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The Forty Rules of Love and Honour: Multi-Layered Narratives by Elif Shafak

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Abstract:

Elif Shafak, a Turkish-British novelist has made a spellbinding impression in the field of her native literature giving it a rung higher up in the ladder of world literature. In line with the native Turkish tradition of storytelling, Shafak is a storyteller at her best and a feminist writer. The Turkish tradition of telling stories within stories has been utilised to its best by Shafak in all her crowning pieces of fiction and non-fiction. The narrative techniques used by Shafak make her works an enchantment, an easy reading experience with a high level of understanding and intricate levels of depth. The multiple wands to execute the magic of narration are the technique of sandwich narrative, multi perspectivity, parallel plotlines, temporal complexities and more to add to it. All these wands taken up together by Shafak make her narrative a magic show of fiction with a touch of cultural and historical reality. This research paper uses the watermark of narrative techniques employed by Shafak in her works *The Forty Rules of Love and Honour* which are woven in the context of Turkish cultural, historical, mystical and superstitious context.

Keywords: Narrative techniques, multi-layered narrative, multiperspectivity, parallel plotlines, historical and cultural context.

Soaked in the native culture and tradition of ancient Turkey, the most widely read female writer from Turkey, presents her native influences, in all her works be it fiction or non-fiction equally. The Turkish storytelling tradition has its origins in the Persian and Arabian influences over the literature of the Anatolian peninsula along with the Ottoman storytelling tradition, which follow up the ancient oral traditions of telling and retelling of stories. Shafak owing to her Turkish origins and the early upbringing by her maternal

grandmother in the land and culture there, soaked Shafak's creativity with the literary genius of her Turkic forefathers.

In line with her native tradition of storytelling Shafak has tucked in her narrative style with various contemporary narrative techniques. Mingling the modern with the ancient becomes palpable enough for the old and the young equally. Employing narrative technique of multi-layered narrative Shafak has equally given way to various narrative techniques of foreshadowing, flashbacks, frame narrative, multiperspectivity, and flashforward. All these techniques have been majorly used by Shafak in her major works. Herein the works under consideration are *The Forty Rules of Love* and *Honour*. Both these works are highly acclaimed and considered masterpieces by Shafak wherein the narrative devices and techniques are enchanting sustaining the interest of the readers till the end.

Taking the narrative wand of multi-layered narrative, the novelist under consideration reveals us the plot and storyline of the selected novels at multiple levels. The unfolding is crisp with sharp cuts of sudden realisation of reality that had been fading away in the world of imagination and fiction woven by Shafak. Shafak is very selective in her writing skills and choice of words to render her desired effects at readers. *Honour* is a multi-generational saga wherein the story of three generations unfolds only to reveal the theme of honour-killing and its consequences under the traditional and radical values of orthodox Muslim community. The central story involves Adem and Pembe from second generation and their kids Esma, Iskender and Yunus constituting the subsequent generation and to add to it, the story of first generational Naze and Berzo is revealed through flashbacks. The story starts with the words of Esma "My mother died twice" (Shafak 1) and the first sentence itself reveals the tragic end of Esma's mother. The honour killing of Esma's mother by her own brother, who in absence of his father took the patriarchal roles upon himself, and to preserve the honour of his family, he killed his mother upon finding the latter's involvement in affairs outside the marital bond. Though the story took an unexpected turn when the climax unfolded, for it was Pembe's twin sister Jamila who was murdered mistaking her to be Pembe. The complexities and the threads connecting them make the novel an apt multi-layered narrative.

Directing the wand to *The Forty Rules of Love*, this historical novel is a multi-layered narrative in the context of its stories being spread across centuries. Paralleling each other are two stories from two different centuries. The story of spiritual companionship of Shams and Rumi from thirteenth century parallels the story of platonic love of Ella and Aziz meanwhile

grounding the whole story on Sufi principles. The narrative moves across centuries with various plots and subplots to add to the intricacy and complexity of the story. The multi-layered narrative in this historical and Sufi novel by Shafak lends her art of narration a crowning touch indeed.

