



THE PERCEPTION OF MULTICULTURAL IDENTITY IN ELIF SHAFAK'S *HONOUR*

Nevin Faden GÜRBÜZ*

Abstract

One of the most prolific, controversial and prominent female writers of Turkey, Elif Shafak touches on gender roles, immigration, quests for freedom and transformation which an individual makes in a new country in her eight novel, *Honour*. In *Honour*, Shafak broadens her earlier writing on the theme of identity, to analyze what it means to be an immigrant when the authoritative cultures one has fled are still carried with them. This paper draws the attention to the perception of multicultural identity in Elif Shafak's eight novel, *Honour* (2013). 'Multiculturalism' is the harmony of various cultures, where culture includes racial, religious, or cultural groups and is demonstrated in traditional behaviors, cultural beliefs and values, motifs of thinking, and informative manners. *Honour* is a sample story of an immigrant minority which includes constant settlers who carry their own language(s) and culture(s) which are distinct from those of the host society.

Keywords: Shafak, Novel, Identity, Family, Migration, Conflict, Multiculturalism.

1. INTRODUCTION

Elif Shafak was born in Strasbourg, France, in 1971. She is an award-winning novelist and the most widely read woman writer in Turkey. Her books have been translated into more than twenty languages. 'Shafak spent her teenage years in Madrid, Spain before returning to her native Turkey. Throughout her life she has lived in numerous cities and states, including Ankara, Turkey, Cologne, Germany; Amman, Jordan; and Boston, Michigan, and Arizona. She has at the same time been deeply attached to the city of Istanbul, which plays an important part in her fiction. As a result, a sense of multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism has consistently characterized both her life and her work.'¹ Shafak considers herself as a story-teller. That is what she does in her life, to tell stories, to write novels. She was born as a child of Turkish parents in Strasbourg, France. After a short while her parents got divorced and she returned to Turkey with her mother. From that day on, she was brought up by a single mother which was an unusual case in the Ankara of the 1970s. The neighborhood was full of large families whose leader was the father. Shafak grew by seeing her single mother in a patriarchal environment. Actually she grew by observing two different women. On one side there was her mother, a well-educated, secular, modern, westernized Turkish woman. On the other side, there was her grandmother who raised her, more spiritual, less educated and certainly less rational. This woman was a person who read coffee grounds to see the future and cast lead in order to ward off evil eye. Her grandmother had visitors who had strong acnes on their faces or warts on their hands. At every turn, her grandmother would whimper Arabic words and then stick rose thorns on a red apple as the number of warts she would like to obliterate. Then she would take in a circle these thorns one by one with a black ink. One week later the patient would come back for a check-up.

It was against science, but none of the people who came to visit her grandmother, returned unhappily or without recovering. Shafak asked her grandmother how she managed this, if it was related to the power of the prayers. 'Yes, prayer is efficient.' The grandmother replied. 'But, you should also pay attention to the power of the circles'. That was one of the precious lectures, Shafak learned from her grandmother. 'If you would like to wipe off something in your life, acne, a scar or a human soul, all you need to do is to encircle it with thick walls. It would dry inside.'² Elif Shafak believes that, we all live in a kind of social and cultural circle. We are born depending on a certain

* Res. Asst., Department of English Language and Literature, Bülent Ecevit University, ¹ www.elifshafak.us

² Elif Shafak TED Talk: The Politics of Fiction (TEDGlobal>NYC | September 2017)



family, nation or class. However, if we do not have a connection in the worlds that are beyond the environment we become hardened to, then we also have the risk to dry out inwardly. Our imagination may tighten, our hearts may shrink, and our humanity may diminish, if we stay in our cultural cocoon for a long time. If the people inside the closest circle, our friends, neighbors, colleagues and family resemble each other, it means we are surrounded by our mirror image. Another thing the women like her grandmother do is to cover the mirrors with velvets or to hang them the wall the wrong way round. This is an old eastern tradition which is fueled by the knowledge that a person's looking at his own image is unhealthy. How ironic it is, to see custom living in the communities sharing similar ideas is one of the biggest dangers of the globalized world. We are apt to categorizing with reference to similarities and differences and then producing prejudices about the other human clusters. In Elif Shafak's view, one of the ways to break these cultural ghettos is the art of story-telling. The stories may not bring the borders down, but they may develop little holes in our logic walls. Looking from these walls, we may see the 'Other', and even we may love what we see.

