



# An Analysis of Trauma in Elif Shafak's / *The Gaze*

**Lecturer Shene Mohammed Ahmed**

University of Sulimanyah – College of Humanities, Dept. of Public Relations,  
Sulimanyah / Iraq  
Shene.ahmed@univsul.edu.iq

## تحليل الصدمة في رواية "النظرة" لإليف شفق

المدرس شيني محمد احمد

جامعة السليمانية- كلية العلوم الانسانية، قسم العلاقات العامة، السليمانية \ العراق



## Abstract

Trauma leaves profound and indelible effects that cannot be easily erased. It is like a knife that strikes deeply and leaves permanent scars across a lifetime. In many cases, trauma may lead to devastation, including the disintegration of identity or even death. The wounds it inflicts have the potential to construct a new, often fractured identity for the victim, turning life entirely upside down. Therefore, the current study entitled "*An analysis of Trauma in Elif Shafak's Gaze*" examines Elif Shafak's *The Gaze* (2006), using Cathy Caruth's theory of trauma. The selected main character is an obese girl, in which she suffers from a childhood sexual abuse, compulsive eating, and eventual suicide. Trauma in Caruth's theory lies the notion of "belatedness, the idea that trauma operates through latency, resurfacing through repetition". the study argues that the obese girl's fragmented memories, repetitive dreams, and compulsive eating are examples for the delayed return of trauma that Caruth identifies as central to Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). The paper shows, how Shafak portrays trauma not only as a personal wound that the person suffers from, but also as the public matter in which the society create an identity for the victims through their judgmental lens towards an obese. The methodology is qualitative; its primary sources are the excerpts from the novel and the character's statements are analyzed.

**Keywords:** Cathy Caruth, Elif Shafak, PTSD, The Gaze, Trauma



## المستخلص

تخلف الصدمة أثرًا عميقًا لا يُمحي بسهولة؛ فهي أشبه بسكّين يطعن بقوة تاركًا ندوبًا دائمة تلازم الإنسان طوال حياته. وفي كثير من الأحيان، قد تؤدي الصدمة إلى الخراب، بما في ذلك تفكك الهوية أو حتى الموت. إن الجروح التي تُخلفها تمتلك القدرة على تشكيل هوية جديدة للضحية، غالبًا ما تكون هوية مشروخة، تقلب حياة الفرد رأسًا على عقب. لذلك تتناول هذه الدراسة، بعنوان "تحليل الصدمة في رواية نظرة لإليف شفق"، مستندةً إلى نظرية الصدمة لكاثي كاروث. الشخصية الرئيسية المختارة هي فتاة بدينة تعاني من اعتداء في طفولتها، مما بسبب في إصابتها بفرط تناول القهري للطعام، وانتحار في نهاية المطاف.

تستند الصدمة في نظرية كاروث إلى مفهوم "المتأخرية"، أي فكرة أن الصدمة تعود لاحقًا عبر التكرار. وتجادل الدراسة بأن ذكريات الفتاة البدينة المتجزئة، وأحلامها المتكررة، وسلوك الأكل القهري لديها هي أمثلة على عودة الصدمة المتأخرة التي تحددها كاروث بوصفها مركزية في اضطراب ما بعد الصدمة. ويظهر البحث كيف أن شفق تصوّر الصدمة ليس فقط كجرح شخصي يعاني منه الفرد، بل أيضًا كقضية اجتماعية، حيث يُسهم المجتمع في تشكيل هوية الضحايا من خلال نظرتهم الحكمية تجاه البدناء. المنهجية المتبعة نوعية، وتعتمد مصادرها الأساسية على مقاطع من الرواية مع تحليل أقوال الشخصيات.

الكلمات المفتاحية: كاثي كاروث، إليف شفق، اضطراب ما بعد الصدمة، النظرة،

الصدمة



## Introduction

Literature remains the sole medium capable of conveying human emotions with sincerity and spontaneity, as it enables the writer to record the shocks, joys, and sorrows that cannot be expressed through any other means. Through literary works, one can experience the suffering and traumas endured in childhood events that have shaped the individual's personality in adulthood and even generated a new way of life influenced by the past. Trauma, is defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary*, is "a mental condition caused by severe shock, stress or fear, especially when the harmful effects last for a long time.". According to *The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)*, this definition is further broadened "results from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being" (2012, p. 2). While trauma theory has been extensively applied to Western canonical texts, its engagement with contemporary Turkish literature remains underexplored. In particular, Elif Shafak's *The Gaze* a novel that offers a nuanced portrayal of psychological trauma has not been sufficiently examined through the lens of Caruth's framework. This gap is significant because *The Gaze* not only represents trauma thematically but also enacts its epistemological instability through narrative structure and voice.

