

ECRITURE FEMININE; STRUGGLES OF WOMANHOOD AND AUTHORSHIP IN ELIF SHAFAK'S *BLACK MILK*

Shabnam Sakiya P S

Research Scholar, Department of English, M E S Asmabi college, P.Vemballur, Affiliated to University of Calicut.

Abstract

Women are always considered as “other” in western phallogocentric culture. This “otherness” is also reflected in the literary scenario. Through the introduction of the term ‘*écriture féminine*’, Helene Cixous found an expression of this otherness and a break from the phallogocentric language. Cixous believed that women could bring about fluidity in language as women are decentred, therefore, freer to create. Being inspired by women writers, Shafak's writing has addressed numerous feminist issues, the vicissitudes of womanhood (like postpartum blues, menopause, etc.) and complexities of motherhood. The purpose of this paper is to examine the conflicting female voices (a harem of finger women or six Thumbelina) that exist within herself. Each woman's voice reflects different perspectives of women, ranging from the ambitious professional to the pure motherly figure. The paper also incorporates her postpartum experience; the tug of war between her all-encompassing writing life and the demands of motherhood.

Keywords: *Ecriture feminine, postpartum depression, individuality, identity*

Introduction

Elif Shafak writes about the inner conflicts she experienced during pregnancy and about the days of postpartum depression. Shafak hopes that she could overcome her postpartum blues by writing about it. Thus, she writes, “If I started to write about the experience, I could turn my blackened milk into ink, and as writing had always had a magical healing effect on my soul, I could inch my way out of this depression (Shafak 7).” The author has done detailed research on women writers of the past and how they balanced their personal lives as well as literary careers. Thus, the book become a great introduction to feminist criticism and literature. It also gives a wonderful insight into the lives of female writers throughout the ages and how each in their own way, tried to resolve this dilemma posed by motherhood.

Methodology

The paper will focus on understanding the experiences and perspectives of women writers through a qualitative approach. It will begin by providing an overview of Helene Cixous's theory of *Ecriture feminine*. Cixous argues that women should write from a place of “excess” and “fluidity”, rather than from the “lack” and “linearity” of traditional male-centric writing. She suggests that women's writing can be characterized by its use of metaphors related to childbirth, breastfeeding, and the female body. The paper will employ a variety of qualitative methods to explore these concepts, including literature reviews, theoretical approaches such as Elaine Showalter's gynocriticism and Judith Butler's gender performativity, as well as textual analysis.

Discussion

For Cixous, motherhood is a fulfilling experience, representing the most intense human-to-human relationship. While she distinguishes between the cultural and biological aspects, she doesn't diminish the significance of the latter. Female biology is an inspiration for her figurative way of writing. She expresses this connection by saying "I'm brimming over! My breasts are flowing, Milk. Ink. Nursing time...". Cixous is a scholar who is both critical of and supportive toward women writers. She thinks instead of "undermining patriarchy from within", many female authors have chosen to write like men, repeating the same codes and stereotypes. She advocates a new writing based on the libidinal economy of the feminine, an *écriture féminine* (Shafak 266).

According to Helene Cixous, women shall write with 'mother's milk' that finds origin during the development stage of a mother-child relationship just before the child is introduced to 'male-centric verbal language'. This relationship between a mother and child in the pre-linguistic stage manifests itself in writings that abolish repressions and subvert existing logic (Mallick). "She analyses the Freudian approach that sees woman as 'lack', replacing it with 'woman as excess'. She characterizes women's writing through the use of metaphors related to childbirth, breastfeeding and subtle allusions to the female body. "It is important to define a feminine practice of writing, and this is an importance that will remain, for this practice will never be theorized, enclosed, encoded-which doesn't mean that it doesn't exist" (Shafak 266). To describe her writing, Shafak also employs the analogy of breast milk. She writes about how her milk turned black due to the postpartum blues and expresses the hope that she can heal herself through writing about it. In this way, she envisions transforming her blackened milk into ink.

Elaine Showalter introduced the concept 'gynocriticism', a mode of criticism which seeks to build a framework of literary analysis that is pivoted on female identity. In the past, texts written by women were often excluded from the literary canon. To carve out their own space in the literary landscape, gynocritics concentrated on language patterns unique to female authors and explored subjects that were especially significant to them, such as domesticity, pregnancy, child rearing and female sexuality. The criticism raised against the gynocritics is that certain perspectives, literary subjects and ways of styling the language are unique to women that would distinguish it from the texts written by male authors. This charge of essentialism is also directed at '*écriture féminine*', a concept proposed by feminist critic Helene Cixous in her influential work *The Laugh of Medusa* (1975).

Despite the paradigm shift brought about by gynocriticism, Shafak notes that, "still today there remains a rule in place: Male writers are thought of as 'writers' first and then 'men'. As for female writers, they are first 'female' and only then 'writers'" (Shafak 39).

In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf argues that it would have been impossible for any woman, to write plays like those of Shakespeare during his time. To illustrate her point, she introduces an imaginary woman named Judith whom she presents as Shakespeare's sister. In a similar vein, Elif Shafak introduces an imaginary sister named Firuze to a renowned 16th century Middle-eastern poet, Fuzuli. Firuze possesses a deep passion for writing poetry but she is denied a formal education in the Madrasa. Instead, she is raised according to the societal norms destined to be a 'sociable wife, meticulous housewife, faithful mother'.

According to Judith Butler, in heteronormative society, gender is a performative construct, and concepts

related to gender, body and sexuality are socially constructed. Interestingly some prominent Turkish male novelists once held the belief that “for a woman, any woman the right way to engender is through her uterus, not through her brain. They claimed fiction writing as their terrain, an inherently manly task. The novel was a most rational construct, a cerebral work that required engineering and plotting. and since women were, by definition, emotional beings, they wouldn't make good novelists. These famous writers saw themselves as "Father Novelists" and their readers as sons in need of guidance (Shafak 19)”.