Brought up in multicultural living conditions, Elif Shafak suggests recognizing not only our own culture, but also the different ones which should be obtained for enlightening ourselves. In her novels, Shafak works the concept of multiculturalism, through both her experiences and imaginations. It is without doubt that what she has been through in her childhood in Spain, Madrid, contributed to her distinctive authorship in the multicultural course. Shafak's eight novel *Honour* is an intriguing work which narrates the multicultural story of a family in a fictional way.

'Multiculturalism is a cultural diversity where two or more groups with distinctive beliefs and cultures exist in a society. Multiculturalism is characterized as a feel-good celebration of ethno cultural diversity, encouraging citizens to acknowledge and embrace the panoply of customs, traditions, music, and cuisine that exist in a multi-ethnic society.' (Kymlicka, 2012). Likewise, Milan Kundera argues that, "the identity of a people and of a civilization is reflected and concentrated in what has been created by the mind—in what is known as "culture." (Milan Kundera, 1984). If this identity is threatened with extinction, cultural life grows correspondingly more intense, more important, until culture itself becomes the living value around which all people rally. In this respect, multiculturalism fundamentally does not state a notion, rather there is a mother lode culture, and around it there are communities that are isolated or not from the society in terms of the main culture. In accordance with this figure, a few different components are sprinkled around and that is considered as a multicultural community. It is also a successful combination of two or more cultures.

As a matter of fact, each community is already multicultural which is a state policy shaped around not crushing the ethnic, religious, national, racial and even sexual minorities, recognition of their rights, but offering them specific privileges. The prominent theoreticians of this policy are Will Kymlicka, Charles Taylor, Bhikhu Parekh and Iris Marion Young. Multiculturalism is a sort of cosmopolitanism that is a phenomenon which represents a huge wealth both at social and individual base, if the base is kept durable. Multiculturalism allows the people who are from different cultures to live in love and brotherhood attachments.

2. HONOUR

The novel that contains an escapist fiction, narrates the tragedy of a Turkish/Kurdish family who immigrate to Britain. Each character is processed so well in great detail that one may recognize if they can see them one day on the street. While the novel progresses in a still normality in the first half, then suddenly the twists start, so we can notice that it is not a simple family tragedy but more complex. Naze and Berzo who live in a place near the River Euphrates, wishing to have a son but have 8 daughters, and are at top of the family tree. Their twin-daughters Pembe Kader and Jamila Yeter – Pink Destiny and Enough Beauty, protagonists of the novel, function as the main conflict of the story both in terms of characters and culturally.

On the other hand, there is Aisha and her drunken husband living in Istanbul with their three children, Adem, Tarik and Khalil. Adem, who visits the small village in Euphrates for his brother Khalil doing his Military service, falls in love with Jamila but is obliged to get marry with Pembe. This is because, Jamila is abducted by their kith and kins and even if no one is sure, she may have been dishonored. Unaware of this matter Adem informs his elder brother, Tariq, who is in Istanbul, that he desires to marry a girl he met in the village. Then Adem marries with Pembe in order not to feel shame of his brother. Pembe also wishes to escape from this village and to visit Istanbul. Iskender, Esma and Yunus are born from this marriage, without bringing happiness to the couple as it appears



to be a wrong one from the beginning. After living in Istanbul, the family moves to London and Adem moves further away from his family by meeting Roxana, a dancer and gambling. In the meantime, Pembe begins to get closer to Elias who rescues her from the offensive teasing of a racist pastry shop assistant in Britain. Tragically, each piece of the family scatters aside. Yunus the youngest member of the family is in a group composed by jitters where he enjoys spending time with Tobiko, a girl quite older than him. In the general sense, the happiest group is theirs.

Esma, the only daughter of Adem and Pembe, dreams of writing a book, and travelling around the world. Iskender, also known as Alexander, Alex in short, is a well-built, brave and aggressive boy. He may also be considered as silly, as one need to be silly so as to perform the things he does. Iskender shares the situation about her mother's relationship with another man to his gadding father in night clubs, after he is faced with his father's unexpected devil-may-care attitude, he thinks that he needs to do something himself. Actually it is his uncle, Tariq who suggests him to do something for his dishonored mother. Tariq also lives in London with his distant relative wife, Meral and runs a small kiosk. Then Iskender decides to cleanse his honour. Here the surprises of the story start, as the idea we all assume that Iskender killed his mother goes someplace else. Pembe's twin sister, Jamila comes to London to visit her sister, after receiving letters from Pembe telling about her affair with Elias. Iskender confuses his mother with his aunt Jamila, and stabs his aunt by mistake.

