



ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

Ophthalmology

Accountability in Honour Killings: Reading of Elif Shafak's *Honour*

KEY WORDS: Transformational leadership, management innovation

Prof. Nuzhat Khan Assistant Professor in English, Sathaye College, Vile Parle (E), Mumbai

ABSTRACT

This paper disputes that the multifaceted elements of how honour killings outlined in literary works can chaperon us to have a better understanding of honour killings as a social phenomenon. Literature vibrantly conceptualises the intricate mesh of relations between individual and society while reciting actions in their social context. As literature reports social group and individual behaviours from multiple points-of-view, it is an imperative tool in terms of understanding the undercurrents of honour killings. In this paper I will talk about the creation of masculinity in Turkish author Elif Shafak's British-set novel *Honour* (2012), scrutinizing ways in which victimhood and culpability are associated when honour killing is used as a way of ascertaining masculinity.

In *Honour*, Elif Shafak conveys the story of the Turkish-Kurdish Toprak family going back three generations and ends with the honour killing of the aunt, Jamila, by her nephew, Iskender.

In my paper I want to highlight how *Honour* contextualises the issues of victimhood and culpability in honour killings.

As we can hear both a witness and the perpetrator of the honour crime as the narrative voices of the story, the novel deals with multiple points of views on the matters of victimhood and culpability in honour killings. I will concentrate on the agents and victims of honour killings as they are characterized in *Honour* and the techniques in which this representation brightens the spectacle of culpability. I claim that victimhood and culpability are allied in complex ways and that complexity lights the intricate nature of honour crimes. Through a contrapuntal analysis of the issues in *Honour*, this paper underwrites to our understanding of how honour killings persist and are sustained in a society of 'classic patriarchy' because of the social force felt by all its members, and of how victimhood and culpability cannot be entirely disentangled. While analysing the novel, as a requirement of Said's humanist criticism, I will endeavour to understand Shafak's reflective mind, her relations with society and her own experiences.

As Said says, 'the act of reading is the act therefore of first putting oneself in the position of the author, for whom writing is a series of decisions and choices expressed in words.' Consequently, broader contexts such as the traditions and cultures of the illustrated societies will be investigated to understand how they are mirrored by the writer. For this reason, a preliminary overview of the writer's life and position and her reception as a writer in Turkey and in the world is worthwhile.

As an author, columnist and academic, Elif Shafak is undoubtedly the unsurpassed known Turkish female writer internationally. She was awarded the Mevlana (Rumi) Prize in 1998 for 'best work in mystical literature' in Turkey with her debut novel *Pinhan (The Mystic)*, published in 1997.⁴⁸⁷ She wrote two more novels and was granted the 'Best Novel-Turkish Writers' Union Prize' before her best seller *Bit Palas (The Flea Palace)* was published in Turkey, in Turkish, in 2002.⁴⁸⁸ Shafak, who wrote her first English novel *The Saint of Incipient Insanities (Araf)* in 2004, gained international fame with her second English novel *The Bastard of Istanbul* (2006). A law case was opened against Elif Shafak for wounding Turkishness due to the words of characters in *The Bastard of Istanbul* who blame the Turks of committing the Armenian genocide of 1915. Her fame increased as the trials were followed by international media.

Shafak was conferred the honorary distinction of *Chevalier of the Order of Arts and Letters* in 2010 by France which is interested in the Armenian question. When she received the award, French Ambassador to Turkey, Loren Bill, precisely mentioned *The Bastard of Istanbul* and Shafak's assistances to freedom of expression, cultural dialogue and human rights and voiced his gratefulness that Shafak did not lose valour after the trial. The novels of Shafak have been disparaged and broadly chatted in Turkey for their

literary quality and content, and due to the fact that some of them are written in English. Although Shafak has been criticised austere, she is still Turkey's best-selling female writer. This may be due to the criticism she has received, allowing her to stay on the schema.

Honour, which institutes the subject of this chapter, is one of Shafak's most intensively deliberated novels. Even before the book was published, its pre-released cover caused disagreement among critics due to Shafak's appearance on the front cover, cross-dressed as Iskender, who is the main character of the novel. Newspaper critics claimed the author was promoting herself and hindered with the imagination of the readers by providing an image of the fictional character.

