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Spiritualism attained through Love for Humanity: A Study of Elif Shafak's Novels

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Abstract:

Human beings have always felt the need to cling to some myth or belief to draw strength in situations that are beyond their control. This is what is known as “faith”. However, when beliefs or faith acquire the status of “dogma or doctrine”, it is time to reconsider and ponder over because dogmas always put a full stop to human critical thinking. They do not allow people to question and use their analytical power. Open-mindedness towards acts of faith and diversion do not lead to termination of that belief/faith. Rather it leads to diversion and diversion breeds innovation. Change is the order of nature and hence if beliefs need to undergo change with the passage of time or with the need of the hour, there hardly seems to be any harm. If adherence to faith leads to a God that does not preach love for humanity then there is something seriously wrong with such type of “faith”. Spirituality leads to God via love for other humans and similar views have been presented by Elif Shafak in her novels— Three Daughters of Eve and The Forty Rules of Love.

Keywords: Spiritualism, Sufism, Faith, Absurdism, Religion.

Saints and Prophets all over the world have preached one religion and a singular philosophy— the love of mankind. Love towards fellow human beings is the greatest religion in the universe and blessed are those who find or try to find Divinity in Humanity. The need for such a religion that preaches the love of humanity is felt more and more in the present scenario where the world is witnessing a shift from globalisation towards localisation. If twentieth century saw the advent of globalisation and the need to connect with people across boundaries based on religion, politics, culture etc., twenty-first century is fast receding towards the idea of localisation where people are once again binding themselves in the constricting compartments of religious animosity, cultural intolerance and political bigotry. People are being less tolerant towards individual differences and the world seems to be a boiling cauldron set on the fire of chaos and misguided notions.

Great writers across the seven continents have influenced the minds of their readers and have been instrumental in bringing about a change in their mindset. Great thinkers and powerful orators have been able to sway the opinion of the general public in favour or against the ideas of the time. Philosophers and saints also tried to exert their influence to bring out people from the shackles of pseudo-religion and lead them towards the enlightened path of spirituality. Saints and prophets held discussions based on religion with the common man trying to lead

them from the misconceived notions of religion to the Oneness of God. Sufis and *dervishes* are men of wisdom who pour their religious sentiments into their poetry and thus praise the Lord through their singing and dancing.

Spiritualism's main focus is to promote an individual's personal experience with God. Spiritualism is a religion that is not based on a relationship with a particular saviour. It recognizes all prophets that have come to humankind throughout the ages, not setting one above the other. Rather, it is based upon the idea that we are all to form our own relationship with God, and to obtain guidance and accept responsibility for our actions based on our interaction with that personal guidance. (Cassadaga Spiritualist Camp)

Many contemporary writers of fiction have focused on the meaninglessness of the universe and believe that the only semblance available to mankind in this chaotic world is his strong adherence to his "faith". This faith can be rooted in anything that gives him mental peace and inner strength. It could be faith in religion, devotion to some human being, some occult practice or anything. Canadian-Indian writer, Rohinton Mistry is of the opinion that human beings are without a doubt mere puppets at the hands of all-prevailing Destiny. Yet these failing and falling individuals find themselves seeking some sort of support by clinging to their faith.

...in this utterly chaotic world where man's existence is meaningless bordering on absurdity, it is his faith and his devotion to his religion that makes some sense of the human predicament. Therefore, religion like art is an attempt to find meaning and value in life; and, like art, religion was propitiated to express a sense of wonder and mystery that surrounds this beautiful yet frightening world. It is Mistry's faith and devotion to the secular religion of Humanity that is reflected through his works and that raises the stature of his art to that of religion. (Sethi, 97-98)

Therefore, faith is the ultimate bond that unites humanity to divinity. It is an awakening that leads man away from the vice surrounding him to the powerful state of realization of truth. Faith acts as the torch that helps men discern between fake and real. Satish Kapoor in his article "Faith is the Way" tries to define the virtue in the following words:

What leads one to the Supreme Truth is faith. But true faith based on revelation, intuition, erudition or experience needs to be distinguished from the fake forms floated by the religious charlatans and mountebanks. Faith shows the way to the Divine and makes one virtuous. On the other hand, fake forms of faith, generate insularity of outlook and breed hatred and violence. (Kapoor, 4)

He also talks about the importance of faith as described by various religions of the world. Buddhism, Christianity, Jainism, Vedas— every religion and every holy scripture lays emphasis on the magnitude of faith in human life.