Frame narrative when takes its turn, it becomes clear in the selected novels that Shafak has mastered herself in the narrative technique of frame narrative. The art of telling stories within stories is not everyone's cup of tea but this turns out to be Shafak's favourite cup of serving the fictional tea. In *Honour* using the technique of frame narrative, Shafak sets the readers on track with the main storyline of honour killing of Pembe meanwhile the subplots make up the secondary storylines wherein the sufferings of Pembe's mother Naze, mysticism of Zeeshan, guilt-stricken Iskender and his letters from prison, sufferings of females and marginalised people, folk Turkish stories and traditions like circumcision of Iskender and many more subplots and stories add to the main story. For example we have the letter from Iskender addressed to his mother testifying to the technique of frame narrative:

If I could be sixteen years old again, I'd never do the things that I did to cause so much pain. To you, my sister, my brother, my poor aunt. I cannot change the past. Not a single moment of it. Zeeshan says I can improve myself now. Even of that I'm not sure. But if you'd accept me into your life again, if you could find it in your heart to forgive me, what a blessing it'd be to once more be your son. (Shafak 323)

The Forty Rules of Love is exemplary when frame narrative becomes the rein to hold on. In this historical Sufi novel, Shafak tells the tale of spiritual companionship and trials of the famous mystic poet Jalaluddin Muhammad Rumi in the spiritual court of spiritual instructor Shams of Tabriz. To set the stage for this story to unfold, Shafak weaves the story of Ella and Aziz, their virtual chats, their confession of love, their love making in platonic terms, their healing and getting healed. Ella has to present a report of a novel 'Sweet Blasphemy' written by some A.Z. Zahara because:

Ella had been told that nobody knew much about the author—a certain A.Z. Zahara, who lived in Holland. His manuscript had been shipped to the literary agency from Amsterdam with a postcard inside the envelope. On the front of the postcard was a picture of tulip fields in dazzling pinks, yellows, and purples, and on the back a note written in delicate handwriting:

Dear Sir/Madam,

Greetings from Amsterdam. The story I herewith send you takes place in thirteenth-century Konya in Asia Minor. But I sincerely believe that it cuts across countries, cultures, and centuries. I hope you will have the time to read *SWEET BLASPHEMY*, a historical, mystical novel on the remarkable bond between Rumi, the best poet and most revered spiritual leader in the history of Islam, and Shams of Tabriz, an unknown, unconventional dervish full of scandals and surprises. May love be always with you and you always surrounded with love.

A. Z. Zahara (Shafak 14)

Furthermore, the forty rules of love “The Basic Principles of the Itinerant Mystics of Islam” (Shafak 40) have added to the narrative element of frame-narrative wherein stories within stories have been written and “The Forty Rules of the Religion of Love, which could be attained through love and love only” (Shafak 40) have been presented in form of stories within stories and Sufi principles have been thus weaved in the fabric of this novel. Thus the frame narrative sometimes referred to as sandwich narrative effectively sandwiches the Sufi principles of love and longing in between two parallel plots of thirteenth and twenty first century.

The next favourite narrative technique is multiperspectivity. Herein the story is not restricted to a single narrator and his or her perspective. In fact stories are narrated by multiple narrators revealing us all the faces of the dice of plot. Beside an omniscient narrator, in both the novels under consideration, the characters themselves narrate the incidents and happenings sharing their perspective, while for the same incident at the same time a different perspective is presented through a different character. Thus this multiperspectivity is presented in *Honour* through the narration by Esma like “I’ll leave him there. In a room in my house. Neither far away nor too close. I’ll keep him confined within those four walls, between the hate and the love, none of which I can help but feel, for ever trapped in a box in my heart” (Shafak 4) and to add to the narrative thread are the letters by Iskender from his prison which are scattered all throughout the story making the story an organic whole along with the third person narratives from an omniscient narrator. “She would give him the cold shoulder, tell him to stay away from her. This might hurt his feelings, but it would be better for him – and his family. Perhaps then he would be faithful to his wife, although she doubted it” (Shafak 60). Thus these all testify to the narrative richness in *Honour*.