She retorted to criticisms about the cover and clarified that the meaning of the cover would not be understood without reading the book first, and that the cover was perceived in relation to literary concerns rather than commercial ones. Shafak indicated why she dressed as Iskender on the cover: First, I have thought about what it feels like to be Iskender for a year and a half. While I was writing, I turned into Iskender. Therefore, the cover reference. Second, literature is already the art of putting oneself in the shoes of someone else. Third, and maybe the most importantly, to draw attention to the role of women in the construction of masculinity... Thus, the cover says 'when you see an image of man, see the woman within as well'. Because what makes Iskender Iskender is actually Pembe.

Shafak's explanations can also be reasoned to her wider literary project as she often emphasises, extra-textually, the importance of feeling how it is to be someone else and the mother's role in the construction of manhood. In this instance, she stresses that Iskender's experience should predominantly be understood; she invites readers to 'feel Iskender'. She asserts that even though her actual concern was violence against women, if we do not comprehend the stress that men like Iskender feel and in which way they are fabricated as men, the problem of violence against women cannot be solved.

Honour speaks the story of an honour killing in a diasporic community inside the structure of the mother-son relationship. The novel focuses on the standpoint of the killer and scrutinises how he is shaped whilst it also interrogates the role of women in the construction of the killer's character. Shafak, via her novel, reminds us that the killer is not a monster and she outspreads our understanding of honour killings beyond aspects covered in the mainstream media to display that there is a story behind the murders. She says that 'There are so much grief in these stories, breaking points. I wanted to examine all these closely'. The novel is extraordinary for its attention on the killer's perception and for this reason the wrongdoer will be the focus of this paper. *Honour* is narrated by the daughter of the Toprak family, Esma, who is both a fictional character and the fictional narrator of the book. The novel opens and closes with the first person singular pronoun (I) referring to Esma, hence we can construe that Esma is a fictional narrator, though a large part of the novel is narrated by a third person

omniscient narrator. In the Turkish version of the novel, Esma's voice is heard only in the first and last part of the novel as the first person narrator. In the English version, Esma narrates all the chapters related to herself in the first person and the others in the third person. Iskender appears as a narratorial voice through prison dairies in both the English and the Turkish versions. Iskender recounts his feelings, experiences, and memories. Shafak uses both the voice of a man who committed an honour killing and the voice of a woman who experienced honour killing in her family. This contrapuntal arrangement makes the novel unique.

The novel times from 1945 to 1992 in the English version and 1946 to 1991 in the Turkish version. The motive of this slight difference is not known but might be associated to some historical mistakes found by editors as she was carped about those mistakes after publication. The settings of the novel is an unnamed Kurdish village on the banks of the Euphrates River, Istanbul, London, and Abu Dhabi. The novel is distinctive of Shafak's fiction in that it has numerous characters, assorted themes and features of black humour. As well as centring on the mother-son relationship within the background of honour killings, the novel explicitly talks of themes like the status of women in Turkish and Kurdish societies and mothers' situation in the construction of those communities; minority and immigrant problems; alienation; identity; dichotomy; love and Sufism. Shafak assembles the novel through analepses and prolepses, giving dates and names of places in the beginning of each chapter. The reader's concentration is kept thriving and the story moves gracefully between narrative voices, places and times. The novel uses postmodern techniques like magic realism and metafiction. Shafak adjusts characters, places and themes into 342 pages (the equivalent of 443 pages in the Turkish version) by adroitly fictionalizing them, nevertheless she was criticised for not tackling the topic and characters profoundly enough.

The story of the Toprak family starts when Adem, who would marry Pembe and be Iskender's father, visits an unnamed Kurdish village during his brother's military service and falls in love with a girl named Cemile there. When he notices that Cemile was kidnapped before, Adem marries her twin sister, Pembe, due to the risk that Cemile may not be a virgin. Adem and Pembe have three children: Iskender, Esma and Yunus. The family moves to Istanbul then to London because of economic complications that result from Adem's gambling addiction. Iskender and Esma both are born in Istanbul and Yunus is born in London. The relationship between Adem and Pembe downright breaks down in London. Adem starts a relationship with a female escort named Roxana. When Adem's money runs out, Roxana breaks up with him and goes to Abu Dhabi. Thus, Adem leaves home forever and goes to Abu Dhabi in the hope of reuniting with Roxana. While searching for Roxana, he works as a construction worker there. He eventually commits suicide by jumping off a building roof. In the meantime, Pembe, with the grief of being distant from her twin, is ill-fated in London. After her husband leaves her, she meets Elias and they have a love affair without physical intimacy. Pembe's younger son, Yunus, sees the couple together when they covertly meet in the cinema, but Yunus does not tell anyone. As soon as the elder brother of Adem, Tarik, notices the relationship, he whips Iskender, his older nephew, that this is a question of honour. Iskender, who senses the accountability of being the man of the family after his father's desertion, hinders his mother from going to work or out of the house. However, he meets Pembe outside and bashes her to death. She turns out to be her mother's twin, Jamila, in her mother's clothes. As Jamila has newly arrived in London and Iskender is not cognizant of his aunt's visit to them he does not apprehend the mistake until later. Only Yunus and Esma know the truth and the actuality is hidden from the other characters to protect Pembe. Iskender and the readers determine the secret towards the end of the novel.

