

# A Socio-Linguistic Study of Elif Shafak's Style in *Black Milk*

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## Abstract

This paper offers a socio-linguistic study of Elif Shafak's *Black Milk: On Motherhood and Writing* (2010), examining how the memoir employs language to represent identity, negotiate cultural hybridity, and critique gendered norms. Central to the analysis is Shafak's creation of the "finger women," polyphonic voices that embody distinct socio-linguistic identities and mirror conflicting speech communities of tradition versus modernity and East versus West. The study also explores her use of code-switching between Turkish, Ottoman, and English registers as both a marker of bicultural belonging and a tool of resistance against cultural and linguistic hierarchies. Finally, the paper investigates Shafak's deployment of metaphors—particularly "black milk"—to describe postpartum depression and to challenge patriarchal stereotypes of motherhood. Through these strategies, Shafak demonstrates the capacity of literature to transform personal struggle into cultural commentary, affirming hybridity, plurality, and resistance as defining features of female subjectivity in a globalized context.

**Keywords:** Elif Shafak, *Black Milk*, socio-linguistics, code-switching, hybridity, gendered discourse, polyphony, motherhood

## 1. Introduction

Elif Shafak is one of the most influential contemporary Turkish-British authors, widely celebrated for her engagement with questions of identity, gender, politics, and cultural hybridity in both her fictional and non-fictional works. Among her numerous publications, *Black Milk: On Motherhood and Writing* (2010) occupies a unique place as a semi-autobiographical memoir. Written in the aftermath of her postpartum depression, the text interweaves personal experiences with intellectual reflections on literature, feminism, and cultural belonging. For Shafak, motherhood became a turning point, not only in her personal life but also in her writing career, compelling her to re-negotiate her identity as a woman and an author. The book's stylistic complexity and narrative richness make it a fertile text for socio-linguistic inquiry, especially regarding how language functions as a means of constructing identity and negotiating social norms.

Socio-linguistics, as a discipline, investigates the relationship between language and society, with a focus on how linguistic choices reflect social identities, power relations, and cultural practices (Wardhaugh & Fuller, 2021). Within this framework, literary texts are not only aesthetic objects but also social documents that reveal how writers engage with their cultural environments through language. In *Black Milk*, Shafak's linguistic and stylistic strategies are deeply intertwined with her bicultural identity as a Turkish woman who also writes in English and participates in global literary discourse. Her blending of registers, code-switching between cultural discourses, and use of metaphorical language demonstrate how socio-linguistic dynamics shape both the form and content of her work.

One of the central stylistic devices in *Black Milk* is Shafak's creation of the "finger women," imagined voices that represent fragmented aspects of her identity. These narrative voices—ranging from Miss Highbrowed Cynic to Little Miss Practical—function as dialogic agents that embody conflicting worldviews. The multiplicity of voices aligns with Bakhtin's (1981) theory of dialogism, which posits that texts are inherently polyphonic, containing multiple perspectives that interact with one another. From a socio-linguistic standpoint, these voices may be interpreted as markers of distinct speech communities, each reflecting specific cultural ideologies. By dramatizing internal conflict through language, Shafak turns her memoir into a site where the personal and the social intersect.

Another important dimension of Shafak's style is her reliance on code-switching and cultural hybridity. Scholars of bilingualism have emphasized that switching between languages or cultural registers is not merely a linguistic act but also an expression of identity (Grosjean, 2010; Myers-Scotton, 1993). In *Black Milk*, Shafak shifts between discourses of Western feminism and Eastern tradition, weaving references to Virginia Woolf, Simone de Beauvoir, and other Western thinkers alongside Turkish cultural idioms and Ottoman historical allusions. This hybridity mirrors her lived experience as a transnational author situated between Turkey and the West. Through this

linguistic negotiation, she performs what Bhabha (1994) terms “cultural hybridity,” creating a literary space where different traditions coexist and contest one another.

Equally significant is Shafak’s treatment of gendered discourse, particularly her exploration of how language shapes the social understanding of motherhood and female identity. Feminist linguists such as Tannen (1994) and Cameron (1996) argue that women often employ distinctive linguistic strategies—such as metaphor, irony, and indirection—to resist patriarchal discourse and to voice experiences that are marginalized within mainstream culture. Shafak’s metaphor of “black milk” to describe postpartum depression is a striking example of how language reconfigures a stigmatized experience into a shared cultural symbol. The metaphor destabilizes conventional associations of milk with nourishment and purity, replacing them with connotations of ambivalence, darkness, and struggle. By naming this experience, Shafak challenges societal silence around women’s mental health and motherhood, thereby employing language as a form of social critique.

Moreover, Shafak’s memoir can be read within the broader socio-political context of contemporary Turkey, where debates around gender roles, secularism, and modernity continue to shape public discourse. Scholars note that Turkish literature often reflects tensions between traditional values and Western modernity, particularly in relation to women’s roles (Gökner, 2013). In this sense, *Black Milk* participates in an ongoing cultural dialogue, situating personal struggles within wider questions of national identity and transnational belonging. Her use of humor, irony, and intertextuality functions as socio-linguistic strategies that not only enrich the narrative but also invite readers to reconsider cultural stereotypes about motherhood and female authorship.

This socio-linguistic reading of *Black Milk* is significant for several reasons. First, it demonstrates how Shafak employs language to perform and negotiate her multiple identities as a woman, a mother, and a transnational author. Second, it highlights the role of literary style as a socio-linguistic phenomenon that reflects and challenges cultural ideologies. Finally, it situates Shafak within broader scholarly debates on gender, identity, and language in transnational literature. By examining Shafak’s style through socio-linguistic frameworks, this study seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of how language not only narrates personal experiences but also shapes social and cultural realities.

