

Thematic Concerns in the Fiction of Elif Shafak

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Abstract

The present paper explores the thematic concerns in the Fiction of Turkish British novelist Elif Shafak. She is a World acclaimed novelist and a speaker who debates for the humanistic concerns for the deprived, othered and subdued communities in the World. Her concerns are not geographically or politically restricted. She battles for the rights of women, for the immigrants in a multicultural society as well as the ones who have been denied their essential human rights due to one reason or the other. She advocates for a global cosmopolitanism and an age old wisdom to tackle the contemporary problems. The paper focuses on her dominant themes in her major works, interviews and talk shows.

Keywords: Cosmopolitanism, multiculturalism, stereotyping, ‘Othering’

Elif Shafak is a Turkish novelist born in Strasbourg and brought up in Istanbul, Britain and America. More than being a novelist, she is a motivational speaker, a social and a political scientist, a healer and a humanist. She writes both in Turkish and English and for her, writing stories and living through them is essential to human life. She has several popular fiction and non-fiction works to her credit. She started writing stories at a very young age. She was the child of an estranged family and for her, weaving stories was a recourse for keeping her sanity intact. Her first novel *Pinham* won the Turkish Rumi award, her second novel *Mahrem (The Gaze)* also won the best novel award in Turkey. Her earliest novels were written in Turkish language and soon she started writing in English language that she always thought of an adopted language. These include- *Bit Palas (The Flea Palace)*, *The Saint of Incipient Insanities* , *The Bastard of*

Istanbul, The Forty Rules of Love, Honour, The Architect's Apprentice, Three Daughters of Eve, Black Milk, 10 Minutes 38 seconds in This Strange World and *The Island of Missing Trees*. Apart from these books, she also wrote several non-Fiction works including essays as well and also spoke openly on the abuse of civil liberties and human rights. Her books have been translated into more than forty languages across the World. Her writings deal with issues revolving around minorities, immigration, exile, belongingness, cosmopolitanism, and marginalization of certain voices, feminist concerns including mental and physical health.

She writes on a variety of themes but one thing she is sure of is that her writing surpasses all stereotyping on the basis of gender, nationality, region, religion or race. Her works chiefly center around her cultural capital of Istanbul and she deals with the themes of culture, women and human rights without falling into the pitfalls of stereotyping. She has even addressed some politically charged issues like that of the Armenian genocide for which she was prosecuted and put behind bars and at the same time her novel, *The Bastard of Istanbul* was also banned in Turkey. It was after this curb on the freedom of speech that she decided to move out of Turkey to The United Kingdom.

As a child, her parents separated and she moved back to her mother's native place in Turkey where she lived with her mother and her grandmother. It was a blessing in disguise for her as she didn't have to grow under the shadow of patriarchy. Her mother was an educated and an independent woman who happened to become a diplomat. Her grandmother represented the world of wisdom, experience and spirituality that was not found in the books but in the lived experience. Due to her position she was privileged to travel to places and feed her imagination to weave stories which she feels similar to drawing circles that happen to meet at one place or another. She got the opportunity to get the best education which was not easily available for majority of women across the globe. Presently, she is a visiting Professor at St Anne's College in the Oxford University. Being brought up in a Turkish society has got its own elusive influences. Turkey's location leads it to have a confluence of the two worlds- The East and the West. It is situated at the doorway to the European culture on one side and the Middle East Islamic culture on the other. Therefore, she considers Turkey as an embodiment of both Islamic and Christian values and culture.

As discussed earlier, her major works revolve around the city of Istanbul; she depicts it as a cauldron of cultures. At a talk show on *Al Jazeera*, She says about the city as “Istanbul makes one comprehend, perhaps not intellectually but intuitively, that East and West are ultimately imaginary concepts, and can thereby be de-imagined and re-imagined.” Through her works, she weaves the magic of the old city of Istanbul representing the traces of the oldest Ottoman Empire exhibited through the family lines. She describes the city in a radio interview on the BBC as, "Istanbul is like a huge, colorful *Matrushka* – you open it and find another doll inside. You open that, only to see a new doll nesting. It is a hall of mirrors where nothing is quite what it seems. One should be cautious when using categories to talk about Istanbul. If there is one thing the city doesn't like, it is clichés.”

Her writing is a blend of the Eastern and the Western Worlds. She dwells on both the tradition of oral story telling as well as the written word, thus retaining and incorporating the two worlds. She dwells on the redemptive power of stories. She also writes on history and its cyclical nature. Citing the example of the binaries of the developing and the developed nations, she argues that the nations which have a solid footing today might be toppled in future whereas the ones that are liquid in the present may have a stronghold in the future. The novelist's voice is a voice representing the various cultures and traditions. She also differentiates between wisdom and knowledge, wherein wisdom is something which is more reliable. The World today has abundant knowledge but wisdom is the need of the hour.