Iskender, who is the first son and whose mother rears him as if he is a sultan, is a unruly teenager at the time of the crime. His sister, Esma, is a girl who feels excluded from the family because of gender discrimination against female children. She repels sexism and aims to become an author. Their seven year old brother, Yunus, is a dreamy boy. Due to his friendly love for an older

woman, called Tobiko, Yunus spends utmost of his time with Tobiko's friends who organise a revolutionary and anti-capitalist group and live in a squatters' house. Iskender aches from repentance for murdering his mother. His preliminary plan was to frighten Pembe and her lover, Elias by wounding her mother in a non-fatal place; however, the piercing results in death. Iskender is sentenced to fourteen years in prison. His brother and sister, especially Esma, do not forgive him for the murder. A couple of years before his release, Iskender picks up from his brother that he actually killed his aunt, but Pembe, Esma and Yunus had hidden the truth about the crime. The readers are exposed the truth at the same time as Iskender discovers it. Pembe, disguised as her twin, goes back to the village. Iskender starts to write an apology letter to his mother which he plans to deliver by hand after his release, but when he gets out of prison, he, and readers of the novel, ascertain that Pembe passed away a year beforehand.

The mother Pembe is the one who preserves patriarchal values. Iskender is raised in Istanbul and the UK with harsh patriarchal values. Esma is a girl anguishing from these values and demurring to them. Yunus is balanced as he is not treated particularly, unlike Iskender, by his mother even though he is a boy. Adem is an inattentive father who received no reprimand for rupturing honour values despite leaving his family for another woman. This perhaps displays the sexist duality of the honour concept. Tarik, as an elder brother of Adem, is a traditional oppressive figure who manipulates social values to suit his interests. Cemile is a woman whose life is in ruins because of patriarchal values as she cannot marry the man with whom she is in love and, in the end, she is killed because of honour values. Pembe's family, as a Kurdish family, embodies an exemplary family with patriarchal and traditional codes. Throughout the novel we see that habits and values are mainly fashioned in the family. Adem's father is an alcoholic and his mother leaves her family because of alcoholism and domestic violence. Suffering from his father's alcoholism, Adem avoids becoming an alcoholic, but he damages his family due to his gambling addiction and desertion. Pembe, is portrayed to be bent by her patriarchal family and she also stimulates patriarchal values. Esma acknowledges that she is pontificated 'with words borrowed from Grandma Naze.' Esma censures Pembe's unfair attitudes and manners to control only female sexuality:

We had been very close, me and my mother, but all that changed the moment my breasts started to bud and I had my first period. The only thing she was interested in now was my virginity [...] Not once had she told me about what was possible and permissible; her powers of communication were reserved solely for rules and prohibitions. [...] Yet she didn't impose the same rules on my brothers.

This description aids the reader to appreciate different perspectives on honour in the same culture and family and the techniques in which personal familiarity can change individual attitudes. This is how Shafak accentuates the prominence of personal experience and family values in personality structure. The novel advocates that concepts of honour that have been intensely rooted in definite cultural constructions of the family and that women have an imperative role in conserving these ideas.

In the novel, Shafak appeals thoughtfulness to 'mother son relationships in a patriarchal society' as she ponders that women habitually 'take a very active part in constructing masculinity in a certain way. They raise their sons in a certain way and those sons end up being [...] more masculinist but the women also play a role in the [...] continuity of this system.' Agreeing to Shafak, the position is much more intricate than 'men are oppressors and women are oppressed'; henceforth she wants to 'take a critical look at the role of women, women of different generations' and their part in the preservation of patriarchal systems. In this construction Esma is a vehicle to echo Shafak's stance. Shafak stated that:

Esma criticizes her mother, does not want to be like her mother.