Shafak explores the stories of various women authors from around the world who struggled with maternal instincts and how they waded through writing and motherhood. It's worth noting that a significant number of female writers are mothers. However, there are also renowned poets and writers, such as Emily Dickinson, Virginia Woolf, Emily Bronte, Dorothy Parker, and Elizabeth Gilbert, who chose not to have children. Additionally, there are female writers who opted to both give birth and adopt. The Nobel laureate, Pearl S. Buck is the most remarkable among them. Shafak also underscores that “money and social class are still privileges that empower some more than others” (Shafak 42).

A woman undergoes several significant stages throughout her life, and the transitions between these stages may not always be easy. Shafak herself often feels like an impostor, a poor imitation of her gender. She expresses the idea that “womanhood is something I need to observe and study, learn and imitate, and still can never fully comprehend” (Shafak 16). Her instincts do not conform to the stereotypical notions of womanhood.

During a conversation with a renowned Turkish novelist, who had chosen the pursuit of writing over motherhood, Shafak found herself contemplating the same

choice. It was at this moment that her ‘harem’ of finger-women made their entrance into the scene- six thumbelinas residing inside her head. These thumbelinas represented different facets of Shafak’s personality, each with her own unique appearance, personality, voice and opinions. They were in constant discord with each other. Little Miss Practical approached choices and actions with logic and blunt rationale; Miss Highbrowed Cynic embraced the intellectual; Milady Ambitious Chekhovian was the career-driven artist; Dame Dervish represented the spiritual Sufi; Blue Belle Bovary was the seductress; and Mama Rice Pudding embodied the maternal figure. Shafak used the metaphor of ‘thumbelinas’ or ‘finger women’ to symbolize the internal conflicts and voices she experienced during pregnancy, describing her ‘harem’ as the place within her where these women resided.

Within Elif Shafak’s psyche, a constant battle rages among the voices in her ‘harem’ as she grapples with the question of whether it is possible to be both a writer and a mother. Little Miss Practical asserts that women can excel as both devoted mothers and successful career women while maintaining happiness. In contrast, Miss Ambitious Chekhovian argues that the writing life is a lifestyle and a lifelong passion that demands unwavering ambition and dedication. It is a realm where an artist’s commitment is all-consuming, often overshadowing other aspects of life.

This internal conflict is profound, as the novelist appears selfish, prioritizing writing above everything else, while the mother embodies selflessness. Shafak artfully portrays the confrontational conversations of her finger-women to illuminate this dilemma. Later on, Shafak discovers two previously unknown women within herself. One of them, a homemaker yearning to be a mother, had been suppressed by Shafak, almost to the point of nonexistence.

According to Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, our identities are not fixed but rather constructed through layers of social and cultural experiences. We perform the roles assigned to us by society, and the binary division of gender is a socially constructed concept that should be challenged. As a female writer grappling with the complexities of motherhood, Elif Shafak delves deep within herself, where she finds fragments of her identity represented by the 'Choir of Discordant Voices' often symbolized by her 'harem' of 'thumbelinas'. It can be understood that Shafak's fluidity in swapping identities is reflected in the presence of these discordant voices within the 'harem' or psyche of the author. She aspires to embody various facet of herself-Milady Ambitious Chekhovian, Little Miss Practical, Dame Dervish, Blue Belle Bovary-yet societal conditioning often pushes her toward the role of Mama Rice Pudding, the archetype of the pure motherly figure.

After experiencing postpartum depression, she lived in fear of losing herself, her writing, her career, her intellect and her inability to be a good mother. She vividly describes those days: "Postpartum depression became an inseparable part of my life. Wherever I went, whatever I did, Lord Poton [depression] followed me like an avid stalker. His presence was tiring, and yet he never took things to the extremes. He didn't eradicate you, but he turned you into something less than human, an empty shell of your former self. Perhaps he didn't stop you from eating and drinking all together, but he took all the pleasure out of it. Perhaps he didn't destroy all your reserves of strength, but he drained them enough that you felt stuck between deep sleep and wakefulness, like a doomed somnambulant"(Shafak).

Womanhood is unveiled as a blend of sisterhood, motherhood and profound individuality. Helene Cixous emphasizes that "there is no social change without linguistic change. Women need to break their silence. They need to write. We should write as we dream". By the book's conclusion, Shafak has embraced all of her six-finger women, each with their unique characteristics, and they coexist harmoniously within her. She aspires to embody them all simultaneously, desiring to be seen as Ambitious Chekhovian, Little Miss Practical, Dame Dervish, Blue Belle Bovary, Mama Rice Pudding, Intellectual Miss Highbrowed Cynic and all at once.

From a post-feminist perspective, she emerges as an aspirational and career-driven mother, rather than a selfless, sacrificial one. Inspired by women writers, Shafak's writing delves into numerous feminist issues, the ever-evolving experiences of womanhood (such as postpartum blues, menopause), and the intricate facets of motherhood-experiences that are uniquely feminine.

References

- Mallick, Mrittika.** (2022). *Ecriture Feminine' By Hélène Cixous: A Feminist Literary Theory That Investigates The Patriarchal Control Of Language.* <https://feminisminindia.com>
- Mambrol, N.** (2019). *Judith Butler's Concept of Performativity. Literary Theory and Criticism.* <https://literariness.org/2016/10/10/judith-butlers-concept-of-performativity/>
- Shafak, Elif.** (2013). *Black Milk: On Motherhood and Writing.* Penguin UK.