This study argues that *The Gaze* offers a compelling fictional representation of trauma's belatedness, fragmentation, and resistance to full articulation, as theorized by Cathy Caruth. The unnamed obese female narrator embodies the enduring disruptions caused by childhood sexual



abuse, with her compulsive eating, self-loathing, and eventual suicide revealing how unresolved trauma reorganizes identity and daily existence. The study addresses two central questions: firstly, how does *The Gaze* depict the psychological aftereffects of childhood trauma in ways that reflect or challenge Caruth's theory. Secondly, how can the narrator's compulsive behaviors and death be interpreted as manifestations of unassimilated trauma. The study is an attempt to investigate how *The Gaze* dramatizes the persistence of traumatic memory and its disruptive impact on identity, using Caruth's theoretical framework to analyze both its thematic content and narrative form. The approach is a qualitative textual analysis grounded in trauma theory, with close readings of key passages that reveal dissociation, sensory triggers, and narrative fragmentation. The paper begins with a theoretical overview of trauma studies, focusing on the development of first-wave trauma criticism and Caruth's contributions. It then presents a detailed analysis of *The Gaze*, examining the representation of the narrator's abuse, psychological symptoms, and fragmented selfhood.

### **Literature review**

Elif Shafak an eminent name in the realm of women's literature defies conventional boundaries with her ironic, inspirational, spontaneous, humanistic, and feminist voice. She stands as a literary icon to be emulated. Her intellectual depth, combined with her distinctive narrative techniques, consistently exceeds the expectations of readers across all age groups. Undoubtedly, she enables readers to feel every moment, every whisper, and every detail with remarkable precision. *The Gaze* is "a fairy-tale-like novel, was first published in 2000." (Pirinçi ,2011, p.44).



In *The Gaze*, the protagonist is unnamed referred to only as the fat girl. Through her, one experiences profound emotional and psychological struggles her weakness, her tolerance, and the pain of being subjected to mocking stares because of her weight. Her life came to a standstill after a traumatic incident; since that day, she remains trapped in that moment, in that childhood, on that street, with the taste of cherries, the sound of her grandmother's slap, and the sting of abandonment by her parents. She dreams of a flying balloon she dares not take her eyes off for fear it will vanish. This once-beautiful, delicate, and dreamy girl had her aspirations shattered into pieces scattered into the air, gone with the balloon, lost to a place unknown, unseen by anyone. The child died there, and life paused with her suffering, with her fragile body and a mouth that could no longer control itself in order to forget and not feel anything. The *gaze* has become an important analytical concept in a range of fields like psychology, gender studies, literary criticism, or even ecocriticism. Elif Shafak's novel *The Gaze* sheds light on how perception affects relationships and sociocultural dynamics and characterizes an individual's identity. In focusing on the marginalized overweight girl, the socially excluded, children, and the disabled. Therefore, Shafak negates standardized societal beauty norms, demonstrating how society imposes harsh structures of judgment. Her narrative strategy incorporates detailed symbolic and concrete images that call for readers to interrogate the processes of viewing and being viewed.

*The Gaze* has been a subject of multiple academic studies and publications. Among those, Tanveer, Gohar and Zulfiqar's (2022) article "A Kaleidoscopic Journey of *The Gaze* by Elif Shafak" that studies the psychological and social effects of a judgmental society on those who are



often viewed superficially. The authors argue that the novel illustrates the societal preoccupation with outward appearance to the detriment of humanity in the individual, which renders the individual devoid of inner beauty alongside the emotional depth. Raza, Hashmi, and Qaiser (2023), in their article “An Eco-Feminist Study of *The Gaze* by Elif Shafak”, adopt an interdisciplinary approach that combines feminist theory with ecological criticism. They emphasize the symbolic relationship between women and nature, highlighting how both are subjected to patriarchal control and objectification. Their analysis suggests that the novel critiques gendered power dynamics by portraying women as victims of societal systems that associate femininity with vulnerability and inferiority.

In addition, Piriñci's (2011) master's thesis titled “The Dilemma of *the Gaze* in Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* and Elif Shafak's *Mahrem (The Gaze)*” investigates how visual and social power structures transform female characters into objects of spectacle. According to Piriñci, Shafak's characters are manipulated by patriarchal norms that reduce them to passive figures meant to entertain or satisfy male desires, ultimately leading to a fragmentation of their sense of self and identity. Further insights are provided by Atayurt Fenge (2016) in the article “This Is a World of Spectacles: Cyclical Narratives and Circular Visionary Formations in Elif Shafak's *The Gaze*.” This study analyzes Shafak's narrative techniques, emphasizing how she uses metafictional devices and cyclical storytelling to critique power structures and self-representation. The author illustrates how Shafak integrates the theme of the gaze not only within the plot but also as a formal narrative device that reflects the novel's thematic core. While previous studies have explored the feminist, psychological, and ecological dimensions of *The Gaze*,



there remains a lack of focused analysis on the notion of belatedness, in which trauma operates through latency, resurfacing through repetition. This study seeks to address this gap by offering a new perspective that examines the obese girl's fragmented memories, repetitive dreams, and compulsive eating are examples for the delayed return of trauma that Caruth identifies as central to Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