She is very angry with her mother for not intervening. I suppose, as readers, we feel the same as well. What if she could have stood firmer. They are very strong characters actually. They, however cannot stand firm against their beloveds. I, at least, wanted to examine these issues.

The illustration of Pembe's motherhood is faithfully allied to the worldly truth in the setting of the novel. As Pembe is taken to hospital in Urfa, Turkey, we can assume that the unnamed village is around Sanliurfa province. To extend our understanding of how the prominence of having sons to a woman revealed in the novel, I refer to Carol Delaney's ethnographic study in Harran, a district of Sanliurfa. According to Delaney, in the villagers' belief system 'the spark of life' can only be transmitted via men. If men have sons this spark is transmitted from fathers to sons and carried down the generations, which makes the spark 'theoretically eternal'; hence, the significance of having sons is an essential part of the concept of heredity. Having children, especially sons, regulates the status of man in the village and as a "'true" man' fathers of sons have more rights to decide on village affairs. For a woman, having a son means that she has saved the lineage of her husband's family, which safeguards her status in the marriage and the family. Hence, a woman gains supremacy by giving birth, especially to sons, within the limits of her societal circumstances.

Ilknur Mese construes women's desire to have sons within this context as their desire to recompense for their powerlessness with the power attributed to men. A associated consequence is that social pressure on men to be powerful finishes with restrictive definitions of masculinity that disqualify the exposure of vulnerability or gentleness which may expose a man to be weaker. She adds that 'femininity and its repercussion motherhood are something produced down the generations. More or less each new generation has been affected by this legacy.'

Pembe's response to Iskender's escape is logical since cowardice has feminine qualities in Turkish culture, as shown in the phrase *kari gibi* (like a woman) meaning coward, renegade. *Kari gibi kacmak* (running away like a woman), *kari gibi aglamak* (crying like a woman) are shared expressions in Turkish to scorn and encounter a man. Even, Iskender, at that age, contemplates about what people would meditate when they have learned that he has died because of cowardice, 'not because of illness or accident like everyone else seemed to do', if he dies on the tree because of hunger or cold. His opinions divulge that the cause of his death matters more to him than dying itself: *thus he attributes more importance to his pride than to his life.*

When Iskender is found in the tree no one can bring him down except his mother. Pembe cheats him by promising that he will not be circumcised. First she hugs him with kind word like 'my son', 'Malamin, my sultan', than she slaps him and says: 'Do not ever shame me again!' In the Turkish publication the diction is more threatening: 'Look at me, don't you ever shame your father and ancestors again!' While the Turkish translation strains Iskender's responsibility to his ancestors and the transmissibility of shame to subsequent generations, the English version stresses Pembe's shame of failing to raise her child in the apt way as it is the mother who is answerable and liable for the actions of their children.

Impugning the mother for the child's actions or anything that goes wrong with children is a more conversant and real concept to a Western audience than shaming ancestors. Mother-blaming is very ancient and some psychoanalytic theories 'fit into a general tradition of blaming mothers'. A child's actions govern the mother's capability of motherhood: 'If good mothers produce good children, then bad children are produced by bad mothers.' In Turkey, however, if a woman is categorized as a bad mother this means she disregards her socially and religiously cherished duty. The shared expression 'Paradise lies under the feet of the mother' is known by maximum people in Turkey even if they do not lead a religious life or are not disturbed about religious necessities. As Shafak says: "Motherhood is so sacred in Turkey. It must be perfect. There is no room for ups and downs."