Her work can also be classified as one manifesting the feministic concerns. In fact she feels these concerns across all cultures not only the Islamic culture. She defies the stereotyping of the Islamic women as one evoking pity and pathos in literature. She addresses these issues but at a universal level. She, being a woman, brought up by women in a male dominated Turkish culture was one of the reasons for her not being accepted in the mainstream where writing was an exclusive domain of men.

As a writer, she is a crusader of a call against the denial of human rights. She writes about all those minorities whose basic rights have been compromised in one way or the other. Her portrayal of the Armenian Genocide in one of her novels voices her concern for the

oppressed ones. She has also openly addressed the issues related to the Yazidis in Turkey and various other minorities across the World. In her documentary on *Al Jazeera* with Wole Soyinka, she locates the aim of literature to “re-humanize people who have been dehumanized”. In most of her interviews she talks about her concerns of the freedom of speech-

I am more interested in showing the things we have in common as fellow human beings, sharing the same planet and ultimately, the same sorrows and joys rather than adding yet another brick in the imaginary walls erected between cultures/religions/ethnicities.(n.p)

As a political activist, she has always raised her voice against authoritarian regimes especially in Turkey. She feels that human rights are at stake in today wobbling democracies. She also raised her voice against the ban imposed on twitter in Turkey in 2014. She also raised her voice time to time against the oppressive and toxic developments taking place in the contemporary Europe. She voiced her concern in *The New Yorker* in the year 2016 as:

Wave after wave of nationalism, isolationism, and tribalism has hit the shores of countries across Europe, and they have reached the United States. Jingoism and xenophobia are on the rise. It is an Age of Angst—and it is a short step from angst to anger and from anger to aggression (2016).

The dominant concern raised in her writings is the othering of identities. She also advocated for the concerns of the LGBT + community and protested against the Russian government through an open letter against their persecution and the oppressive blasphemy laws. A dominant themes that run in her works is the concern for “others” or the people who have been erased and pushed to the margins. The ‘Othering’ of identities goes back to the times of Homer when it was employed with geographical connotations only, but it has hit the eye of the storm in the mid twentieth century only when debates and issues were raised for the concerns of the people of color, gendered others and the colonial subjects who were considered different from the majority. The discourse of Postcolonial concerns also centers around the concept of the ‘Other’ highlighted with the seminal work of Frantz Fanon- *The Wretched of the Earth*. The ‘Othering’ of certain communities is the outcome of the anxiety and the insecurity faced by the mainstream.

It occurs when there is a phobia of the other. The Turkish society is also a divided one where the ‘us’ and the ‘other’ are in contextual relationship with each other. For instance there are binaries of European or the Asian, the Turkish or the Kurdish; the East or the West; the Islam or the Christianity and the man or the woman. Explaining the ‘Other’ in the words of Shafak at the *London Book Fair* in 2013, she says:

It could be anything, you know, ethnic, sexual, religious minorities, but also, any, anyone kind of pushed to the margin of any social or cultural context. I am interested in hearing that person’s voice, and if possible, bringing that voice to the center of attention. (n.p)

Her fiction revolves around the multicultural communities where there is a center and there are margins. She aims to incorporate those margins towards the center. She believes the World exists in the form of circle of stories, where some are in the center while others are at the margins and these all circles meet each other in one way or the other. She attempts to project those that are at the margins. She feels that women are often at the margins within a given society. She explains this by giving an example of a Deputy Prime Minister of her country who regards that good woman should not laugh loudly. She feels that these gender dimensions that are set in a particular society are restricting in nature. She elaborates this in her talk show on “Turkey Politics: Women are almost non-existent” in 2015:

Even we have a Deputy Prime Minister who said that Turkish women should not laugh out loudly in public space because it would be not proper. We have had minister saying that Turkish women should focus on their motherhood. This is their primary career. We have had politicians, top-level politicians, saying that they do not believe in gender equality. (n.p)

The high gentry and the elitist educated class of the society also do not question this negation and ‘othering’ of identity. She feels herself empowered despite being born in a male dominated Turkish society and tries to eradicate this relative othering of women through her fiction. She feels that it is her female readers- maybe wives, sisters, daughters or friends for urging their male

counterparts to read her book. In a male dominated society women are not welcomed as authors or writers.

Shafak portrays in her fiction that there is no absolute good or bad as they are the issues emerging from our insecurities and phobias due to difference in race, ethnicity, colour and nationality. The ‘Other’ of the identity is a result of “cultural gaps, cognitive gaps and intellectual gaps” which consider one set as “us” and the other as “they”. She dwells on the idea of equality as a solution to this ‘Othering’ of identity.

She feels that today’s situation can be tackled through the path of divinity and spirituality taught through Sufism. She brings about the power of Sufism in her novel *The Forty Rules of Love*:

Life in Sufi philosophy is a big circle and everyone of us, with no exception, is part of it, and what is more beautiful is that every individual in this circle stands in the same distance from its center, which means that there is no one who is higher or lower in rank than any other in it. It is a circle and not a triangle and thus everyone is equal. A real Sufi believes in that he/she has no right to judge anyone because what he/ criticizes in other exists in him/her in the first place.

