navigate this dichotomy: his history may seem insignificant against such monumental works, yet his contributions allow him to leave an indelible mark on the empire's legacy.

The narrative delves into construction as a mnemonic act. As Sinan's buildings are crafted for permanence and continuity, Jahan's character is molded by his engagement with the empire's architectural saga. Working alongside Sinan, Jahan grasps the dual nature of memory—both intimate and collective—and how the structures he aids in erecting can outlive his ephemeral existence and weave into the fabric of a larger historical tapestry. Through this realization, Jahan reconstructs his identity, acknowledging his role in a history much greater than his own.

Memory and Legacy: Connecting the Past to the Present

In "The Architect's Apprentice," memory plays a pivotal role in understanding both personal and collective identities. Jahan's memories intertwine with the empire's collective recollections. The narrative challenges the notion of linear historical progression, illustrating how the past shapes the present through memory and inheritance. Sinan's edifices are crafted not merely to exalt the Sultan but also to act as emblems of imperial memory, safeguarding the empire's grandeur through time.

Jahan's engagement with Sinan's architectural legacy prompts him to reflect on his place within the grand tapestry of history. Sinan's creations act as conduits between yesteryears and today, enabling Jahan to integrate his personal history with the broader historical currents. His apprenticeship becomes a means for Jahan to anchor his identity in the empire's narrative, suggesting that identity is fluid, continuously molded, and remolded by memory and historical events.

Thus, in "The Architect's Apprentice," memory is not only a vehicle for personal development but also a bridge linking individuals to the empire's collective saga. The book posits that history transcends a mere sequence of happenings; it is a perpetual cycle of remembrance where individuals and societies revisit and reframe their yesterdays.

Conclusion

Elif Shafak's "The Architect's Apprentice" masterfully blends personal experiences with historical events, illustrating the complex interplay between individual identity and the broader historical forces at play. The narrative delves into the ways memory and history influence personal identity, as seen through Jahan's journey, emphasizing architecture's role as a conduit for both individual expression and collective memory. Through his interactions with Sinan's architectural wonders, Jahan transcends his personal history and connects with a wider historical story, showcasing the interconnection of memory and identity in the formation of self and empire.

The book offers a deep contemplation on the essence of historical legacy, positing that identity is perpetually shaped by the interplay of personal recollections, historical dynamics, and the cultural frameworks that delineate one's being. Shafak's intricate story encourages readers to contemplate the intricacies of identity formation within the historical and political context of the Ottoman Empire, as well as in any society where history and memory are pivotal in crafting individuality.

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