
Suffering of Women characters in Elif Shafak's Novel Honour

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Abstract

The novel is about the plight of women living in different places. Not only in Turkey but even in England men treat women as an inferior sex. The mind set of society in the Turkish village and in England is same. Places don't play any role in changing such mind sets. Women suffer because they are under the control of male dominating society. Many female writers have raised their voice against this discrimination. Shafak is a Turkish novelist and sets her novel in Turkish village as well as in England. This novel is about the so called male- ego, where a son kills her mother for the sake of his family 'honour'.

Key words: Honour, Western, Eastern Cultures, Diaspora, Women, Men, Kurdish, English, Dancer, Mother-hood, etc

Introduction

Many writers have portrayed the problems of the place of women in the society and her place in her married life. Certain societies are still considering women as an inferior sex and for the sake of their hegemonic honour; they even kill her, torture her and dishonour her. Not only female writers but male writers with sense of humanity wrote about her in their respective novels, poems articles etc. Elif Shafak is the writer who very wittily crafts her novel on such a great theme and subject. *Honour* is a novel by Shafak, where a son kills his mother for the sake of his pseudo-honour. Elif Shafak is considered to be the most popular Turkish writer. She has written many novels among them are *Forty Rules of Love*, *Bastard of Istanbul* the *Flea Palace* and *Honour*. Shafak blends Western and Eastern traditions of storytelling in stories

of families, Diasporas, sub-cultures, youth and especially women.

Istanbul has always been a central part of Shafak's writings. She depicts city as "a she-city" and likens her to an old woman with a young heart, who is eternally hungry for new stories and new lives" (6). Shafak is advocate of women's equality and freedom and her novels revolve round the role of women in a society.

Honour is a story where past and present are intertwined together. It is a story about a family, mother- son relationship, a half Kurdish and half Turkish family in London in the late 1970s. The novel is blend of East and West. Shafak in an interview says about *Honour*:

My novel travels to different cities and location, like my novels do. There are scenes in Kurdish village, and Istanbul, but London has been central. I love the multicultural blending here, which is different than anywhere else. But I also

wanted to say if honour related attacks are happening even here and they are, then that means they can happen anywhere.

Shafak took the title of the novel Honour from Turkey itself. In Turkey this novel is called Iskender, which means Alexander. She herself said in an interview that: In Turkey the novel is called Iskender, which means Alexander. Honour I could not name it Alexander in English as people would think it was great Alexander the great. So instead of focusing on a character I focused on the theme and chose *Honour* as its name.

Honour is a novel about struggle, existence and freedom of two women Pembe and Jamila. Their mother had suffered very badly, because she couldn't give birth to a baby boy. When Pembe was born, Naze was so sad that she forgot about all she had suffered for the previous twenty –hours. She gave birth to a baby girl and had another baby in her womb, but she was reluctant to deliver it. She was forced back to bed by the women of vicinity and her husband Burzo. This time Naze did not attempt to runaway. She gave a big sigh and turned towards window reluctantly:

This time Naze did not attempt to run away. She gave a wisp of a sigh, buried her head in the pillow and turned towards the open window, as if straining to hear fate's whisper in the wind, as mild as milk. If she listened attentively, she thought she might hear an answer from the skies. After all, there must be a reason, a justification unbeknownst to her but surely obvious to Allah, as to why He had given them two more daughters when they had already six, and still not a single son. (5)

Elif Shafak very pathetically describes the death of Pembe's mother Naze. Not having a son had affected her psyche so much that after the birth of her twin daughters she was sure that she will deliver a baby boy. She was expecting once again. This was her ninth delivery. She was very happy as if God has gifted her a son this time. Shafak through the character of Naze depicts a Turkish society where male is a semi-god and every mother feels elated and honoured to give birth to a son rather a daughter. Her mother-hood seems to be incomplete without having a son in her life. This time Naze had a breech birth. The baby was too big and was pointing the wrong way. Hours passed Naze was all in blood but the baby was not coming out. Naze ordered the mid-wife to cut her womb and take away her son. Cut me, you bitch! Take him out, ' Naze ordered and then laughed, as if she had Already crossed a threshold beyond which everything was a joke. It's a boy don't you see? My son is coming! You spiteful. Jealous whore. Take a pair of scissors! Now! Cut my belly open and take my son out! (19)

Naze didn't survive nor did the baby, the baby whose gender she had been wrong about the whole time. Her ninth infant, the child who killed her and then quietly passed away in her cot, was another girl.