The Buddha described faith as 'one's great possession'. Faith, he said, enriches the mind with wisdom, softens hard and selfish minds and gives us a friendly spirit and a mind of understanding sympathy.

Elif Shafak, Turkish-American writer and novelist is a firm believer of realization of God through love of mankind. Her powerful works of fiction especially *Three Daughters of Eve* and *The Forty Rules of Love* are a projection of her faith, lived through her characters and their belief that the only path that leads to God passes through the by lanes of love for fellow human beings. A staunch advocate of spiritualism, she goes all the way to differentiate between religion and spirituality. She opposes the set ideology established by the so-called caretakers of religion and challenges the customs practised in the name of religion. God does not live in a temple or in a mosque. He is not bound by the narrow walls of a shrine. He is omnipresent. He is not pleased by sacrifices be it human or animal. He cannot be appeased by violence perpetrated in His name. He is omnipotent. He does not need mortal men to fight in His name. Almost similar message is conveyed by the character, Shams of Tabriz, a Sufi Dervish of the thirteenth century, in her novel *The Forty Rules of Love*.

Pity the fool who thinks the boundaries of his mortal mind are the boundaries of God the Almighty. Pity the ignorant who assume they can negotiate and settle debts with God. Do such people think that God is a grocer who attempts to weigh our virtues and our wrongdoings on two separate scales? Is He a clerk meticulously writing down our sins in His accounting book so as to make us pay Him back someday? Is this their notion of Oneness? (*FRL*, 180)

Cutting across generations, the novel unifies the ancient preaching of Shams of Tabriz and his dear friend *Mawlana* Rumi with the ideology of twenty-first century characters Aziz Z. Zahara, a mystic photographer and Ella Rubenstein, a middle-aged housewife from Northampton. Aziz's way of looking into things not only coincides with that of Shams, he also acts as the mouthpiece of his philosophy of Love, Religion and Spirituality. Shams opposes the dogmatic opinion of the religious fanatics and zealots and highlights their constricted vision of the Divine through misreading and misinterpretation of the religious commands. Shams says,

Instead of losing themselves in the Love of God and waging a war against their ego, religious zealots fight other people, generating waves and waves of fear.... Always resentful of somebody for this or that, they seem to expect God the Almighty to step in on their behalf and take their pitiful revenges. Their life is a state of uninterrupted bitterness and hostility, a discontentment so vast it follows them wherever they go, like a black cloud, darkening both their past and future. (181)

A similar chord is struck by Prof. A.Z. Azur in Shafak's novel *Three Daughters of Eve*. Azur acts as the mouthpiece of the author and tries to make his students understand the basic difference between "religion" and "God". He is of the opinion that though religion is essential for human beings, they need to realize the importance of being secular. Being secular is not an equivalent of atheism. It does not mean that one should not believe in the existence of God. But God cannot essentially be found in religious places. God is a superior power whose presence cannot be confined to spaces or whose knowledge cannot be limited to books. Prof. Azur takes a special seminar at the Oxford titled "God". He handpicks his students and prefers to have a divergent group among them. The orthodox, the ultra-liberals, feminists, conservatives and the confused constitute the multifarious group of eleven students

belonging to different backgrounds, coming from dissimilar religious, ethnic, political milieu. It is during one of his lectures to his students on "matters of faith" that he describes the resurgence of religion in the twenty-first century.

Up until a few decades ago, he said, even the brightest scholars were certain that by the twenty-first century religion would have vanished from the face of the earth. Instead religion made a spectacular comeback in the late 1970s,...This century was bound to be more religious than the preceding one... But in our fixation with religious, political and cultural conflicts, we let slip a crucial riddle: God. (*TDE*, 246)

Peri, one of his students from Turkey who has been grappling with the idea of God since her childhood, takes up the study of God with Prof. Azur. She is convinced that the answer to her God phenomenon lies with only one person and that person is none other than Azur for Azur puts into words all the thoughts Peri had been harbouring in her heart and mind but unable to disclose.

Azur tells his class that

Whereas in former times, philosophers— and their pupils— grappled more with the idea of God than with religion, now it was the other way round... By weakening our cognitive ability to put forth existential and epistemological questions about God and by severing our link with philosophers of times past, we were losing the divinity of imagination. (*TDE*, 246)

Aziz from *The Forty Rules of Love* also exhorts the same concept of the inability of man to understand and differentiate between religion and spiritualism.

