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**Female Conduct and Family Honour: A Study of Elif
Shafak's novel 'Honor'**

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Abstract: *Honor killings have been in on the rise in the Turkish society during the past few years. Societal pressure and blind adherence to religious codes often leads to different prescribed codes of conduct for men and women. Any deviation from the same is believed to affect family honor. The burden of protecting family honour is usually laid on the shoulders of women and deviated behaviors often lead to violent punishment including murder. Shafak through her novel 'Honor' takes up the theme of honor killing and examines the unjust treatment rendered to women in Turkish society.*

This paper examines how religion and society restricts women and forces them to follow prescribed codes often causing them to lead unhappy and suffocating lives. Conditioning happens through various agents and agencies from a very early age. Men and women often unjustly receive dual treatment for the same 'crime'. Honor killings are often resorted to by the family members as a means to protect and preserve family honour which is only affected by deviated behavior from women.

Key Words: *Honour, gender roles, honour killings, feminism, Turkish culture and religion, gender bias.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

Elif Shafak, one of Turkey's renowned contemporary female writers, has seventeen works to her credit- eleven of which are novels. Juggling multiples roles like that of an academician, writer, social worker, activists, TED speaker etc., Shafak has not shied away from expressing her concerns and opinions on wide range of issues including freedom of speech, women's rights, minority rights, global politics and democracy. She writes both in Turkish and English and her works have been translated into many languages enabling wide readership across the globe. Her most popular works include "The Bastards of Istanbul", "Honour", "Forty Rules of Love", "10 Minutes and 38 Seconds in This Strange World", "The Architect's Apprentice", "Black Milk: On Writing, Motherhood, and the Harem Within" etc.

Her novel "Honour" published in 2011, narrates the tragic story of three generation of a Turkish-Kurdish family which spans over Turkey and London. Even after migrating and settling down in a much liberal society, the family makes efforts to adhere to traditional cultural and religious norms, especially with regard to gender roles. Jamila and Pembe –the twin sisters, whose lives are the major focus of the novel, offer to the reader, glimpses of stereotyped Turkish cultural and religious codes for men and women.

2. Research value:

Although Turkey is a much liberal country compared to other Muslim nations, it is still bound by codes of conduct which often leads to unfair treatment of women. Hence, studies like this will throw light

into condition of women and the need for social reformation and stringent law to protect women from violence.

3. Textual Resources :

The Encyclopedia Britannica defines honor killings as “often the killing of a woman or girl by the male family members” who justifies their action on the ground that “the victim has brought dishonor upon family name or prestige”. Honor of the family is of highest significance and is portrayed as resting mainly with conduct of women in the family. When referring to the different words in Turkish language which means honour, Shafak says “*Male honour, namus ,is defined through women*” (The Guardian). Men, on the other hand, receives differential treatment although he remains responsible for being the preserver of his family’s honour. As Kardem (pg:25) points out “Constructing honor over the bodies of women and the control of their sexuality by men in a way legitimizes honor killings in people’s minds, especially when it is clear that the woman has committed adultery”.

Shafak through this novel boldly takes up the theme of honour killing which has been on the rise in the patriarchal Turkish society. Although Turkey is considered much liberal than other Muslim countries and its women enjoy a better status, honour killing still remain to be a cause of worry. Even with stringer legal reforms to tackle the issue, death or suicides of women continue in ‘tainted’ families. Violation of honor codes by women leads to “social death of men who fail to act like men” and “actual death of female relatives”(The Guardian). Bloodshed is viewed as the sole remedy for regaining the honor of the family. In most cases, it is brother who implements the act decided by the father figure in the family and silently supported by the women of family. As Kardem says “Chastity, having no extra-marital relations, dressing properly, conducting oneself according to expectations and knowing one’s duties according to traditions” are invariably expected from Turkish women.(pg:17). Research conducted proves that there seems to be close association between the concept of honour and conduct of women.