### **Trauma theory**

Trauma, within psychoanalytic and literary theory, is not solely a traumatic event, yet it is a fragmented moment that cannot be collected again. It comes usually in disguised forms. In literary scholarship, "trauma studies emerged in the 1990s, drawing on Freudian psychoanalysis to conceptualize trauma as an extreme experience that challenges the limits of language and even ruptures meaning altogether" (Balaev, 2014, p. 360). Among the early proponents whom Baldev terms "first-wave trauma criticism" is Cathy Caruth, who defined trauma as "an unrepresentable event that revealed the inherent contradictions within language and experience" (Balaev, 2014, p. 363). Caruth, a leading figure in this approach, argues that traumatic events fragment consciousness, damage the psyche, and resist direct linguistic representation.

Cathy Caruth further broadened trauma's definition as an "overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events whose impact is delayed, often manifesting later through symptoms akin to flashbacks, nightmares, or dissociation" (Caruth, 1995, p. 2). Clinically, this corresponds with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), as individuals face hypervigilance, emotional numbness, and recurrent intrusive memories, reflecting the



inescapable grip of an unassimilable experience. She emphasizes the paradox of trauma, highlighting that its essence exists in being only partially understood at the time it happens. She states, “it is indeed the truth of the traumatic experience that forms the center of its psychopathology; it is not a pathology of falsehood or displacement of meaning, but of history itself” (Caruth, 1995, p 5). This viewpoint reveals trauma as stemming from a neglected or unprocessed historical instance, instead of simply being a distortion or illusion. Caruth also argues that trauma signifies “the complex relation between knowing and not knowing” and that it is precisely where these intersect that psychoanalysis and literature meet (Caruth, 1995, p 5). Through this lens, trauma challenges traditional modes of understanding, requiring to be approached through narrative, metaphor, and disruption.

The core tenet of Caruth’s theory is belatedness, the notion that trauma manifests through delay and resurfaces through recurrence. She observes that “the repetition of the traumatic experience in the flashbacks can itself be re-traumatizing” and that such repetition “can ultimately lead to deterioration” (Caruth, 1995, p 64). The return of the traumatic accident is not a faithful memory but a structural symptom, continuously erupting because it was never fully processed. Caruth concludes that trauma harbors “history itself in the form of a wound that resists direct narration” (Caruth, 1995, p 2), capturing how trauma continuously escapes being fully owned by consciousness, haunting both memory and narrative. Caruth extends trauma from an individual pathology to a wider historical and ethical condition. She insists that “history, like trauma, is never simply one’s own, that history is precisely the way we are implicated in each other’s traumas” (Caruth, 1995, p 24). This statement reframes trauma as a shared legacy, demanding that



society practices ethical witnessing, acknowledging not only personal suffering but also the interwoven nature of collective wounds. Beyond just treating PTSD symptoms, healing must include recognition, narrative, and empathy—an admission that trauma cannot be contained within the individual, but resonates across communities and time. The next section will explore how the main female character in the *Gaze* suffers from childhood trauma. The different forms trauma takes in her life, and how she faces them.

## **Analysis and Discussion**

Shafak in this novel immerses the reader into the world of her characters and events without warning. Furthermore, she elevates the reader like a colorful balloon adored by children especially those who are lonely. With Shafak, sensory experience becomes deeply intertwined with narrative. Scents and tastes play a pivotal role in her this novel, and the richness of Turkish cuisine often leaves a distinctive mark on the characters. She positions the reader at the heart of Eastern Turkish culture, evoking its textures in vivid detail. The novel unfolds in a dream like story and flies among different settings. It starts in Istanbul 1999, with an obese girl who always feels the harsh gazes of the surroundings. Her child abuse makes her life extremely hard. She had no choice except to find a new breath in order to forget so she falls in love with a dwarf whom he uses her as a material for his future project. She is nameless in the novel, which Shafak intentionally unnamed her in order to show her nothingness for the society and her family. At the end of the novel, she commits suicide in this way she thinks that she turns her page off to escape the savageness of the society.