In conclusion, the introduction of this study establishes the relevance of socio-linguistic analysis to Elif Shafak’s *Black Milk*. By analyzing narrative voices, code-switching, and gendered discourse, the research will show how Shafak’s stylistic strategies reflect her negotiation of cultural hybridity and feminist critique. This approach underscores the importance of viewing literature not merely as art but as a social act that both reflects and transforms cultural contexts.

## **2. Exploration of the Multiple “Inner Voices” in *Black Milk* (the “Finger Women”) as Distinct Socio-Linguistic Identities**

Elif Shafak’s *Black Milk: On Motherhood and Writing* (2010) is a hybrid memoir that navigates the author’s struggles with postpartum depression, motherhood, and writing. One of its most striking narrative strategies is the creation of the “finger women,” a collection of inner voices that personify different aspects of Shafak’s identity. These figures are not merely psychological fragments but can be examined as distinct socio-linguistic identities. Each finger woman articulates a specific worldview, shaped by language, discourse style, and cultural ideology. Through them, Shafak dramatizes the conflicts between tradition and modernity, East and West, feminism and patriarchy, motherhood and authorship. The multiplicity of these voices illustrates how identity is socially and linguistically constructed, making *Black Milk* a compelling case for socio-linguistic literary analysis.

From a theoretical perspective, the finger women align closely with Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of dialogism and polyphony. According to Bakhtin (1981), texts—particularly novels—are not monologic expressions of a single voice but dialogic arenas where multiple voices coexist and contest meaning. Each voice carries its own ideological weight, representing a social language or discourse that reflects specific communities and cultural contexts. In *Black Milk*, Shafak embodies this polyphonic quality by giving each finger woman a name, a personality, and a linguistic identity. They converse, argue, and interrupt each other, creating a textual space that mirrors the dialogic interplay of discourses in society. This technique transforms her internal struggles into a socio-linguistic drama where language itself becomes the medium through which identity is fragmented and negotiated.

The finger women differ significantly in the registers they employ and the ideologies they represent. For example, Miss Highbrowed Cynic speaks in an authoritative, intellectual style, skeptical of tradition and committed to rationalism. Her discourse reflects the language of academia and cosmopolitan modernity, resonating with Shafak’s identity as an educated, globally engaged writer. In contrast, Little Miss Practical communicates in pragmatic, down-to-earth language, embodying social expectations of women as caretakers and homemakers. Her voice draws upon colloquial registers, practical concerns, and the socio-linguistic norms associated with domestic life. Between these two extremes are figures like Dame Dervish, who speaks in spiritual tones, drawing on Sufi

metaphors and Turkish cultural references. Dame Dervish's language invokes an alternative discourse community rooted in mysticism and tradition, representing another facet of Shafak's cultural inheritance. Each of these voices not only expresses a personal inclination but also symbolizes a linguistic identity tied to larger social ideologies.

This multiplicity of socio-linguistic identities reveals the extent to which Shafak's personal struggles are embedded in cultural conflict. The finger women become agents of code-switching, shifting between discourses associated with different social spheres. As Grosjean (2010) notes, code-switching is not merely a linguistic phenomenon but an identity practice, allowing individuals to navigate between cultural worlds. In *Black Milk*, the oscillation between the voices dramatizes this navigation. When Miss Highbrowed Cynic dominates, Shafak leans toward a discourse of Western feminism and rational critique. When Little Miss Practical speaks, she is drawn into the Turkish cultural narrative of domestic responsibility. The shifts between these registers highlight the socio-linguistic hybridity of Shafak's identity as a transnational woman negotiating multiple communities.

Moreover, the finger women illustrate how gendered discourse shapes linguistic performance. Feminist linguists such as Tannen (1994) and Cameron (1996) argue that women's voices are often fragmented and constrained by patriarchal expectations, forcing them to adopt multiple, sometimes conflicting discourses. In *Black Milk*, this fragmentation becomes literalized. The finger women embody the contradictions faced by women who are expected to balance intellectual ambition with domestic duties, spirituality with secular modernity, and individuality with communal belonging. The very act of giving these conflicts linguistic form underscores the socio-linguistic nature of identity construction: Shafak is not merely thinking these tensions but speaking them through voices that carry the weight of cultural discourses.

At the same time, the interplay of these voices destabilizes the idea of a single, unified self. Identity here emerges as dialogical, produced through the negotiation of multiple socio-linguistic positions rather than as a fixed essence. Bakhtin (1981) describes this as heteroglossia—the coexistence of multiple speech types within a single text. Shafak's memoir thus becomes a heteroglossic space, where the author stages her internal conflicts through the language of different discourses. This approach not only reflects her personal struggle with postpartum depression and motherhood but also critiques the broader cultural narratives that attempt to confine women to singular roles. By refusing to silence any of the finger women, Shafak acknowledges the legitimacy of multiple socio-linguistic identities, even when they contradict one another.

Another important dimension is the performative function of these voices. Butler (1990) has argued that identity is not a stable attribute but a performance enacted through repeated linguistic acts. The finger women exemplify this performativity, as they enact particular subject positions through their speech. Miss Ambitious Chekhovian, for instance, embodies the identity of the aspiring writer, constantly referencing literary traditions and artistic ambition. Her socio-linguistic repertoire is marked by intertextual references, high literary style, and an insistence on the authority of authorship. In contrast, Milady Ambitious Chekhovian's concerns are resisted by Little Miss Practical, whose discourse reflects social norms that devalue women's artistic pursuits. These performances are not neutral but socially situated, revealing how Shafak negotiates competing expectations of womanhood, authorship, and motherhood.