The novels begins with a narration about Naze (Pembe and Jamalia’s mother) who sole aim in life was to give birth to a son. She is constantly depressed and worried at having borne eight daughters and not a single son. She was traditional woman who believed that the purpose of a woman’s life revolved around getting married and raising a family. When her husband Berzo tried to give Pembe and Jamila education she objected saying “How is that going to help my daughter get married?”(Pg 12). The novelist from the very beginning reveals to the readers the traditional thought with regard to violence towards women through Naze who passes on these to her children and molds them accordingly. She believed that husbands had the right to inflict violence on their wives and women are meant to tolerate it without protest. She makes it very clear that no daughter of hers shall abandon her husband on any grounds and they will never be welcomed back to their parents’ home under such circumstances. Naze instils in her daughter the importance of modesty in a women’s life “Modesty is a women’s only shieldIf you lose that you will be worth no more than a chipped kurus”(Pg:15). She believed in the superiority of men over women and assumed that it was not to be questioned or challenged as this was how God had created them.

Through Naze’s words, Shafak also reveals the biased concept of society where women’s wrong doing could easily stain the honour of the family and was “instantly noticed”(Pg:16). Shafak also exposes the dual standards of the society in the treatment of men and women when it comes to honour. Although a woman’s actions can have a direct impact on the honour of the family, she can never have honour, it belonged to men. “Women did not have honour. Instead they had shame.” (Pg 16).The undue importance associated with honour in the Turkish society more than individual happiness is one of the primary concerns of the author in this novel.

The imagery of “stain” runs through the novel. When Jamila is kidnapped by her sister’s husband’s family, she is marked “tainted” and the honour of the family is lost. Adem who wished to marry Jamila backs out of the marriage out of fear of the society. The only redemption for her and her family was in marrying an old widower from the same family who was kind enough to accept her. Men again portrayed as the guardians of honor. Adem (Pembe’s husband) who initially wanted to marry Jamila changes his mind when he discovers her ‘tainted’ reputation and marries Pembe instead out of fear of society. His own mother had ran away with another man, the shame which he and his family still carried even after several years. When Haide (Pembe

and Jamila's elder sister) elopes with a man eventually returns to her parents' home, Berzo responds "If I had a son, I'd ask him to kill you and clean the family's name" (Pg: 266). Honor of the family is of such prominence to the family that they force their own daughter to commit suicide by providing her the rope to hang herself with. Such barbaric acts stemming from fear of society and concern for protecting the family's honor. In Tariq's (Adem's brother) words "honor is all that some men had in this world"(Pg 153). "The less means a man had, the higher was the worth of his honor"(Pg: 154).

Preferred and accepted behavior is seen to be instilled in children from a very early age be it a girl or a boy. When Pembe eventually becomes a mother she does the same to be children with clearly segregated codes of conduct. She wishes her son to be bold and her daughter to be modest and demure. When Iskander is found after running away due to fear of circumcision, she is furious at his cowardly behavior and reprimands him saying "don't ever shame me again"(Pg:30). When her husband cheats on her, Pembe blames herself. She passively resigns to her fate and hopes that "time or her prayers would put things in their place."(Pg:109). Tariq (Adem's brother) is also seen as blaming Pembe for his infidelity.

Another instance of dual standards in treatment of women is Adem's initial views on codes of behaviour for his wife and mistress. While he expects Pembe to follow prescribed cultural and religious codes that preserve the honour of the family, he accepts Roxana as she is –bold, independent and demanding. Roxana stands up to him and insults him occasionally for his shortcomings. She doesn't do housework and did what she liked. The character of Roxana provides readers with a contrasting picture of the difference in life and liberties of women of traditional and liberal cultures.