The novel employs a non-linear narrative style and incorporates multiple interwoven stories. Its setting shifts according to the characters' perspectives. The central character is the obese girl, whose story unfolds in Istanbul in 1999. She experiences sexual abuse during her childhood, which subsequently leads to her becoming overweight. Later, she falls in love with a dwarf, believing that she has finally found peace; however, she ultimately realizes that she was merely a subject of his project. In the end, she commits suicide. In this novel, dreams play a pivotal role reflecting the inner world of the main character. The story starts with a dream by the obese girl. She often dreams of a flying balloon, the novel opens with her dream, I was dreaming about a flying balloon. It was in the charcoal-grey sky, among the snow-white clouds, in the shade of the bright yellow sun. I'd climbed up the roof. I had been watching the flying balloon from below, when a violent wind suddenly blew up. All at once we were shaken by the violence of this sudden wind. .... I was wearing woollen baby shoes with a bird design on them. (Shafak, 2006, p. 19)

As it is stated previously according to Cathy Caruth's trauma theory, trauma often returns "belatedly" through images and dreams. Therefore, the obese girl's dream in a minibus on her way to work. This dream functions as symbolic reflection of her childhood abuse. Flying balloon can be seen as a symbol from her memory for her desire to escape the past, the present and future because she regards them as unsafe environment to be in. as for the colors, charcoal sky is not fully back to symbolize death, nor it symbolizes light. It is in between; there is an instability. It also can be considered as a reflection of her instability and fear which results from the moment her safety has shattered. However, the violent wind is the link that connects her to the traumatic event that happened. Finally, the woollen shoes represent



her longing to obtain her freedom back, her innocence and her pure life when she was a child.

The nameless girl, who is called the fat girl in the novel, is usually the center of gazes wherever she goes. She is an overweight girl with enough height to easily catch people's attention. When she goes to work by minibus, she becomes the focus of all the people around her. As she states, "The women next to me was watching me out of the corner of her eyes. She probably noticed the smell of the sweat... I am used to it; these kinds of things happen to me all the time. (Shafak, 2006, p. 21), the obese girl sits on a mini bus next to a woman accompanied by her daughter. She believes that her smell is noticed by the people next to her, which reflects her inner belief that people can sense her shame. When she states that she is "used to it," as if this mistreatment from the surrounding is normal. Because of the inescapable abuse of her childhood, the social gaze she always faces reopens her original wound. Moreover, she prefers to sit next to the window on her way to work. "I like sitting next to the window I am less aware of the other passengers, and can spend the trip watching people outside." (Shafak, 2006, p. 22), She continually avoids watching people inside the minibus; she tries to focus on the outside world in order to overcome the anxiety she faces from their gazes. Her chosen seat next to the window mirrors her flying balloon dream, in which she wants to be physically and visually unobserved by the public. In the minibus, there is a child who sits next to her accompanied by her mother. At the same time, she feels her stomach is empty "I am hungry. But traffic is heavy, the rain is falling faster, and there is a long way to go." (Shafak, 2006, p. 25), she wants an escape from the stress she has faced and run to eat. She repeats "I am hungry. But the child is ugly, and bug-eyed



and the numbers are awful. I am hungry. But I should not overreact. This trip will last long enough to count to three, just from one to three. (Shafak, 2006, p. 25), This scene takes place in the minibus when the child is counting, “one, two, three.” The obese girl is unhappy about the situation for several reasons. First, the counting reminds her of the abuse incident where the abuser asked her to count to three. Second, the child’s repetition of the numbers connects her past trauma with her present reality. She says that she is hungry as an escape from the current situation. Thus, the ill temper of the obese girl is caused by her traumatic experience in childhood.

The obese girl has recently left her family house and moved to live with a dwarf in his apartment. She found in him a person who never judges her appearance and never criticizes her. She moved to “Hayalifener Apartments where we could be together” (Shafak, 2006, p. 89). She decides to pay him a visit where he works, but she gets stuck in the door and she cannot move:

**My motionlessness resembled a hard-working ant running around a dead bee lying on its back at the bottom of an empty water glass...my motionlessness was like a memory that resembled consumptive spitting out his uncomfortable memories into a handkerchief; spending each day in quarantine infecting his sickness with loneliness. My motionlessness was like the warm, yellowish pudding that’s poured over homemade cakes; it is slowly covered everything with its sweetness. (Shafak, 2006, p. 76).**

In the above quotation the obese girl blames herself and her body for not entering the door. According to Cathy Caruth’s trauma theory, an unclaimed experience that returns belatedly through fragmented and



metaphorical language “the repetition of the traumatic experience in the flashbacks can itself be re-traumatizing” and that such repetition “can ultimately lead to deterioration.” (Caruth, 2006, p. 64). The comparison she makes between herself and the ant surrounding the dead bee illustrates the dissociation that is present in trauma survivors. The second comparison she makes with the consumptive patient reflects Caruth’s claim that trauma is a wound that speaks through the body. Finally, the hot pudding shows her real pain, which is covered by the sweetness of the pudding. These symbolic images align with Caruth’s view of trauma as something that cannot be fully understood. She is stuck (Shafak, 2006, p. 76) in the door of the building where she lives with her boyfriend. As she states, “This kind of thing happens to me all the time when I pass through those double doors and only one side is left open. I don’t fit through this type of door” (Shafak, 2006, p. 76). Her inability to move symbolizes her inability to survive her traumatic experience. She suffers from PTSD; she is stuck physically, yet psychologically she deeply relives her childhood abuse.