The finger women also serve as a means of resisting cultural silencing. In societies where women's voices have historically been marginalized, Shafak creates a textual space where multiple female voices can coexist and speak freely. As Gökner (2013) observes, Turkish literature often reflects tensions between secular modernity and traditional gender roles. In this context, Shafak's multiplication of female voices becomes an act of resistance, highlighting the diversity and complexity of women's identities. Socio-linguistically, the finger women disrupt the dominance of a single, patriarchal discourse by staging a polyphony of perspectives. They reveal that identity is not monolithic but plural, contested, and dynamic.

In sum, the finger women in *Black Milk* exemplify how socio-linguistic identities operate within literature. Each voice is tied to a specific discourse community, employing a unique linguistic style and ideological perspective. Together, they dramatize the internal and external conflicts of a transnational woman navigating multiple cultural spheres. Through them, Shafak illustrates that identity is dialogical, hybrid, and performative, shaped by the interplay of language, culture, and gender. By turning her inner struggles into a polyphonic conversation, she demonstrates how literature can embody the socio-linguistic realities of fragmented, multicultural subjectivity.

### **3. How These Voices Mirror Speech Communities With Conflicting Ideologies (Traditional vs. Modern, Eastern vs. Western)**

Elif Shafak's *Black Milk: On Motherhood and Writing* (2010) is not only a personal memoir but also a cultural text that dramatizes ideological conflicts through the presence of multiple inner voices known as the "finger women." These figures represent fragmented parts of Shafak's identity and operate as socio-linguistic embodiments of different speech communities. Each voice embodies a specific cultural discourse, reflecting the tensions between tradition and modernity, as well as between Eastern and Western worldviews. By staging these conflicts internally,

Shafak transforms her personal crisis into a larger socio-linguistic exploration of identity, belonging, and cultural hybridity. The finger women thus function as symbolic mediators of competing speech communities whose ideologies continually intersect, overlap, and clash.

Sociolinguistics emphasizes that language is not neutral but a social practice embedded in cultural ideologies (Wardhaugh & Fuller, 2021). Every speech community possesses norms, registers, and discourse strategies that reflect its worldview. In *Black Milk*, Shafak's finger women represent precisely such communities, embodying ideological positions that are historically and socially situated. For instance, Little Miss Practical echoes the discourse of traditional domesticity, privileging pragmatism, family duties, and the expectations placed on women within Turkish society. Her speech resonates with the conservative view of womanhood as defined by sacrifice and motherhood, and she often invokes language grounded in everyday routines and material concerns. In contrast, Miss Highbrowed Cynic represents the discourse of modern intellectual skepticism, speaking in a critical, rationalist register associated with Western academia and global feminist movements. Between them, Dame Dervish employs the language of spirituality and mysticism, reflecting Turkey's Sufi traditions and the Eastern philosophical heritage. These voices thus reveal Shafak's position at the crossroads of speech communities that are simultaneously local and global, traditional and modern.

The tension between traditional and modern ideologies has long shaped Turkish cultural identity. As Göknaar (2013) explains, modern Turkish literature often negotiates between secular Western modernity and Islamic-Ottoman traditions, producing a hybrid cultural discourse. Shafak inherits this literary and social dynamic, and the finger women dramatize it on a personal scale. When Miss Highbrowed Cynic insists on the supremacy of rationalism and intellectual pursuit, she mirrors Turkey's Kemalist legacy of modernization, with its emphasis on secular education and Westernization. When Little Miss Practical resists, reminding Shafak of her duties as a wife and mother, she channels the traditional speech community that upholds patriarchal and familial values. These voices do not exist in isolation; rather, they speak across one another, reflecting Bakhtin's (1981) notion of heteroglossia, where multiple ideological languages coexist in tension. Shafak's text thus becomes a microcosm of Turkish society itself, caught between conflicting ideologies that compete for dominance.

The East–West divide in *Black Milk* is also deeply linguistic. Shafak frequently code-switches between discourses rooted in Western feminist thought and those embedded in Eastern cultural traditions. Scholars such as Grosjean (2010) have argued that bilinguals and bicultural individuals often use language to navigate multiple identities, shifting codes depending on context. In the memoir, this code-switching is dramatized through the finger women: some voices cite Western intellectuals like Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir, while others invoke Turkish proverbs, Sufi metaphors, or Islamic cultural norms. Dame Dervish, for example, speaks in spiritual terms that echo the mysticism of Rumi and Sufi philosophy, grounding her identity in an Eastern discourse that values intuition and transcendence. Meanwhile, Miss Ambitious Chekhovian speaks in the idiom of literature, citing Western artistic ideals that emphasize autonomy and authorship. These discourses collide within Shafak's text, highlighting the socio-linguistic hybridity of a transnational identity that cannot be contained within a single speech community.

At the heart of these conflicts is the question of womanhood. Feminist linguistics has shown how gender is performed and contested through language (Butler, 1990; Cameron, 1996). In *Black Milk*, the finger women enact competing gender ideologies: the traditional voice insists that a woman's fulfillment lies in motherhood and domestic stability, while the modern feminist voice demands intellectual independence and creative authorship. This linguistic struggle dramatizes the societal pressures placed on women in both Eastern and Western contexts. In Turkey, the expectation that women prioritize family remains deeply entrenched, while in Western feminist discourse, autonomy and self-expression are celebrated as hallmarks of emancipation. Shafak's finger women thus mirror these conflicting speech communities, forcing the author to negotiate between contradictory definitions of femininity and selfhood. Her memoir becomes a socio-linguistic performance of these negotiations, illustrating how identity is dialogically constructed across ideological boundaries.