Both the characters and the story are totally multicultural, stretching from the Euphrates River to London. It is instrumental to analyze the characters identically and culturally, in order to reveal this aspect of the novel. It is considered as a multicultural novel since it contains characters from different cultures such as Roxana from Bulgaria, - regards herself as Russian though-, Rita, the boss and friend of Pembe at the hair-dresser, from Jamaica, Elias, a man whose complex ethnic background allows him to be accepting of cultural differences, and other characters coming from Turkey and London.

3. MULTICULTURAL IDENTITY

Pembe and Adem, the couple who get married and move to London after living in Istanbul in the 1970s, respectively come from a different culture. We can say that, Pembe is from a small village in the south-eastern town of Turkey, Urfa which possesses an eastern, patriarchal and traditional way of life. She could speak both Turkish and Kurdish 'unlike the other eight-year-old girls in her village, Jamila and she went to school - a decrepit, one-storey building in another village forty minutes' walk away - and could count.' (Shafak, 2013, 10).

'While Jamila clammed up completely, refusing to speak any language whatsoever, Pembe tried hard to excel in Turkish, determined to learn the teacher's language and, through that, to reach his heart.' (Shafak, 2013,10). Pembe is more open to diversity and understandings the other compared to Jamila. Pembe, one had the chance to go to the cinema in the city, with her father, Berzo 'loved everything about the cinema - the ornate foyer, the heavy, draped curtains, the thick, welcoming darkness.'

'Jamila could not understand how the family had been on *that* island for so long but still not set eyes on the Queen, save in magazines and newspapers. Sometimes she doubted whether Pembe had ventured from the neighborhood where she lived at all. If she always ended up confined between walls, what was the use of her travelling to a faraway country? Why couldn't human beings live and die where they were born? Jamila found big cities suffocating, and was daunted by the thought of unknown places - the buildings, the avenues, the crowds pressing on her chest, leaving her gasping for air.' (Shafak, 2013, 32). Jamila stayed in the village, lived alone in a small cottage, wearing long-sleeved, colorful gowns, ornamented vests, shalwar. She would mount a horse and read for anything all the time as well as prepare medicine and service for the women who give birth. Although it is unusual for a woman living alone in the eastern society, Jamila convinced her father to let her remain single and assist the midwives.

In point of fact, Adem fell in love with Jamila when he saw her in the village and had a conversation, and wished to marry with Jamila. This concept of desire to marry with an eastern Kurdish girl, builds a multicultural character, Adem, a western man who come from Istanbul, the biggest town of Turkey. 'Born and bred in Istanbul, Adem only left the city for the first time when he was eighteen years old. Taking with him a suitcase full of clean underwear, lavender cologne and a box of *baklava*, he got on a bus and arrived twenty-four hours later, drained and disoriented, at a south-western town where he knew not much about. From there he travelled in the back of a lorry to a



village that bordered the northern tip of Syria. This was where his brother Khalil had been doing his military service for the past five months.’ (Shafak, 2013, 32).

‘Broadly speaking, those who are mixed-race and mixed-ethnic, those who have lived in more than one country (such as expatriates, international students, immigrants, refugees, and sojourners), those reared with at least one other culture in addition to the dominant mainstream culture (such as children of immigrants or colonized people), and those in inter-cultural relationships may all be considered multicultural.’ (Berry, 2003, 17-37). However, there is no doubt, we perceive Adem as a character who is not very religious but pays attention to traditional notions when he is on the horn of a dilemma regarding the marriage with Jamila whose virginity is not certain. It is also dramatic to meet Adem’s rejection Jamila just because of Berzo’s, -Jamila’s father- offer and obscurity of her maidenhood with the anxiety how to introduce this girl to his brother, Tariq. Here we come across an eastern, patriarchal, traditional mind that is hung up to regarding woman as a sexual object. It is as surprising as seeing Adem’s thoughts about Roxana, the Russian-Bulgarian woman whom Adem met in a casino in London while gambling and fell in love. After spending some time with Roxana, Adem was thinking seriously to be with her.