Trauma, through Cathy Caruth’s lens, is not located in the event itself, but in its belated and fragmented return through repetition, triggers, and bodily sensations. Therefore, the obese girl’s body becomes a permanent reminder of her trauma: “If you are fat as I am and the elevator breaks while you’re in it. It’s definitely you who has broken it. ... Polite people look at me from the corner of their eyes, and then at the sign that tells the maximum weight the elevator can carry” (Shafak, 2006, p. 85). She is unable to use the elevator due to people’s judgments of her weight. She further adds, “They try to guess roughly how much I weigh, and secretly start adding up” (Shafak, 2006, p. 85). If the elevator breaks, the blame will fall on her weight. The



people's gaze is full of symbolic violence, which comes in a disguised form. Thus, Caruth emphasizes that trauma returns through sensory triggers, making the people's gaze an inescapable part of her life. The obese girl has a temporary space of relief, which is the supermarket, where she, as a trauma victim, seeks neutrality. Her real pain is not the overweight she carries; it is her psychological pain, which she can barely handle. Furthermore, when there is psychological distress, there should be a physical manifestation of it. Caruth illustrates that the body becomes the site where unprocessed memories and anxiety are inscribed. She gets nervous and says, "My cuticles were torn and chewed away, and in horror I hid my finger so no one would see it" (Shafak, 2006, p. 96). The obese girl often harms herself and chews her cuticles when she experiences internal tension. By giving these small details, Shafak shows how the obese girl is afraid of her damage being seen by others due to her feelings of being judged, which aligns with Caruth's trauma theory regarding the impact of the gaze. The dwarf insists that she open her heart to him and narrate her story. Consequently, he learns about her past and uses her as material for his dictionary of gazes, as she states: "He always wants me to relate my dreams. And I do relate them sometimes as they were, and sometimes with changes. Films and dreams provided material for the dictionary of gazes" (Shafak, 2006, p. 156). According to Caruth, the unconscious replay of traumatic events usually comes in the form of dreams. The obese girl always dreams, and she relates her dreams to her boyfriend. The disgusting sexual abuse that she faced as a child often comes in the form of dreams. She changes her dreams to blur reality and imagination, where her wounds serve as raw material. The obese girl's suffering stems from her early childhood. She was not fat at all; however, she started gaining weight as she



grew older. Her obesity is the outcome of her traumatic experience as a child, serving as a living archive of her wounds, as she complains:

**I was carrying the illness I knew myself to be carrying: my obesity was like an amulet that had mistakenly been sewn to my skin when my form was being put together. Though in the past, quite a long time ago that is, there was a period, a phase of my childhood, when I was not at all fat.....I remembered that I had once been a thin child. The past is gone forever.**  
**(Shafak, 2006, p. 158)**

When she states that this obesity is like an amulet sewn to her skin, it means she cannot be avoided at all; it is imposed on her without her will. Here, the traumatic event shaped her identity into what it is in the present time. Furthermore, Shafak insightfully describes the shift in the obese girl's life by narrating her situation from past to present: "I was carrying," and "there was a period... when I was not at all fat." Through Caruth's lens, to describe trauma's non-linear temporality, she believes there are certain periods in the life of the survivor in which past stories and events are unreachable. The child that once was thin and beautiful no longer exists.

When time passes and she starts feeling that she cannot bear her weight anymore, she decides to change her life: "I was on a diet" (Shafak, 2006, p. 155). She prevents herself from food except for fruits for several days. When she feels distressed again, she starts eating. After the eating break, she feels guilty and starts to vomit: "I started to vomit; I flushed the toilet. I washed out my mouth. I washed out my face. I washed out my mouth. I brushed my teeth. I washed out my mouth. I looked at myself in the mirror. No matter what I did, I vomited less than I ate" (Shafak, 2006, p. 190).