Pembe and Jamila were twins and very much attached to each other. Pembe was very bold and loved to learn Turkish but couldn't complete her studies as the society was against female education. Jamila was straight and sober and was happy what God bestowed on her. She was very beautiful that is why they called her Jamila-means very beautiful. The story

takes a turn when a young man Adem Toprak came to their village. Adem was born and bred in Istanbul. Adem left Istanbul and was in the village staying with his uncle. During a marriage party he saw Jamila and proposed her for marriage and wanted to take her away to a far place from this village. Adem was psychologically upset because back in Istanbul his mother had eloped with her lover. Adem could not stop himself and left the city. Adem loved Jamila but married Pembe for the sake of honour. Adem rejected Jamila because years ago Jamila's elder sister Kamile was going to get married. Just before the marriage the two families got into fight and kidnapped Jamila in retaliation. They kept her somewhere for a few days. Then Jamila's father Berzo sent for them a consent to Kamile's marriage, in return they brought Jamila back. Jamila was then examined by a mid-wife, who said Jamila had no hymen but some girls are born like this. Adem married Pembe knowing that he never loved her because the society would not accept Jamila as her chaste wife. Jamila had not defended herself or sworn her chastity, and her silence was so unsettling. What if she was not a virgin? How could he live with this doubt for rest of his life? What would his brother Tariq say when he learned that he had found himself a tainted wife-an exact replica of their mother.(99)

Pembe was seventeen when she became a mother-young, beautiful and apprehensive. Her mother Naze's voice echoed in Pembe's ear. She felt happy as well as sad for her mother. She thought her mother must be watching her being a mother of a son.

Meanwhile, Iskender was growing. His skin was like warm sand, his hair dark and wavy and gleaming like stardust, his eyes brimming with mischief, he smiled copiously winning hearts. After some years Pembe and Adem left for England and Pembe left her sister Jamila as her reflection there. They communicated with each other through letters and post-cards. In England Pembe gave birth to another son Yunus. Yunus could speak fluent English. Yunus was an introverted one while as Iskender was imply and extrovert. Yunus always noticed her mother; she looked withdrawn, lost in thought. Yunus could feel that Pembe was not happy with his married life. She started to work shortly after Adem had gambled away two months worth wages. Suddenly money was needed like never before. Their marriage was just a compromise because Adem was fulfilling his lust with his mistress Roxana. As Simone de Beauvoir says, "the curse which lies upon marriage is that too often the individuals are joined in their weakness rather than their strength, each asking from the other instead of finding pleasure in giving"(343). While Iskender was at school Pembe started to go to the houses of rich, where she would take care of their toddlers, cook their food, clean their rooms, scour their saucepans, and iron their clothes. Esmâ her daughter who is the narrator of the events in this novel, would be left in care of a neighbour, an old woman with a sharp tongue and poor hearing, but otherwise a nice lady.

After working for several; families Pembe found a full time job. The woman was an actress and had just given birth to a baby girl. Her husband was a busy traveller.

Pembe's job was to take care of the house and the baby. Pembe was cooking food in the kitchen and her daughter Esma was playing under the kitchen table, the woman's husband appeared. Unaware of Esma's presence he staggered towards Pembe and grabbed her sides. The man tried to molest her chastity, but Pembe pushed the man against wall, in his drunken state he offered little resistance. Pembe took her daughter and then took a bus and got off at her usual stop and decided to walk the rest of the way home. Adem returned home asked for money, but had not got the money from the family while saving her honour. Adem abused her and then took a backscratcher on the sofa, a mustard yellow cold tool made up of ram's horn. In the twinkling of his eye he grabbed it and flung it on the side of her face with a thud cutting her neck. She protests but nobody listens to her except her daughter Esma. Patriarchy is the social order in which women are dominated by men. We are used to see the world such as family, religion, education and culture reflecting how men are benefitted by these than a woman. Man by default becomes the centre of human existence and women get placed at the periphery of that circle. Simon de Beauvoir writes, "marriage subjugates and enslaves woman and it leads her to aimless days indefinitely repeated, life that slips away gently towards death without questioning its purpose."(500)

