

## **Unifying Power of Storytelling: A Study of Elif Shafak's Select Novels**

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### **Abstract**

The project aims to explore the unifying elements of storytelling in *The Forty Rules of Love* and *Three Daughters of Eve* by the author, Elif Shafak in the light of Postmodernism. The two novels depict the elements of mini-narratives, pluralism, multiplicity and polyphony. *The Forty Rules of Love* juxtaposes two centuries and blends them, whereas, *Three Daughters of Eve* juxtaposes two continents. The two novels talk about the cultural, ethnical, religious and individual differences which are the major cause of gaps and conflicts between people. This research paper focuses on highlighting the multiple narratives of the marginalized characters belonging to the minority groups.

**Keywords:** Postmodernism, Mini-narratives, Multiplicity, Polyphony.

### **Introduction**

Every culture has its own set of stories. They are as diverse in nature as our end numbers of cultures. Stories are shared to the world to bring into light the culture, history, personal narrative, political commentary, issues related to cultural norms, and for teaching morality. These stories build a platform for the people to connect with other people from different nations, religions and cultures. When we go through a story, we connect with the characters and so we grow sympathy and empathy for the character. In an article, "Why Novel Matters in The Age of Anger", Shafak says:

"The novel matters because stories continue to connect us across borders, and help us to see beyond the artificial categories of race, gender, class. The world is frighteningly

messy today, but a world that has lost its empathy, cognitive flexibility and imagination will surely be a darker place.” (Shafak)

Our intellectual minds are stimulated when we read different perspectives. We start questioning dogmas and prejudices. We start looking for the perspectives of the ‘other’ who is not one of us as we understand that their viewpoint holds equal importance. We try to mend our rigid thoughts. “Listening to stories widens our imagination, telling them lets us leap over cultural walls, embrace different experiences, feel what other feel”. (Shafak)

Stories promote multiplicity. They bring into the centre the unheard voices, the voices of the marginalized. Through stories, we get to know the multiple truths which are not limited to one conviction. This can be further understood through the concept of polyphony which includes the diversity of voices or viewpoints.

“The essence of polyphony lies precisely in the fact that the voices remain independent and, as such, are combined in a unity of a higher order than in homophony. If one is to talk about individual will, then it is precisely in Polyphony that a combination of several individual wills take place that the boundaries of individual will can be in principle exceeded. One could put it this way: the artistic will of polyphony is a will to combine many wills, a will to the event.”(Mikhail Bakhtin)

## **Elif Shafak: The Art of Story Telling**

Elif Shafak is one of the widely read contemporary writers. With her roots in Turkey, she has lived in other parts of the world such as Michigan, Boston, Arizona, Istanbul and London. She embraced different cultures and languages from these places and presented in her works. Elif Shafak writes about minorities, women, immigrants, different cultures and youth. Her works reflect her keen interest in cultural politics, Sufism, history and philosophy. Her works are powerful and influential. Through her fictitious characters, she gives voices to the marginalized. Further, she challenges dogmas and doctrines.

*The Forty Rules of love* is a neatly Knitted story of two centuries. It has one foot in contemporary times and the other in the thirteenth century. Both the stories are parallel to each other. The first story is about Ella Rubinstein, a housewife with a monotonous life. Her marriage with David was all about understanding, affection and compassion but nothing like love and passion. The most needed pillar to support their marriage was missing. Ella was at peace with her life until she realised the crescendo of void inside her. When she started working for a literary agency, she came across a novel titled “*Sweet Blasphemy*” written by A.Z. Zahara. She started reading it as her first assignment, not realizing what great impact it

will have on her life. “*Sweet Blasphemy*” was set in the thirteenth century. The juxtaposition of past and present reveals us that nothing much has changed even after centuries. People still fight over religious, gender, cultural and ideological differences. One wants to dominate the other. It is not the differences that divide people but the unacceptance of these differences. While there was hostility, killing, chaos and turmoil all around, an Islamic Scholar lived a peaceful life. Jalal-ad-Din Rumi mostly called Mawlana – “Our Master”. He was regarded as a beacon to all Muslims. In the foreword, he is introduced as the symbol of love and spiritualism.

“In an age of deeply embedded bigotries and clashes, he stood for a universal spirituality, opening his doors to people of all backgrounds. Instead of an outer-oriented jihad- defined as “the war against infidels” and carried out by many in those days as in the present- Rumi stood up for an inner-oriented jihad where the aim was to struggle against and ultimately prevail over one’s ego, nafs.”(FRL19-20)

His meeting with Shams of Tabriz was the beginning of a remarkable, unique and solid friendship. Their friendship altered their lives. Rumi had to get out of his comfort zone to taste mysticism, divine love and Sufism. As both the stories are parallel, similarly, Ella was struck with amazement how she could relate her life with the novel, she tried to contact the writer of the novel, “*Sweet Blasphemy*”. Upon knowing Aziz Z.Zahara, Ella noticed various similarities between Shams and Aziz. Both were spiritual and challenged dogmas. In *Saints and Sinners* by *The Express Tribune*, the book has been reviewed as:

“A story of two spiritual relationships as a powerful subject to ponder on, especially in the current climate when the world is ablaze with secular, religious, and cultural differences. The book is entrenched with realism, hope, forgiveness and freedom. The vibrant characters add a deep conviction to the novel. The power of the novel may just be the simplicity with which it is written, each of the forty rules is a lesson, a philosophical principal that has the power to engage its reader in self-analysis.”(The Express Tribune)

Similarly, the character of Azur in *Three Daughters of Eve* questions religious and cultural dogmas. He took seminars on ‘God’. He picked up students from diverse backgrounds with unlike ideologies to talk about one topic. The group of eleven students comprised of the feminists, the orthodox, the ultra-liberals and the confused. Through this Shafak has tried to present different viewpoints held by people in a society. Azur tries to teach his students the

difference between 'Religion' and 'God'. His motive was not to preach 'what to think' but rather 'how to think' unlike many religious zealots.