When the nameless child had been sexually abused, the first thing she did was wash her mouth several times. She did this action repetitively so as to forget the taste of her traumatic experience. As a grown-up girl, she tried to go on a diet several times but failed. She could not resist eating. After eating, she felt horrible and went to the toilet to vomit. She started vomiting and washed her mouth several times because she is experiencing PTSD in this scene. According to Caruth's theory, this is a symptom in which the survivor suffers from a compulsion to repeat. Therefore, the obese girl's act of vomiting after eating too much and then washing her mouth symbolizes her inner motives to control her body again, which once was unable to defend itself against the traumatic oppressor. Within Caruth's framework, this represents one iteration of trauma's core paradox: the survivor attempts to extract the past from the present, but in the attempt to extract, the past is preserved. The setting shifts to the obese girl's childhood, in which she lived with her grandmother in a building where a number of people lived in different apartments: "the house of the colour of salted green almonds was her paternal grandmother's house" (Shafak, 2006, p.194). There is a cherry tree in the back garden of the building, she recalls, "In the back garden of the house next door there was a coal shed, with a zinc roof, and two doors. That's where the child would throw pits of the cherries" (Shafak, 2006, p. 195). She enjoys her afternoon time in the back garden while her grandmother and the whole neighborhood sleep: "the whole neighborhood became a giant cradle, and the breeze murmured lullabies" (Shafak, 2006, p. 195). The following quotation gives the description of the setting where the child was abused:



In the back garden of the house next door there was a coal shed; with a zinc roof, and two doors. One of the doors was always closed, and the other was always open. There was a big padlock on the door that was closed. They kept wood and coal there in the winter. There was no need for a lock on the door that was left open. Thieves couldn't steal emptiness. (Shafak, 2006, p. 212). The setting where the child was sexually abused is described in detail, seemingly to avoid the harsh reality of the event. Therefore, an open door symbolizes emptiness, whereas a locked door symbolizes suppression. Both doors thus mirror Caruth's concept of blocked access to the traumatic event. The abuse occurred in a place where people would not usually suspect it, offering a blurred view neither private nor public. After that, the child describes the man who abused her very precisely:

There was a man inside. He was a stranger. He was just standing there, under the broken window, where the rays of sunlight shone in. half of his face was in light, and half was in dark. He was leaning his back against the wall, and held his head in his hands. He looked very worried. Perhaps he was crying. He was well-dressed. His shoes were very shiny despite being covered with coal dust. It was clear that the man was not gypsy. The child knew one had to stay away from gypsies/ gypsies 'shoes were never like this. (Shafak, 2006, p. 214). The man does not look like a gypsy; the concept of danger comes



from the outside only and reflects society's points of view about marginalized people. However, he looks like those who do not have enough clothes: "his jacket looked a little tight" (Shafak, 2006, p.214). She adds that his movements were "heavy and slow" (Shafak, 2006, p.214); it seems that he is drunk and his movements are not stable. Then she describes his face, half in dark and half in light, which symbolizes the dark side of the human being that controls the bright side. Thus, this paradox mirrors Caruth's trauma theory when the survivor is unable to trust people or to identify the safe and the dangerous areas. In this scene, the girl hides in the coal shed during a game of hide-and-seek with her buddies, only to be deceived into a counting game by a man who manipulates her, in which he says "one, two, three" and she has to obey him. When he starts counting, he asks her to close her eyes on "one" and then open them on "two."

Will you play a game with me? A counting game? Would you like to play? Outside the kids were calling her. they were going to start the game over again. .... one close your eyes..... the moment she closed her eyes she was in darkness. She looked straight into the darkness, and there she saw number one. One was not a run-of-the-mill number.... She felt her dress with her hands. (Shafak, 2006, p.226).



**She continuously describes the situation as;**  
**The dress her grandmother had brought her. And therefore,**  
**was not naked in front of a strange man. Two open your**  
**mouth. As soon as she opened her eyes he was in light and**  
**number two was in the light. Two was not a run-of-the-mill**  
**number. It was extraordinary. ... the child was struck with**  
**terror as she looked at two... she had to run.... Unfortunately,**  
**her eyes reminded fastened on two..... that other was a piece**  
**of pink flesh. (Shafak, 2006, p.226). She adds, It was**  
**surrounded by very curly hairs. It hangs down from among**  
**these hairs like a tough of a thirsty animal. Very slowly it was**  
**becoming bigger, and longer, and thicker. just as the man**  
**began to approach, the child told herself that there was**  
**nothing to frightened of. Anyway, the next number was three.**  
**Three comes right after two. That mean it was not long before**  
**this unpleasant game came to an end. She would finally be**  
**able to leave when three arrived. (Shafak, 2006, p.226-227)**

The victim's mind is shattered; she recounts her experience through peculiar, deep, and sensory markers. She focuses on numbers to avoid accessing what exactly has been broken under that zinc roof. Cathy Caruth's framework sheds light on the fact that trauma is typically not encountered in the form of a complete, ordered linear narrative, but as a shattering of perception. The mind of the victim fractures narrative, sensation, and meaning in order to navigate an existential threat. The strong link between the main character, "the nameless fat girl," and numbers is clearly shown



through the course of the events. As a result of this sexual abuse, which is directly connected with counting, the obese girl develops a hatred for numbers. Each number reminds her of the abuse she went through. The sexual abuse is catalogued in her mind as one, two, three. Her unconscious tells her that one is the darkness she experienced, and two has sentenced her to death by execution. Moreover, Caruth believes that trauma is marked by a confrontation with an experience that resists comprehension in the present time. While the hide-and-seek game is going well with the kids outside, the child is experiencing an inner traumatic scene. She is trapped in number two and cannot escape until number three comes to end the game, although part of her is outside, thinking about her friends playing.