I am spiritual, which is different. Religiosity and spirituality are not the same thing, and I believe that the gap between the two has never been greater than it is today. When I look at the world, I see a deepening quandary. On the one hand, we believe in the freedom and power of the individual regardless of God, government, or society. In many ways human beings are becoming more self-centered and the world is becoming more materialistic. (145-46)

Whereas *Three Daughters of Eve*, cuts across continents and brings together characters from different background under one umbrella, Shafak's second novel based on spiritualism, *The Forty Rules of Love*, cuts across generations to bring together two sets of characters who could be easily interpreted to be the reincarnation of ancient characters in present times. The camaraderie shared by Rumi, the ancient scholar and Shams of Tabriz, a Sufi heretic from the thirteenth century could be juxtaposed on the twenty-first century characters of Ella, a well-educated housewife and Aziz, a travelling photographer and writer of the novel *Sweet Blasphemy*. Shams and Aziz are both travelling monks and can be seen to echo similar thoughts in the novel. Ella even recognizes an overlapping similarity in features of both Aziz and Shams whose features are described by Aziz in his novel. Thus an evident congruency can be witnessed between men belonging to two altogether different generations. Shams was

a Sufi and was much ahead of his time. He questioned the ardent believers and challenged their faith. He says

Why worry so much about the aftermath, an imaginary future, when this very moment is the only time we can truly and fully experience both the presence and absence of God in our lives? Motivated by neither the fear of punishment in hell nor the desire to be rewarded in heaven, Sufis love God simply because they love Him, pure and easy, untainted and nonnegotiable.

Love is the reason. Love is the Goal. (182)

Like the Sufis Peri from *Three Daughters of Eve* is also on a mystical journey in search of God. God for her is a puzzle, which, if she is able to solve could lead to solutions to all her queries and expiation to all her miseries. Peri's childhood is marred by the never-ending quarrels between her orthodox mother and her liberal father. Their fights always begin and end in the name of God. Both are extremists as far as their views are concerned. Peri ever-enthusiastic to find a middle path tries to act as a bridge between the two. She seems to be an arbitrator trying to settle the God-dispute between two belligerent countries. "While her friends seemed as uncomplicated and light as the kites they flew, playing in the streets, joking around at school and taking every day as it came, Nazperi Nalbantoğlu, an unusually intense and introverted child, was busily searching for God." (34) Her father gifts a diary on her birthday and asks her to write something in it. She calls this "the God-Diary" and uses it as a channel of communication with God. Her confused thoughts are able to find a place in this diary, thoughts she dare not reveal to anyone, especially her parents. Her understanding and perception of God is beautifully described by Shafak in the novel.

God, a simple word with an obscure meaning. God, close enough to know everything you did— or even considered doing— yet impossible to reach. But Peri was determined to find a way... With some kind of agreement as to what God was or was not, there would be less tension in the Nalbantoğlu household, even across the world. (34)

The innocent mind of Peri, unable to comprehend the real cause of conflict between her parents, tends to believe that if she could somehow find God, she will be able to repair the ever-widening chasm between the two. However, her mission to set things right is not only limited to her household but also expands to the correction of the incomprehensible universe. Through Peri's innocuous and random thoughts, the author tries to comprehend the restlessness prevalent in the world around. According to young Peri

God was a maze without a map, a circle without a centre; the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle that never seemed to fit together. If only she could solve this mystery, she could bring meaning to senselessness, reason to madness, order to chaos, and perhaps, too, she could learn to be happy. (34)

It is the be all and end all of all the religions of the world— to provide inner strength and a sense of happiness. Religion is not about binding people and keeping them under strict control by terrifying them in the name of hell or luring in the name of heaven. Religion is

about liberating people from all fears; setting up their own values but at the same time respecting the values of others. Shams' rule number Thirty-Two says it all

Nothing should stand between yourself and God. Not imams, priests, rabbis, or any other custodians of moral or religious leadership. Not spiritual masters, not even your faith. Believe in your values and your rules, but never lord them over others. If you keep breaking other people's hearts, whatever religious duty you perform is no good.... Learn the Truth, my friend, but be careful not to make a fetish out of your truths. (246)

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