Honour was both commended and disapproved in Turkey and internationally. It was nominated for the Man Asian Literary Prize in 2012; longlisted for the Women's Prize for Fiction in 2013; and longlisted for the International Impac Dublin Literary Award in 2014. *Honour* has been evaluated more positively at the international level than it has been in Turkey. Maureen Freely's review for *The Guardian* suggests that Shafak's 'portrayal of Muslim cultures, both traditional and globalising, is as hopeful as it is politically sophisticated,' for which Shafak merits a world audience. Alev Adil, in a review for *The Independent*, praises *Honour* as 'an extraordinarily skilfully crafted and ambitious narrative, with Shakespearean twists and turns, omens and enigmas, prophecies and destinies fulfilled.' Adil, however, labels the characterisation of minor characters as 'broad-brush' and she remarks some minor historical flaws related to 1970s London subculture. She also acmes irregularities in characterization like the fact that Pembe allows seven-year-old Yunus to disappear for hours, and does not notice his tattoo for months. According to Ammara Khan, although *Honour* is not a good case of magic realism 'as the crying spiritualism of which is too much to digest,' it 'offers everything that you would expect from a good novel' with 'vivid storytelling.' Khan criticizes the recurrent use of fluke and 'shoehorning in [of] solutions to jarring questions' in the final pages. Although I found international grave reception of the novel fairer in terms of critiques of its style, I also observed that international critics are more timid to criticize subjects in the novel associated to the illustration of culture and its plotting. In this regard, my reading has supplemented a discerning understanding of the novel, precisely focused on its demonstration of Turkish honour culture. Literary criticism in Turkey has also been affected by the arguments and opinions surrounding, but not directly related to, *Honour*.

In Shafak's *Honour*, Iskender's uncle, Tariq, is the leader of the honour killing illustrated in the text, where he pushes Iskender to be the man of the family, to control his mother, Pembe, and to avert her from having a lover. Nevertheless, Tariq reassures Iskender to commit an honour killing, he fantasises as if he has never done so after the killing. Iskender calls his uncle, Tariq, after piercing his aunt under the mistaken postulation that he is stabbing his mother. Uncle Tariq condemns Iskender for his act: "What have you done, son?" His voice sounded choked. "This is terrible." Iskender narrates his bewilderment at his uncle's words as his uncle changes his stand completely before and after the stabbing: I was taken aback. 'Bb... but... wee... ttt... alk... ed ab... ab... ou... ttt... this.' 'Surely we did not,' my uncle said. The man who had told me everything and then enthralled upon me, over and over again, that I had to do something and do it soon, had wiped out into thin air. I was stunned. It is clear from Uncle Tariq's denial that he does not want to take any legal responsibility as he says over the phone: 'Iskender, son, you have to turn yourself in. I'll tell the police this is exactly what I told you when you rang me. You cannot run from the law!' With his words, Tariq's hypocrisy is distinguished by Iskender and highlighted for the reader.

The uncle in this Turkish novel doles from the act of killing by reinstating their supposed honour without compelling the murders themselves. All the responsibilities of killing are deliberated on the nephew or the son, while the commanding uncles uphold a Godlike status as they decide who should kill whom. Meryem's uncle tells his son Cemal that: '[...] it's up to you to put things right. [...] Take the bitch to Istanbul and finish her off there'. Uncle Tariq puts the idea into Iskender's head that he has to do something about his mother's affair. While the two uncle figures are dynamic in making a decision about honour killing, fathers do not have the power to forestall killing, and they are not involved in the decision-making process behind the honour killing. Meryem's father, uncle and Cemal are in the same room when the uncle clarifies his detailed plan about the honour killing but Meryem's father, Tahsin Agha, is silent: 'he had not uttered a word during the sheikh's speech. He did not say anything to support his older brother but just sat there in troubled silence.' From now, it can be claimed that uncles are represented as atrocious: any

humane feelings or inner conflict over the killing that they may have are unrevealed. Represented as a decision-making device without any positive humane feelings, the figure of the uncle is dehumanised. We ought to think about why it is the paternal uncles who offers the judgements on honour killing in this novel. The contribution of the extended family in the crime permits the killing to be structured in cold blood, as they may not have as close ties with the victim as do the members of the immediate family and so it does not seem unrealistic when sentiments of the extended family members towards the killing are not exposed. More prominently, I would argue, the authoritative uncle figure points to the patriarchal system of the community, where, in classic patriarchy, the oldest man of the household rules the family. This patriarchal system exemplifies the supremacy of decision-makers and sustains itself by putting down confrontation. As fathers with inner emotional conflicts have the prospective to fight killing decisions, they incline to be excluded from the decision making process. Men in patriarchal systems are considered and appreciated as long as they fit within them; if they do not, they can be overlooked or disgraced or, in some cases, honour-related violence can also target them.

The statement that honour killings are committed ferociously and there are many intricate dynamics demarcated in this literary work. As honour killings are not easily comprehensible, this fiction can assist us to take a further step along the path to understanding the landscape of honour killings in specific communities. This literary works clearly maps the personal and collective calamities leading to honour killings and they parallel real cases of honour killings.

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