The performative interplay of the finger women underscores the impossibility of reconciling these speech communities into a single coherent voice. Bakhtin's theory of dialogism emphasizes that meaning emerges not from monologic assertion but from the interaction of voices in dialogue (Bakhtin, 1981). In *Black Milk*, the voices do not resolve into consensus but remain in perpetual tension. This mirrors Shafak's lived experience as a bicultural writer whose identity is formed at the intersection of East and West. By allowing the voices to coexist rather than silencing them, Shafak resists the pressure to assimilate into one ideological discourse. Instead, she validates the plurality of her socio-linguistic identities, acknowledging that modern subjectivity—especially for transnational women—must be understood as fragmented, dialogic, and hybrid.

Furthermore, the finger women can be read as symbolic of larger cultural conflicts within Turkey and beyond. Shafak's text resonates with what Bhabha (1994) terms the "third space of enunciation," where hybrid identities emerge from the negotiation of cultural differences. The finger women inhabit this third space, simultaneously

drawing on traditional and modern, Eastern and Western discourses. Their conflicts dramatize the lived reality of hybrid subjects who must constantly navigate competing cultural expectations. From a socio-linguistic perspective, the finger women illustrate how speech communities are not bounded or static but fluid and overlapping, producing hybrid forms of discourse that reflect the complexities of globalization and transnationalism.

In sum, the finger women in *Black Milk* operate as mirrors of speech communities with conflicting ideologies. Their voices dramatize the tensions between tradition and modernity, East and West, feminism and patriarchy. Through them, Shafak reveals how identity is socially and linguistically constructed, shaped by the competing discourses that circulate within and across cultures. By staging these conflicts internally, she transforms her personal crisis into a broader cultural dialogue, using language as both a medium of conflict and a tool of negotiation. The finger women thus highlight the power of literature to represent socio-linguistic realities, demonstrating that personal identity is inseparable from the ideological voices that constitute the social world.

#### **4. Use of Polyphony (Bakhtinian Dialogism) to Represent Shafak's Fragmented Identity as a Woman, Mother, and Writer**

Elif Shafak's *Black Milk: On Motherhood and Writing* (2010) is an autobiographical memoir that narrates her experiences with postpartum depression, creativity, and the conflict between motherhood and authorship. What distinguishes the text from other maternal memoirs is its deliberate use of multiple internal voices—the “finger women”—to stage her identity struggles. These voices do not blend into a unified self but instead remain distinct, dialogically interacting with one another throughout the narrative. This technique aligns closely with Mikhail Bakhtin's (1981) theory of polyphony and dialogism, in which the novel is conceived as a chorus of voices rather than a single, monologic perspective. In Shafak's text, polyphony functions as a socio-linguistic strategy to represent her fragmented identity as a woman, mother, and writer living at the intersection of conflicting cultural and ideological forces.

Bakhtin's notion of dialogism rests on the idea that meaning emerges not from isolated utterances but from the interaction between different voices, each embedded in a specific social and ideological context. In the polyphonic novel, voices are autonomous, retaining their individuality rather than being subsumed into the narrator's authority (Bakhtin, 1984). Shafak employs precisely this principle by giving each finger woman a unique linguistic register and worldview. Miss Highbrowed Cynic speaks in rational, intellectual tones, reflecting the discourse of academia and Western modernity. Little Miss Practical embodies the voice of domestic responsibility, speaking in pragmatic, everyday language that prioritizes family life. Dame Dervish channels spiritual traditions, employing metaphors and a contemplative register reminiscent of Sufi mysticism. Together, these voices do not collapse into consensus but continue to challenge, contradict, and negotiate with one another. The result is a textual space that mirrors Shafak's lived reality: fragmented, conflicted, and dialogically constructed.

The fragmentation of identity expressed through polyphony is particularly significant when examined in relation to Shafak's gendered experiences. Feminist theorists have long emphasized that women's subjectivity is often divided by conflicting societal expectations (Butler, 1990; Tannen, 1994). Women are expected to fulfill domestic roles while simultaneously striving for personal achievement, a contradiction that produces fractured identities. In *Black Milk*, Shafak dramatizes this fracture by allowing her finger women to speak as independent voices rather than suppressing them into a unified “I.” Polyphony thus becomes a feminist strategy, making visible the multiple discourses that women must inhabit and the impossibility of reconciling them into a coherent, singular self. Instead of hiding the fragmentation, Shafak foregrounds it, illustrating the socio-linguistic pressures placed on women by patriarchal and cultural ideologies.

The theme of authorship in *Black Milk* is likewise mediated through polyphony. Miss Ambitious Chekhovian, one of the finger women, embodies Shafak's artistic ambition, speaking in a voice filled with literary allusions and references to Western authorship. Yet this voice is continually contested by others, especially Little Miss Practical, who insists on the sacrifices required for domestic life. The dialogue between these voices illustrates the clash between the discourse of creativity and the discourse of duty. From a Bakhtinian perspective, the writer's identity is not the resolution of these competing voices but the ongoing negotiation among them. Shafak does not present herself as an author who has harmoniously integrated motherhood and writing; rather, she represents herself as someone whose identity is dialogically fractured, constantly shifting between irreconcilable demands. In doing so, she redefines authorship as a site of dialogism rather than unity.