(n.p)

She brings out the Sufi traditions about which the people even in the Middle East are not much aware of. She brings out this mystical tradition in her *The Forty Rules of Love* that gives a call for mutual understanding in a multicultural world practicing monotheism, thereby showing the path of adaptation and progress. Through her work, she introduces these traditions to the World giving an idea of the ‘other’ and how it can lead to a change of perception. The novel portrays a Jewish character Ella, who happens to get a chance to explore the Islamic vision through a world of books. Several excerpts and translations from the Quran are used to celebrate the respect for woman that gives a complete change over some other biased and prejudiced interpretations. So, her novel comes as an unbiased approach to womanhood taught in the scriptures. She projects a colorful and romantic version of Islamic values which were earlier stereotyped as extremist, patriarchal and narrow. Through her novel, Shafak shows the path for transcending the

‘otherness’ which can ultimately lead to positive changes in the social structure as depicted in the protagonist Ella’s life.

She basis her idea of equality in incorporating every minute detail and thereby eradicating the generalizations, dismantling the conformity with the socially set patterns and stereotypes. She is of the view that one should refrain from generalizations and issues should be addressed in a more nuanced way. She raises her concern for the growing number of religious clashes, cultural misunderstandings and prevailing sense of anxiety, phobias and insecurities in the contemporary times. It is the fear of unknown, the fear of the change and newness that need to be addressed. A strange defensive mechanism is sought against this fear by threatening and endangering the cosmopolitan discourse, forcibly implementing sameness and uniformity. It is a sort of criminalizing all that is different from the ‘us’. With this fear, the Turkish society underwent drastic changes from being a cosmopolitan society to a stereotyped one. Citing the seriousness of these changes she gives an example at a talk show titled “Striving for ‘sameness’ Turkey stifles progress”.

Even if you were Kurdish you were still expected to say aloud, “I am a Turk.” It was assumed that we all shared the same nationality (Turkish) and the same religion (Muslim)—even those students who were Jewish or Armenian. Even the school system was based on sameness. We were treated as a mass of undifferentiated beings rather than individuals with diverse backgrounds and varying talents. (CNN)

Shafak addresses this problem by considering herself as a global soul and a World citizen. She feels that diversity comes from her internationalism. For her ‘home’ and ‘belongingness’ denote a place that makes one comfortable and not one’s birthplace. She considers the whole World as a global community which is served by the digital technology. At the London Book Fair, she comments:

I am a strong believer in the possibility of having multiple belongings rather than a strict, you know, frozen or fixed sense of identity. I am more interested in belongings, for me belongings are more fluid, they are more water-like and you

can have multiple belongings, you can have multiple homes, sometimes you can even have portable homelands. Identity politics very much relies upon a distinction between us versus them, and this is hidden belief: us is better than them and I want to question that distinctive framework. (n.p)

Another popular and bold novel of Shafak *The Bastard of Istanbul* (2007) presents with the society's problem of negating the 'Other'. The novelist brings out the theme beautifully through the portrayal of two strong characters Asya and Armanoush, whose identity and existence is completely wiped out because of their lack of connection with their respective pasts. The novelist also focuses on the brutal erasure of the Armenians during the 1915 war in Turkey. She brings out the connotations associated with the word 'Bastard' in Turkish society. It means a person who is not fathered out of a legal communion, whereas metaphorically it stands for all individuals who cannot identify themselves with their past. The novel was banned in Turkey due to her portrayal of the Armenian genocide in the backdrop. It also projects the inferior status of women in a patriarchal society. So, it exhibits several facets of the exclusion and 'othering' of identities on the basis of gender, race and ethnicity. She creates strong characters in the form of Zeliha and tries to break strong stereotypes created in the name of society, religion and traditions. She also highlights the importance of acknowledging diversity. She also dwells on the idea of solidarity among differences that is the need of the hour. According to her, contemporary world situation is that of fluidity where stability is at stake. She reinforces the idea of solidarity at the World Literature Festival that the entire world is interconnected, the fate, the stories and the destinies are all intertwined and there is "no nation, no culture, no sub-culture that exist in isolation" (n.p).

It can therefore be concluded that Shafak's fiction is all about the humanist concerns of mutual co-existence based on equality and respect. She is critical of the 'Othering' of certain cultures and groups based on ethnicity, nationality, gender or race. She also highlights how stereotyping of certain cultures and negating certain identities is detrimental for the society. No doubt, she is a motivated feminist but not in the line of those evoking pity. As a child of a divorced single mother in a Turkish society, she emerges out as a powerful symbol for millions other languishing under the shadow of patriarchy. Despite being jailed and banned, she speaks

the truth vehemently at various platforms criticizing the dogmatic and oppressive societies of the World.

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