The worst, filthiest, and ugliest scene occurs when the child opens her eyes in number two and describes the man's genitals. She does not know what this is, yet she describes its shape and how it grows bigger and longer. In this scene, one can notice what trauma theorists identify as the freeze response. She is motionless, her mind concentrated on this strange thing she is watching, which is like the tongue of a hungry animal. Caruth describes this situation as the psyche's attempt to store the sensory imprint while delaying the affect until later. This aligns with Caruth's view that trauma is not fully owned by the survivor; it returns, unbidden, in flashes and sensory intrusions. But before three, the piece of flesh arrived. It arrived and entered her mouth. It advanced step by step into her mouth. The man was wheezing heavily. The piece of flesh left her mouth. A strange liquid flowed the emptiness it had left behind. It was very sticky. It had a terrible taste. The child could not bear it and opened the door to her stomach she began to vomit. She began to vomit what the piece of flesh vomited into her mouth.



... she looked into the nothingness and saw the absence of three was worse than one and two and even than three. Because the man had gone. (Shafak, 2006, p. 218).

The child's sensory details mirror how trauma imprints itself in the body's memory. Her small body could recount before her mind could comprehend the situation. The absence of three stands for the traumatic events that are not complete and can never be over. The child's vomiting act is repeated in the life of the obese girl. Whenever she eats too much, she vomits. Therefore, it is considered an unconscious attempt to purify herself from that sin. She washed out her mouth. She soaped the sponge. She washed out her mouth. She sponged herself. She washed out her mouth. She shampooed her hair. She washed out her mouth. She dried herself with a towel. She washed out her mouth. She combed her hair. She washed out her mouth. She put a clean underwear. She washed out her mouth. (Shafak, 2006, p. 223). Through Cathy Caruth's lens, traumatic incidents often return as repetitive actions that replay the original injury without conscious choice. The child washes her mouth more than one time, repeatedly, in order to escape the taste and texture of the liquid vomit that the strange man left in her mouth. However, the taste and texture rooted their traces in her life. The repeating actions of soaping, drying, and wearing are structured as trauma flashbacks. The child states, "the back garden of childhood has the sour taste of cherries" (Shafak, 2006, p. 227). The back garden used to be her favorite place to eat cherries and spend her afternoons. However, after the sexual abuse, the sweet cherries became sour. When she arrives home, she starts to wash her mouth and change her clothes. The whole neighborhood is downstairs waiting for her return. They think she is missing. They never know



that she was in the back garden under the zinc roof. She joins the crowd, and the women bring food with them. She starts eating, but her eating does not stop until she becomes obese. She wants to forget the bad taste of the stranger's sticky liquid. She wants to put an end to the terrible taste in her mouth. Shafak's metaphor, "the stomach is a mythical land... it has secrets in its back garden," transforms the body into a psychic landscape. She felt extremely hungry after enduring the disdainful glances from unbearable individuals. She began to chew the bunches of grapes on the table, but she couldn't get rid of the terrible taste in her mouth. She was very hungry. She pulled the pot toward her. The pot was full to the top. "May I have another plate?" The plate was finished very quickly. She reached her hand into the pot. The more she consumed, the more her hunger grew, devouring one handful after another. Her stomach began to ache. Still, she did not stop eating... "the stomach is a mythical land and like every mythical land it has secrets in its back garden" (Shafak, 2006, p. 226).

The setting shifts again to the obese girl as a grown-up lady. She is complaining about her body; she knows that people are using her as a sign. She states: "People like me are dictional signs for other people's eyes. Let's say someone wants to point someone out in a crowded place... People like me are a reference point" (Shafak, 2006, p. 230). The author shows trauma not only through the repetition of memory, dreams, and the senses, but also through the stereotypical image of fat people, which has been the source of entertainment and mockery. Fat people's identity is drawn through people's gaze. After living with her dwarf boyfriend, whom she thought would be different from the other people, "But now, having read the dictionary of gazes, everything looked different again to my eyes. Now I understood that