Motherhood itself is presented in *Black Milk* as a polyphonic experience. Shafak uses the metaphor of “black milk” to describe her postpartum depression, a reversal of the traditional association of milk with nourishment and purity. This metaphor becomes a shared voice within the narrative, a linguistic construct that bridges the gap between the voices of despair and resilience. The finger women debate whether motherhood enhances or inhibits creativity, whether it fulfills or destroys the self. These conflicting perspectives embody the cultural discourses around motherhood: traditional societies often valorize maternal sacrifice, while feminist discourses critique the silencing of women's ambitions. In allowing both discourses to exist simultaneously through her inner voices, Shafak

performs what Bakhtin (1981) describes as heteroglossia—the coexistence of multiple speech types within a single narrative. Motherhood, for Shafak, is not a monolithic identity but a contested dialogue between opposing socio-linguistic positions.

The East–West cultural divide also finds expression through polyphony. Dame Dervish’s spiritual voice represents Shafak’s Eastern heritage, grounded in Turkish and Islamic traditions, while Miss Highbrowed Cynic articulates Western rationalist discourse. Their dialogue mirrors Shafak’s bicultural identity and the broader tensions of transnational writers negotiating between cultural poles. Bhabha’s (1994) theory of hybridity is particularly relevant here: Shafak inhabits a “third space” where Eastern and Western discourses meet, clash, and hybridize. The polyphonic structure of the memoir becomes a narrative enactment of this hybridity. Rather than privileging one discourse over the other, Shafak allows them to exist in perpetual tension, thereby representing her identity as hybrid and unresolved.

From a socio-linguistic perspective, polyphony in *Black Milk* highlights the relationship between language and power. Each finger woman embodies not just a personal inclination but also a discourse tied to social ideologies. Miss Highbrowed Cynic’s intellectual register carries the prestige of Western academia, while Little Miss Practical’s pragmatic language reflects the undervalued but socially powerful discourse of domestic labor. The constant conflict between these voices illustrates how identity is produced through the struggle between competing discourses of power. By refusing to silence any of the voices, Shafak democratizes the narrative space, giving equal weight to perspectives that are often marginalized in literary or cultural discourse. This aligns with Bakhtin’s (1984) idea that polyphony resists hierarchical domination, allowing multiple voices to coexist on equal terms.

Crucially, polyphony in *Black Milk* resists closure. At the end of the memoir, Shafak does not resolve the conflicts between her roles as a woman, mother, and writer. The finger women remain present, their voices lingering as reminders that identity is an ongoing negotiation rather than a finished product. This open-endedness is consistent with Bakhtin’s vision of dialogism as unfinalizable: meaning is always in flux, never reducible to a single authoritative conclusion. For Shafak, the recognition of fragmentation is itself liberating. By embracing polyphony, she acknowledges that her identity cannot be reduced to a single role or discourse but must remain dialogically constructed across multiple socio-linguistic positions.

In this sense, Shafak’s memoir offers a powerful rethinking of identity in both literary and socio-linguistic terms. As a woman, she foregrounds the conflicting discourses of gender; as a mother, she dramatizes the contested meanings of maternal identity; and as a writer, she embraces hybridity and multiplicity as intrinsic to authorship. Polyphony becomes the formal expression of this fragmentation, making visible the dialogic interplay of voices that constitute her subjectivity. Rather than presenting a seamless self, Shafak offers a fractured one, showing that fragmentation is not a weakness but a truthful representation of contemporary identity, particularly for transnational women negotiating diverse cultural and gendered expectations.

### 5. Code-Switching and Cultural Hybridity

Elif Shafak’s *Black Milk: On Motherhood and Writing* (2010) is a text in which questions of identity, culture, and belonging are inseparable from questions of language. Written originally in Turkish and later published in English, the memoir reflects the hybridity of its author, who has lived across different cultures and who embodies multiple linguistic repertoires. Among the most striking features of her style is code-switching, understood both literally as the movement between Turkish, Ottoman, and English linguistic references, and metaphorically as the oscillation between discourses of tradition and modernity, East and West, feminism and patriarchy. This linguistic hybridity is not simply decorative; it represents Shafak’s way of dramatizing the fragmented, transnational identity she inhabits. Code-switching in her work thus becomes both a marker of identity and a strategy of resistance, enabling her to challenge cultural hierarchies while negotiating the socio-linguistic tension between global modernity and local tradition.

Hybridity has been theorized by Homi Bhabha (1994) as the creation of a “third space,” a site where cultures meet and produce new meanings that resist binary oppositions. Shafak’s writing can be read as an enactment of this hybridity, since she situates herself neither exclusively in Turkish tradition nor exclusively in Western modernity but in the dialogical space between them. In *Black Milk*, her stylistic hybridity is visible in her references to Turkish idioms, Ottoman history, and Sufi mysticism, alongside her engagement with Western feminist thinkers such as Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir. This oscillation creates a textual environment where discourses interact without resolving into a singular perspective. In doing so, Shafak reflects her own bicultural identity as a Turkish-British writer who refuses to be confined by national or linguistic borders. As Bakhtin (1981) argues, texts that embrace heteroglossia—multiple, conflicting voices—embody the social reality of language as dialogic. Shafak’s memoir exemplifies this principle by embedding hybridity within its linguistic fabric.