Pembe's sufferings do not end here but carried further. Adem was having an affair with Roxana. Loving Roxana and being with her was his only job. After having sex with Roxana Adem used to come to home for seeking money from

Pembe and never tried to speak words of love and sympathy to her instead would beat her but she denied money. Pembe was living a hell and had no source of joy except her daughter Esma and her sisters' letters. Since the day she was born as the seventh daughter of a woman who longed for a son, Pembe had come to see this world as a hotbed of favouritism and inequalities. Pembe was now working with a lady in a salon named Rita. Rita was a nice lady not a boss but a real friend to her and Pembe felt comfortable while working there. One day Pembe went to a éclair shop to buy some puddings for Yunus. There she met a Greek man; his name was Elias, who was a chef by profession. Elias and Pembe were now friends and Pembe found solace and peace in his company.

On the other hand Jamila was busy in delivering new born babies to this world. She was all alone and people thought she had a jinni under her control that is why she used to live away from the village near the woods. Only Pembe's letters were a source of pleasure for her otherwise she was living a hellish life alone among the woods. Both Pembe and Jamila loved Adem and both had a tattered life to live. Seldom writes:

Men can think of himself without woman. She cannot think of herself without man. And she is simply what man decrees . . . she appears essentially to the male as sexual being. For him she is a sex-absolute sex; no less. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with to her, she is the incidental, the in essential as opposed to his essential.(534)

To add to misery of both the women, Pembe and Jamila are suffering. Jamila

always remember her love to Adem and had nightmares of that love while as Pembe had never tasted the true essence of that love. Both the sisters are alone Pembe in the company of Adem and Jamila living her life all alone.

Pembe was feeling happy in the company of Elias. They very often met and feel a need of each other. Their love was above sex and immorality yet both find each other's company a solace and peace in this terrible world. Jamila on the other hand was busy for the past fifteen years, preparing concoctions that might be requested in a moment's notice with a knock on her door. She was the healer, the virgin-mid-wife who spoke the language of birds, reptiles and insects. A *granddaughter of Prophet Solomon*. That is what the locals call her.

That too was a reason why she had managed to survive on her own in the wilderness.

They respected, feared and despised her; as a result they left her alone. This woman

Who was no woman; a witch who paced the tight rope between two worlds . . . when Jamila was in the cellar, she stepped outside of her body, becoming a conduit for an arcane energy that coursed through the universe, healing mending and multiplying.(173)

Jamila was not interested in travelling to unfamiliar places, meeting strangers, discovering continents beyond the horizon. Such was the life which Jamila was living but she always wanted to see her twin sister Pembe.

After Adem abandons his family Iskender the eldest son stepped in and became the

one who will not let any shame come to the family's name. When Pembe began a chaste affair with Elias, Iskender discovered that you could love someone with all your heart and yet be ready to hurt them. Shafak describes a world here where women as well as men enforce an honour code that results in the social death of men who fail to act like men and actual death of several female relatives. As Beauvoir says, "man is defined as a human being and woman as female- whenever she behaves as human being she is said to imitate man"(455).

After Adem falls in love with an exotic dancer, he drifts away from his family. Iskender the eldest son is left unprotected and is brutally bullied before forming his own gang and doing much worse to others. His view on masculinity is further sharpened by the neighbourhoods' fledgling radicals and he has one rule for her English girl-friend and another for his mother. In the end Jamila who comes to London through a group of outlaws is killed as a disguise for Pembe by Iskender Iskender is in prison, having killed her mother for having a chaste affair in London's East End. Years ago in Turkey his parental grandmother ran-off to live with her lover. The shame these two women brought on their loved ones remain a stain on the family's 'honour', as indelible as the tattoo worn by Iskender's brother.

In precise Shafak captures a culture where men can abandon his family for a mistress and women are killed for the sake of honour having a friendship with another man. Here Simone de Beauvoir says, "One who is born, but rather becomes a woman" (434).

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