‘Every time Roxana lectured him, Adem had the impression that she was addressing all the men she had known. That hurt. Being part of a rogues’ gallery, having no distinctive character in her eyes, made him feel like the temporary lover that he was. He wanted to be unique, her one and only. It didn’t matter that there had been others before him. Well, it did matter, but at least he could be assured that he was special it would lessen the discomfort.’ (Shafak, 143-144)

Ironically, Adem’s intellectual alteration is noticeable in his thoughts concerning Roxana. The man who rejected the woman due to the virginity issue in 1961 in the south-eastern Turkey, was voluntarily wishing to accept a casino dancer in 1978 in London even though he was in love with both of them. Adem’s contradictory reaction to this matter of fact represents him as a multicultural character. In addition, Adem is positioned in a complexity unwittingly, referring to the ideas between East and West. ‘He was also a shameful man who abandoned his family for a dancer.’ (Shafak., 144)

Pembe, the bizarre, young Turkish woman of Kurdish descent, who has grown up in a small village in the south-east of Turkey, dreams of discovering beyond the village. ‘I’m going to be a sailor and travel the world. Every week I’ll wake up in a new harbor.’ (Shafak., 38). Holding this kind of fancies, Pembe was lucky enough to marry Adem and travel across Turkey and then Europe since her sister, Jamila was ‘not a proper girl to marry’. Although it is not charged widely, we have the impression from Esma’s speech that Pembe lived in Istanbul for a while after marrying Adem.

Furthermore, their children Iskender, and Esma were born in Istanbul where they spent a couple of years. ‘there was a flat in Istanbul – the place where Iskender and I had spent the early years of our childhood but that now belonged to another time, another country. This was where our family had lived prior to our move to England in May 1970, shortly before Yunus was born.’

Pembe has gone through a change of culture twice, first moving to Istanbul from Urfa and second moving to London from Istanbul. As a young person, it was not so challenging for Pembe to be able to adapt both of these diverse cultures of which she was aware. Pembe would respect Allah’s intention to create the Toprak family different from their English neighbors and Turks different from Kurds too, and also some Kurds were even unlike other Kurds. Pembe would keep the characteristics of her origin culture by adding new perspectives with she gained in Istanbul and London. On the one hand, it was totally unacceptable to have a love affair with Elias who was an Orthodox Christian and coming from a multi-national origin, while she was still married to Adem. Perhaps, being in another country and not seeing her husband anymore made her feel independent and finding it wrong though, Pembe maintained meeting with Elias for cinema secretly from her children. On the other hand, Pembe would insist her daughter, Esma to be a calm girl, to stay at home all the time, while she would give unlimited freedom to her first and most valuable son in her eyes, Iskender, and call him “my sultan” by attributing great importance to his son as it is expected in the eastern culture. Thus, Pembe stands in between two different identities and cultures.

The concepts of discourse, power, culture and language are dialectically interrelated – they complement one another. Discourses, in turn, are shaped and informed by practices. Discourse and practices then enter into power relations. One does not have more or less power than the other but each equally shapes the other (Foucault, 1977).



4. CONCLUSION

To conclude, the novel has proved to be an effective site for defining multicultural identity in an extended transnational viewpoint. The characters productively enable a representation of gaining mixed perceptions in the journey of their physical and psychological experiences. Hence, travelling from the very east to the west along with self-images, signifies a result of the migratory notion. In the novel, it is both discussed the concept of multiculturalism within the woman condition in an oppressed society. Shafak portrays the difficulties of being a woman in a certain region of Turkey, in addition to the challenges of the contrary features of a culture. Therefore, the novel, *Honour* remarks the social, cultural and identical concepts of a distinct society.

Shafak's novel discusses how the cultural opposites can be blended in one individual and lead to a formation of third culture or a multicultural nature in a society. *Honour* has made a sophisticated description of a family from the very south-east of Turkey to Istanbul and to London by rebuilding and improving the characters with a multicultural identity.

REFERENCES

www.elifsafak.us

Elif Shafak's TED Speech. TEDGlobal>NYC | September 2017.

Kymlicka, Will (2012) *Multiculturalism: Success, Failure, and the Future*. Queen's University February

Kundera, Milan (1984). *The Tragedy of Central Europe*. Translated from the French by Edmund White New York Review of Books Volume 31, Number 7 · April 26.

Shafak Elif. (2013) *Honour*. Penguin Books.

Berry, John W. (2003). *Conceptual Approaches to Acculturation*. In K. M. Chun, P. B. Organista, & G. Marín (Eds.), *Acculturation: Advances in theory, measurement, and applied research* (pp. 17-37). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Padilla, Amado M. (2006). Bicultural Social Development. *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences*, 28, 467-497.

Eliot, Thomas S. (1996). *Four Quartets*. New York: Harcourt brace & Co., 1943.

_____. Culture's In-Between. *Questions of Cultural Identity*. Eds. Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay. London: Sage. 53-60.

Fanon, Frantz (2004). On National Culture. *Literature in the Modern World Critical Essays and Documents*, 2nd rev. ed. Ed. Dennis Walder. Oxford: Oxford UP, 371-377.

Foucault, Michel (1977). *Discipline and punish*. New York: Pantheon.