At the lexical level, Shafak often inserts Turkish or Ottoman words that carry cultural meanings untranslatable into English. This strategy mirrors the practice of bilingual speakers who switch codes to preserve the authenticity of

cultural expression (Grosjean, 2010). For instance, terms that invoke familial intimacy, culinary practices, or local proverbs appear in their original form, anchoring her narrative in the socio-linguistic world of Turkey. These inclusions resist the homogenizing pull of English as the global literary language, asserting the legitimacy of Turkish cultural forms within a global readership. Myers-Scotton (1993) has demonstrated that code-switching often indexes identity, signaling a speaker's alignment with particular cultural or social communities. In *Black Milk*, Shafak uses code-switching to affirm her continuing attachment to Turkish identity even while writing for an international audience. At the same time, the presence of English-language references underscores her cosmopolitan position, situating her within a global literary tradition. The hybrid text thus mirrors her dual identity, performing bicultural belonging in linguistic form.

Beyond the lexical level, code-switching in *Black Milk* operates discursively, as Shafak shifts between the registers of different ideological traditions. One moment the narrative is grounded in the domestic concerns of *Little Miss Practical*, whose voice embodies the speech of traditional Turkish femininity. In another, *Miss Highbrowed Cynic* dominates the conversation with her intellectual, rationalist tone, echoing Western feminist discourse and the language of modern academia. *Dame Dervish* then interrupts with metaphors drawn from Sufi spirituality, articulating yet another cultural repertoire. These shifts in voice are not arbitrary but deliberate dramatizations of Shafak's fragmented subjectivity. Each register indexes a distinct speech community with its own cultural ideology, and together they illustrate how code-switching reflects the complexity of living across multiple worlds. Wardhaugh and Fuller (2021) note that individuals in multilingual contexts often use code-switching to negotiate identity and to align themselves with different groups depending on context. Shafak's discursive hybridity embodies precisely this negotiation, revealing her simultaneous belonging to, and conflict with, both Eastern and Western communities.

Equally significant is the function of code-switching as resistance. In contexts where English dominates as the lingua franca of global literature, inserting Turkish or Ottoman terms without translation challenges the hegemony of English by insisting on the value of local languages. Pennycook (2007) argues that such practices destabilize linguistic hierarchies and resist cultural homogenization. Shafak's refusal to assimilate all cultural elements into English asserts her agency as a writer who will not dilute the specificity of her heritage for the sake of accessibility. Similarly, her oscillation between discourses of feminism and tradition resists the imposition of singular ideological frameworks. Western feminist narratives often assume that emancipation requires rejection of domestic and maternal roles, while Eastern traditions valorize motherhood as the pinnacle of womanhood. By allowing both discourses to exist in dialogue, Shafak refuses to privilege one over the other. Instead, her code-switching creates a space where multiple definitions of womanhood coexist, challenging rigid binaries and affirming hybridity as a valid mode of identity.

This hybridity is particularly visible in Shafak's treatment of motherhood. In many Western feminist texts, motherhood is depicted as a constraint on female creativity, a barrier to authorship and autonomy. Conversely, in traditional Turkish discourse, motherhood is celebrated as the ultimate fulfillment of a woman's life. Shafak oscillates between these poles, her language shifting depending on which finger woman speaks. *Miss Ambitious Chekhovian* insists on the primacy of authorship, echoing the discourse of Western artistic independence. *Little Miss Practical*, however, voices the language of familial obligation, invoking Turkish cultural values of sacrifice and care. The metaphor of "black milk" encapsulates this tension: while milk traditionally symbolizes nourishment and purity, its association with "blackness" conveys the darkness of postpartum depression. This metaphor is itself a form of code-switching, blending local maternal imagery with global psychological discourse. It resists cultural expectations that idealize motherhood as unambiguously positive, while also refusing to embrace the Western tendency to portray it only as a burden. The hybrid metaphor exemplifies how Shafak uses language to articulate ambivalence, challenging simplistic cultural narratives.

Shafak's use of code-switching also dramatizes the tension between global modernity and local tradition. Göknaar (2013) observes that Turkish literature has historically been shaped by the interplay of Ottoman legacies and Kemalist modernizing reforms, producing a cultural field marked by hybridity and contestation. Shafak situates herself within this tradition but extends it into a transnational dimension. By alternating between Western and Eastern codes, she foregrounds the dissonance between universalist modernist ideals and culturally specific traditions. Her identity as a transnational author requires constant negotiation of these tensions, and her code-switching reflects this ongoing process. Rather than resolving the conflict, her text performs it, showing that identity in a globalized world is inevitably dialogical and unsettled. As Canagarajah (2013) argues, translingual practice is not about choosing one language over another but about creatively negotiating meaning across multiple linguistic repertoires. Shafak's memoir embodies this principle, using code-switching as a means of sustaining hybrid subjectivity.

The performative quality of code-switching in *Black Milk* further emphasizes its socio-linguistic significance. Judith Butler's (1990) theory of performativity suggests that identity is not fixed but constituted through repeated

acts, including linguistic acts. Each time Shafak shifts between Turkish and English references, or between traditional and feminist discourses, she performs a facet of her identity. These performances accumulate into a hybrid subjectivity that resists reduction to a single category. The very act of oscillating between codes becomes a declaration of belonging to multiple communities, while also exposing the contradictions inherent in such belonging. In this sense, code-switching is not just a representation of hybridity but a performative enactment of it, making visible the processes by which identity is constituted.