"I have learned so much from God that I can no longer call myself a Christian, a Hindu, a Muslim, a Buddhist, a Jew. The Truth has shared so much of itself with me that I can no longer call myself a man, a woman, an angel or even a pure soul"

(TDE, 179)

The protagonist of the novel, Peri was struck between her secular father and a religious mother. And amid all this Peri grew up as a confused individual with an agitation to believe or not to believe. She was certain that Azur had all the answers to her questions. There the three daughters of Eve unite, Shirine, "the sinner", Mona, "the believer" and Peri, "the confused". The story raises a question that despite the differences in their viewpoints towards God and religion, can there be any ground other than God and religion to unite them?

"Shafak has masterfully created equally lush portraits of warm and complicated Istanbul and cold and collected Oxford. Peri's parents are symbolic to the clash between Istanbul's mix of modernity and religiosity, liberalism, and conservatism. Her mother is a religious zealot, while her father is a liberal drunk, and in their heated interactions we see the struggle Turkey itself is going through" (Saadia Faruki)

Most of the conflicts that our society is facing today revolve around the differences and the lack of acceptance of these differences. These differences have led to the development of gaps between the two opposite groups of the people such as eastern and western, homosexual and heterosexual, theist and atheist, modern and traditional. The clash between the two different ideologies has widened the gaps between the people. People form clusters based on similarities and then they tend to produce stereotypes about other clusters of people. In an Interview, *The Politics of Fiction*, Elif Shafak says:

"One way of transcending these cultural ghettos is through the art of storytelling. Stories cannot demolish frontiers but they can punch holes in our mental walls and through those holes we can get a glimpse of the other and sometimes you will like what you see." (Shafak)

Postmodernists believed that there is no universal mutable truth instead there are multiple truths that are limited to the perception of an individual, culture or society. Postmodernism was highly sceptical of established norms about religion, truth, morals and ethics instead they emphasised on the individual's relative truth. Postmodernists 'deconstructed' these norms by

saying these metanarratives destroy differences and try to impose regularity. Metanarratives were a danger for multiplicity and pluralism.

Jean-Francois Lyotard in his book *The Postmodern Condition* defines it as:

“Simply, incredulity towards metanarratives. ‘Grand Narratives’ of progress and human perfectibility, then, are no longer tenable, and the best we can hope for is a series of ‘mini-narratives’, which are provisional, contingent, temporary, and relative and which provide a basis for the actions of specific groups in particular local circumstances. Postmodernity thus ‘deconstruct’ the basic aim of the Enlightenment, that is, the idea of a unitary end of history and of a subject.” (Lyotard)

While *The Forty Rules of Love* take us on a journey of spiritual enlightenment, the other novel, *Three Daughters of Eve* take us on the journey of doubt and faith. Both the novels aim to trigger our consciousness to raise important questions regarding, God and religion, faith and doubt, moral and immoral. It is when we read these novels we become self-critical and try to grasp the thoughts and beliefs of the ‘other.’ We need to unlearn what we have learned, to learn something new about the minorities, marginalized and oppressed whose voices have been suppressed since years. It is when we can push the boundaries of our mind, we can expand our hearts for the other.

“I am more interested in transcending myself, going beyond the boundaries of the ‘self’ that was given to me at birth and becoming the ‘other’. When I write about the ‘other’ – ethnic minorities, sexual minorities, the persecuted voices etc. – I realise I write about myself. I always felt closer to those on the periphery than those at the centre, to those who are silenced than to those who speak aloud and to those who have been disempowered than to those in power.” (Shafak, *The Tribune Express*)

The character of Shams and Azur are the perfect examples of the balance between faith and doubt. Faith makes them compassionate and doubt makes them curious to know more. They both respect and love human beings despite their age, gender, religion or nationality.

The novels also depict false nationalism. Few characters such as the Zealot, Baybars, Aladdin and Hakan believe they are doing everything in the interest of public and for the public while all they are doing is serving their egos. In one of her interviews, Shafak says,

“I am very critical of ultra-nationalism and religious fanaticism. Both of them are based on hatred and intolerance. And so is far-right bigotry. As the Sufis said long ago, as human beings, we are all interconnected. People such as Donald Trump create

more anti-Americans in the Middle East; fundamentalists in the Middle East create more Islamophobes in the west. It is a vicious circle. We need to break this circle of hatred, animosity and duality. We need to find narratives based on pluralism, intelligent compassion and creative humanism.” (The Tribune Express)

## Conclusion

Though Both Ella and Peri have fulfilling lives, both have a void within themselves, the fifth element. This gives us an idea that we all have something in common, the void. We fill it with hatred, resentment and envy instead of tolerance, love and compassion. What divides us can also unite us. Our Art and Culture thrive on differences as differences lead to more creativity because spectrums are always more beautiful than mere shades of black and white. Shafak says, “All totalitarian regimes are based on a fake notion of sameness and that is very dangerous. Where there is a culture of sameness, literature will suffer, human beings will suffer.”

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