at first, I had been the source of this datable dictionary” (Shafak, 2006, p. 242). He accepted her as she was. Suddenly, she discovers that she was just material for his project, “the dictionary of gazes.” She has been invaded for the second time: the initial betrayal when she was a child, and the last one when she is a grown-up girl. According to Caruth’s theory, “trauma consists of two scenes—the earlier in childhood having sexual content but no meaning, the later after puberty having no sexual content but meaning” (Caruth, 1995, p. 9). Thus, the dwarf has used her pain, abuse, childhood, adulthood, and body as a product for his project. As Caruth suggests, trauma is the belated recognition with psychic aftershocks: “the impact of a traumatic event lies precisely in belatedness, in its refusal to be simply located in its insistent appearance outside the boundaries of any single place and time” (Caruth, 1995, p. 9). Therefore, the obese girl’s realization, “Now I understood,” is her belated moment to reopen her original wound. Shafak shows how the fat has been consumed physically, textually, visually, and emotionally. Therefore, she was physically abused, the abuse that made her fat. She was consumed visually, seen by people as the “other.” And finally, she was consumed emotionally by her boyfriend, whom she trusted and thought was the refuge from dangerous people, but he used her as a product to write about. The obese girl declares that no matter how many times you clean, the dust remains. This mirrors her individual experience: “No matter how clean we might be, every cleaning of the eyes leaves some dust hidden under the carpet, a memory we can’t forget or cause to be forgotten” (Shafak, 2006, p. 246). Her memory of the past shaped her entire life. At the end, when she wants to commit suicide, she feels hungry again: “I was so hungry it was as if I’d always been left hungry. As if I hadn’t been stuffing myself all



my life. I was a big lie, a huge denial. I was a failure” (Shafak, 2006, p. 247). She feels hungry all the time; since the moment when she returns home after the abuse in her childhood, she comes home and starts washing her mouth in order to forget the bitter taste of the sticky liquid that was in her mouth. She is a failure in her eyes and in the eyes of the people around her. She further adds that she is never happy: “I was unhappy. Like my stomach” (Shafak, 2006, p. 247). Her stomach is never tired of eating, never satisfied, which reflects her unhappy life. There is always a great gap that is impossible to fill. Whenever she is surrounded by people, she becomes the source of conversation: “I couldn’t control my nerves when people watched me in order to add colour to their lives or to have something to talk about” (Shafak, 2006, p. 247). After suffering for a long period of time, she decides to put an end to her life. She commits suicide, but before doing so she starts eating like she never ate before. She says: “I opened my mouth wide. I opened my mouth so wide that the earth feared my teeth” (Shafak, 2006, p. 248). Her trauma has never ended; eating is to escape the bad taste that was imposed on her in her childhood. She decides to use the gas in order to finish everything: “I turned on the gas. I don’t know why I did this; I wasn’t aware of what I was doing, nor of what might happen” (Shafak, 2006, p. 248). She believes that if she had not been abused in her childhood, she would not have faced the hardship: “Everything could have worked out differently. That means every story can be told differently” (Shafak, 2006, p. 249). She actually died, yet for her it was a different story—a story of the colored balloon which she was dreaming of all the time: “At the same moment I started rising into the air” (Shafak, 2006, p. 255). She realized that she is zero: “Since I’d become zero by no longer existing, I could comfortably rise into the sky and above the



clouds” (Shafak, 2006, p. 256). The obese girl finally imagines herself to be a floating balloon in the sky: “I am a floating balloon filled with gas. And like every floating balloon, I am floating in the eyes of a lonely child. Lonely children unlike other children often turn their eyes inward” (Shafak, 2006, p. 258). This image is crucial in reflecting her trauma crisis. The balloon represents fragility and inevitability because it can explode at any moment. The lonely child is her in her childhood, and she speaks on behalf of lonely children in the world, who look inward in order to avoid the abusive actions of abusers. Thus, suicide is seen as an escape from being the object of people’s gazes—of those who do not know why she became fat, and of those who never knew about her childhood abuse. She states: “I am exploding. I am not going to stand it any longer” (Shafak, 2006, p. 261). Through this final image, Shafak shows how the girl’s trauma has shaped her entire life, yet her imagination and memories allow her to reclaim some sense of agency and meaning beyond the pain. Her story illustrates the enduring impact of abuse and the struggle to find selfhood in the aftermath of trauma.



## Conclusion

The *Gaze* offers a compelling fictional representation of trauma's belatedness, fragmentation, and resistance to full articulation, as theorized by Cathy Caruth. The unnamed obese female narrator embodies the enduring disruptions caused by childhood sexual abuse, with her compulsive eating, self-loathing, and eventual suicide revealing how unresolved trauma reorganizes identity and daily existence.

While trauma theory has been extensively applied to Western canonical texts, its engagement with contemporary Turkish literature remains underexplored. In particular, Elif Shafak's *The Gaze* a novel that offers a nuanced portrayal of psychological trauma has not been sufficiently examined through the lens of Caruth's framework

To sum up, trauma in *The Gaze* extends beyond individual suffering, shaping both the psyche and identity of the victim while being amplified by societal judgment. Trauma theory as by Cathy Caruth is applied to show effects of trauma on the main character physically and psychologically.



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