Moreover, the hybridity produced by code-switching contributes to Shafak's resistance against patriarchal silencing. By allowing multiple voices to speak in different registers, she ensures that no single discourse dominates. This polyphonic strategy aligns with Bakhtin's (1984) view of the polyphonic novel as one in which no voice is subordinated to an authoritative narrator. In *Black Milk*, Shafak democratizes her narrative space by giving equal legitimacy to discourses of rationalism, domesticity, mysticism, and creativity. The coexistence of these discourses resists cultural attempts to silence women who deviate from normative roles. By staging her own ambivalence through code-switching, Shafak transforms what might be seen as fragmentation into a powerful critique of cultural and linguistic hierarchies.

Ultimately, Shafak's use of code-switching and cultural hybridity underscores the inseparability of language and identity in transnational contexts. Her memoir reveals that linguistic hybridity is not a flaw but a resource, enabling her to articulate the complexity of her experiences as a woman, mother, and writer across cultures. Code-switching becomes a marker of her bicultural belonging, situating her within both Turkish and global literary traditions. It also becomes a tool of resistance, challenging the dominance of English, the authority of patriarchal narratives, and the rigidity of cultural binaries. In this way, *Black Milk* exemplifies the socio-linguistic realities of globalization, where identities are formed not within a single tradition but in the dialogical interplay of multiple linguistic and cultural codes. Shafak's narrative affirms that to live and write in the modern world is to inhabit hybridity, to embrace the tensions of code-switching as constitutive of identity rather than as signs of inconsistency.

## 6. Gendered Discourse and Social Commentary

Elif Shafak's *Black Milk: On Motherhood and Writing* (2010) is more than a memoir of postpartum depression and artistic struggle; it is a work that interrogates the ways in which language shapes the cultural understanding of gender and motherhood. At the heart of the text lies the metaphor of "black milk," a paradoxical image that encapsulates the tension between nourishment and darkness, creativity and despair. Through such metaphors, Shafak not only represents her own experiences of female subjectivity but also critiques the cultural frameworks that seek to confine women within narrow roles. Her memoir can thus be read as an extended exercise in gendered discourse, where the author employs linguistic strategies to resist patriarchal stereotypes and to create alternative spaces for female identity. By examining Shafak's use of metaphor, irony, polyphony, and narrative experimentation, one can see how *Black Milk* functions as a socio-linguistic commentary on the cultural politics of womanhood, authorship, and motherhood in both Eastern and Western contexts.

The metaphor of "black milk" is perhaps the most powerful linguistic device in the memoir. Traditionally, milk is associated with nourishment, purity, and maternal love. It signifies the biological bond between mother and child, the life-giving substance that sustains infants and symbolizes care. Shafak's inversion of this image transforms it into a sign of darkness and despair, capturing the debilitating effects of postpartum depression. By naming her condition "black milk," she articulates an experience that is often silenced in cultural discourse, particularly in societies where motherhood is idealized as a woman's ultimate fulfillment. The metaphor simultaneously communicates the ambivalence of maternal identity: motherhood is both life-giving and suffocating, joyful and painful. In socio-linguistic terms, this metaphor destabilizes conventional associations and demonstrates how language can reconfigure cultural meanings. As Lakoff and Johnson (1980) have argued, metaphors are not mere rhetorical ornaments but fundamental to human thought, shaping how we conceptualize experiences. Shafak's metaphor therefore constitutes not only a description of her depression but also a radical reimagining of motherhood through language.

The power of the metaphor lies in its hybridity. On one level, it draws from Turkish cultural imagery, where milk is strongly tied to notions of kinship, purity, and womanhood. On another, it resonates with global discourses on depression and mental health, which often use metaphors of darkness to describe psychological suffering. By combining these frames, Shafak produces a hybrid image that speaks across cultures, at once local and global. The metaphor thus exemplifies her broader linguistic strategy of cultural hybridity, where Eastern and Western codes converge. It also illustrates her ability to transform personal suffering into a linguistic resource that challenges social taboos. In cultures where postpartum depression remains stigmatized or unacknowledged, Shafak's metaphor legitimizes the experience, turning it into a shared symbol that can foster empathy and dialogue.

Beyond metaphors, Shafak engages in a sustained critique of patriarchal norms and stereotypes surrounding motherhood. In Turkish society, as in many others, motherhood is often regarded as the highest form of female identity, a role that supposedly provides women with ultimate fulfillment. Women who question this role or who

express ambivalence about it risk being labeled selfish, unnatural, or ungrateful. Shafak confronts this cultural narrative head-on by dramatizing her reluctance to embrace motherhood and by acknowledging the sense of loss and fear that accompanied the birth of her child. Her memoir gives voice to feelings that are often suppressed, thereby resisting the cultural script that idealizes motherhood as unambiguously joyful. In doing so, she joins a growing body of feminist writers who challenge the romanticization of maternal identity and who insist on acknowledging its complexities and contradictions (Rich, 1976; O'Reilly, 2004).

Shafak's critique is particularly evident in her use of polyphony. The finger women who populate her narrative embody different discourses surrounding womanhood and motherhood. Little Miss Practical voices the traditional view that a woman's duty lies in caring for her family, while Miss Ambitious Chekhovian insists on the primacy of artistic creation. The dialogues between these voices dramatize the conflicting cultural pressures placed on women: to be nurturing mothers and obedient wives on the one hand, and to be independent intellectuals on the other. The fact that these voices never reconcile reflects Shafak's refusal to endorse a singular model of womanhood. Instead, she affirms the multiplicity of female identities, suggesting that women can never be reduced to one role. This polyphonic strategy resists patriarchal discourse, which often seeks to impose a unified, normative model of femininity. By giving voice to competing perspectives, Shafak demonstrates that identity is dialogical and contested, not fixed and predetermined.