Traditional cultures expect men to be the provider and protector of his family. When Adem abandon's his family for Roxana, it is perceived as a shameful act but the severity of his action seen as less when compared to Pembe falling in love with another man and thus compromising the family's honour. In the absence of Adem, the role of the head of the family is taken up or handed over to Iskender, the next male member of the family. Pembe herself is seen as obliging to his superiority and obeys him with no hesitation. As a child when Iskender gets involved with an altercation with another boy and beats him up, Pembe doesn't reprimand him. She seems to be proud of that fact that he has is growing in his abilities to be the protector of the family in the absence of her husband. He is granted privileges that she doesn't give to her other children especially her daughter Esma. Pembe lays down rules and regulations for her daughter as her mother had done for her, thus molding her to fit into prescribed gender roles and codes of conduct. Iskender on the other hand is left free to follow his will. He dictates terms to his mother even forbidding her to leave the house and doesn't hesitate to slap his sister during an argument.

In order to portray a picture of an ideal woman according to accepted norms, Shafak brings in the character of Mirel (Adem's sister in law and Tariq's wife) who did nothing but serve her husband and family. She strongly disapproved western women and their liberal ways. To her, women who did not stay home and care of their families were "fallen"(pg:230).Tariq takes pride in the fact that he never let her work among strangers as man was to be the 'provider' and disapproved of Pembe for the same reason. Even having stayed in a liberal country for years, Tariq and Mirel did not see any reason to deviate or change from their beliefs and culturally accepted norms. Tariq who was a mentor to Iskender in the absence of Adem, also instills in him these gender roles reminding him constantly to be in control of his family and its members especially the women. Tariq supporting his brother's family is more out of concern for preserving the honour of the family than out of genuine affection.

Pembe is seen to be constantly guilty for being in a relationship with Elias and considers herself "the bad, the unchaste"(pg:263).As mentioned earlier, she never thinks ill of her husband for abandoning her and her children for another woman. Nor does she consider herself as having a right to fall in love again. According to Simon de Beauviour, marriage subjugates and enslavens women and it leads her to "aimless indefinitely repeated ,life that slips away gently towards death without questioning its pupose."(1989:445). She is surprised at the attention, kindness and respect shown to her by Elias.

Iskender is outraged when he discovers that his mother is having affair with another man. As the head of the family, he considers it to be his duty to uphold the honor of the family. Iskender is weighed down by the pressure of expectations from society especially his uncle Tariq. It is noteworthy that he himself had got his English girlfriend pregnant out of wedlock and doesn't seem to consider it as a cause of dishonor for the

family. Also, his father abandoning his family to be with a dancer does not seem to cause considerable disgrace in comparison to his mother having an affair. The burden of a family's honour seems to entirely depend on the women. Another character who pressurizes Iskander to charge is the 'Orator' affirms his position as the head of family and provides him with the advice that "If your parents slips up, you have got to stand up against them"(pg:226)

Shafak also uses the novel to the contrast gender roles between Turkish culture and the West. The women in west are shown as independent, liberated, confident, assertive and sharing equal position with men. While women belonging to Turkish culture are depicted as controlled, dependent, lacking in ambition, timid and mostly confined to their homes and household chores; their life revolves around their husbands and their families. The Turkish men clearly enjoy an elevated status with them being the decision maker, provider of the family, controller of family members (especially women) and protector. In contrast, men in the west are shown to have much liberal outlook where they share responsibilities with women and consider it natural for women to enjoy equal rights. Gender roles are affirmed even in the names given to male and female children as Esmâ, Pemebe's daughter points out. Female names were more "whimsical and dreamlike as if a woman were unreal, a figment of one's imagination"; While male names embodied "power, ability and authority" (Pg:183) Both the men and women of Turkish origin as represented as being strongly bound by codes of religion and culture and strive to adhere to the roles prescribed by these. Deviation from these norms of behavior is bound to bring shame, disgrace and dishonor to the concerned family in the society.

4. CONCLUSION:

Although the central characters of the novel are women, Shafak also draws attention to the pressure felt by men to conform to social and religious norms. Men constantly strive to abide by the preferred gender roles to avoid social shaming. Women are restrained and are dictated by these norms which never allows them to live life to the fullest. Men and women receive differential treatment and justice by society which sometimes even result in the death of women for simply choosing individual happiness over those dictated by society.

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