Irony is another important linguistic strategy through which Shafak challenges patriarchal stereotypes. At various points in the memoir, she ironically exaggerates the expectations placed on women, exposing their absurdity. For example, the idea that a woman must sacrifice all personal ambition in order to be a "good mother" is presented in a tone that simultaneously acknowledges its cultural force and ridicules its oppressive nature. This ironic distancing enables Shafak to critique cultural norms without directly rejecting them, thereby creating space for readers to question their validity. As Hutcheon (1994) has argued, irony functions as a double-voiced discourse, allowing writers to subvert dominant ideologies while remaining within their linguistic frameworks. In *Black Milk*, irony thus serves as a subtle but powerful tool of resistance, destabilizing the patriarchal discourses that seek to confine women.

Shafak's memoir also critiques the global discourses of feminism, highlighting their limitations in addressing the specificities of non-Western women's experiences. While she draws inspiration from figures like Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir, she is acutely aware that their models of emancipation cannot be uncritically applied to women in Turkey or the Middle East. For instance, Woolf's insistence on the necessity of "a room of one's own" for female creativity assumes a socio-economic context that is not universal. By juxtaposing Western feminist ideas with Turkish cultural norms, Shafak demonstrates that women's struggles must be understood in their specific cultural and historical contexts. This critique aligns with postcolonial feminist scholarship, which has argued that Western feminism often universalizes women's experiences and neglects the voices of women from the Global South (Mohanty, 1988). Shafak's hybrid language resists this universalization by insisting on the particularity of her own cultural position, while still engaging in dialogue with global feminist discourses.

Another dimension of Shafak's gendered discourse is her exploration of the relationship between motherhood and authorship. Historically, women writers have often been depicted as having to choose between creative work and family life, as though the two were mutually exclusive. Shafak dramatizes this dilemma through the conflicting voices of her finger women, some of whom insist that motherhood will destroy her artistic career, while others suggest that it might enrich her creativity. This tension reflects broader cultural anxieties about women who seek to combine professional ambition with maternal identity. By refusing to resolve the conflict, Shafak resists the binary logic that demands women choose one role over the other. Instead, she acknowledges the difficulty of balancing motherhood and writing, presenting it as an ongoing negotiation rather than a settled question. Her narrative thus challenges cultural stereotypes that cast women as either selfless mothers or selfish professionals, offering instead a model of hybrid identity that embraces contradiction.

The socio-linguistic significance of *Black Milk* lies in its capacity to transform private experience into public commentary. By articulating her postpartum depression and ambivalence about motherhood through metaphor, irony, and polyphony, Shafak destabilizes cultural narratives that silence or stigmatize such experiences. Her language creates a discursive space where women's diverse experiences can be voiced and validated. In this sense, the memoir functions as both literature and social critique, revealing how language can be mobilized to challenge patriarchal ideologies and to expand the possibilities of female identity. It demonstrates the power of literature as a socio-linguistic act, capable of reshaping cultural meanings and resisting dominant discourses.

In conclusion, *Black Milk* exemplifies how metaphor, narrative voice, and linguistic hybridity can be deployed to critique patriarchal norms and to represent female subjectivity in all its complexity. The metaphor of "black milk" transforms personal suffering into a cultural symbol that redefines motherhood, while the polyphonic dialogues among the finger women dramatize the conflicting discourses that shape women's identities. Through irony and hybridity, Shafak resists cultural stereotypes and challenges both local traditions and global feminist narratives.

Her memoir reveals that gendered discourse is not fixed but contested, and that women's experiences can only be understood through the multiplicity of voices and perspectives that shape them. By turning her own struggles into a socio-linguistic commentary, Shafak affirms the importance of language as a tool of resistance and a means of creating new possibilities for female identity.

## 7. Conclusion

Elif Shafak's *Black Milk: On Motherhood and Writing* (2010) demonstrates how language can serve as a powerful medium for negotiating identity, resisting cultural constraints, and reimagining womanhood in a transnational context. Through the device of the "finger women," Shafak dramatizes her fragmented subjectivity, giving voice to the multiple socio-linguistic identities that contest within her. These polyphonic voices mirror competing speech communities—traditional and modern, Eastern and Western—showing how identity is not singular but dialogically constructed. In doing so, Shafak aligns her narrative with Bakhtin's (1981) theory of heteroglossia, where meaning emerges from the interplay of diverse voices rather than from a single authoritative perspective.

Her practice of code-switching further illustrates the hybridity of her identity. By shifting between Turkish idioms, Ottoman references, and Western feminist discourses, Shafak not only marks her bicultural belonging but also resists the homogenizing dominance of English and global modernity. Code-switching in *Black Milk* is both a marker of transnational identity and a strategy of resistance, creating a space where global and local traditions coexist in tension (Grosjean, 2010; Bhabha, 1994).

Equally central to her memoir is the critique of gendered discourse. Through metaphors such as "black milk," Shafak redefines motherhood by acknowledging its ambivalence and by giving linguistic form to experiences of postpartum depression that are often silenced. Her ironic, polyphonic, and hybrid style challenges patriarchal stereotypes and expands the possibilities for female subjectivity, situating her within both feminist and postcolonial literary traditions (Rich, 1976; Mohanty, 1988).

In sum, *Black Milk* reveals the potential of socio-linguistic analysis to illuminate literature's role as social commentary. Shafak's hybrid style demonstrates that identity in a globalized world is necessarily fragmented, dialogical, and plural. By mobilizing language as a site of negotiation and resistance, she transforms personal struggle into a broader cultural critique, offering readers a powerful meditation on womanhood, authorship, and belonging.

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