On similar lines taking up the narrative richness in *The Forty Rules of Love* we have multiple narrators herein too but when considering the two parallel plotlines and their narrators, we have that, a single narrator from twenty first century is Ella besides an omniscient narrator. Both these narrators set the stage for the plot of thirteenth century where the count of narrators is equivalent to the count of major characters in the plotline. The narrators include Shams, Rumi, The Killer, The Master, The Novice, Hasan the Beggar, Suleiman the Drunk, The Zealot, Aladdin, Kerra, Kimya, Baybars the Warrior, Sultan Walad and Desert Rose the Harlot. These narrators in their own turn make the narrative of historical, mystical novel an exemplary case for the technique of multiperspectivity. Even the incidence of defaming of the reputation of Rumi by his visit to liquor shop has been presented through different perspectives. The companionship of Shams and Rumi in their reach has also been presented through the eyes of other witnesses as Shams mentions “Bad-mouthing one another is second nature to many people. I heard the rumors about me” (Shafak 224). Besides the narrative characters, an omniscient narrator too grips the story with the theme and technique aptly.

The two works under consideration are rich in to and fro narration along with the tools of foreshadowing and flashbacks. The narratives do not flow in and follow a single timeline. In fact the timeline fluctuates time and again, and the plots are conveyed through flashbacks and foreshadowing. Like in *Honour* the fate of Naze’s daughters have been foreshadowed in the beginning itself through the conversations between their parents about the studies of their daughters and its implication in their daughters independency and future as:

‘What do you know? If one day their husbands treat them badly, they won’t have to put up with it. They can take their children and leave.’

‘Oh, where will they go?’

Berzo hadn’t thought about that. ‘They can seek shelter in their father’s home, of course.’

‘Uh-hm, is that why they trudge so far every day and fill their minds with that stuff? So that they can return to the house where they were born?’

‘Go and bring me tea,’ Berzo snapped. ‘You talk too much.’

‘Perish the thought,’ Naze murmured as she headed to the kitchen. ‘No daughter of mine will abandon her husband. If she does, I’ll beat the hell out of her, even if I’m dead by then. I’ll come back as a ghost!’

That threat, empty and impetuous though it was, would become a prophecy.” (Shafak 11).

In *The Forty Rules of Love* foreshadowing is used time and again as a rhetoric to stress the end of Shams’ life. Though the end has been revealed in the beginning itself by The Master as Shams confesses “With that, the master told us the journey was beset with great danger and unprecedented hardships, and there was no guarantee of coming back. Instantly all the hands went down. Except mine” (Shafak 72-73).

Desert rose, the harlot and the marginalised character in the historical novel shares the story of her fate as a harlot, her childhood and her upbringing as flashbacks in the middle of the story.

Having nothing to give them, I stood aside quietly, certain that they would do me no harm. But just when they were about to leave, the gang leader turned to me and asked, “Are you a virgin, dainty thing?”

I blushed and refused to answer such an improper question. Little did I know that my blushing was the answer he wanted.

“Let’s go!” the gang leader shouted. “Take the horses and the girl!” (Shafak 119)

Apart from it, in very and many chapters, the narrative techniques of flashbacks, foreshadowing and different time frames add to the rhetoric of the novels. Mastering these techniques, Shafak has mastered her art in the technique of flashforward. The novels selected start nearly at end and then all of it unfolds slowly to the point from where it all began. In *Honour*, Esma begins narrating the tragedy of her mother’s life who is symbolic of nearly all the women who find refuge in love outside the unhappy marital bond and when their truths are revealed in orthodox patriarchal world, they are murdered just to preserve the honour of the family. In the second novel under consideration, the story begins with the narrative voice of The Killer “Beneath dark waters in a well, he is dead now. Yet his eyes follow me wherever I go, bright and imposing, like two dark stars ominously hanging in the sky above” (Shafak 21), and the scene of Sham’s death and aftermath is shared in flashbacks therein and then the story and the story behind the story begins. Thus, the readers and their interest is what is sustained till the end and Shafak through her narrative tools and through her content excels

in doing it because her “narrative concerns itself with what is happening all the time (Stein 30) rather than limiting it in terms of characters, timelines and plotlines. Truly Shafak is a narrator with incredible capacities for the same.

Parallel plotlines when taken in consideration, it becomes evident that in both the novels under consideration, the two plots from different timelines run parallel to each other. In the case of *Honour*, one plot is narrated by Esma in nineteen nineties wherein her interaction with her brother Iskender are dealt in, after he has been released from jail and the other plot dealing with the honour killing and its context is being narrated by omniscient narrator. In *The Forty Rules of Love* the two plotlines are running parallelly in two centuries separated by a period of seven centuries. The plot developing in thirteenth century brings out the spiritual love of Rumi and Shams along with the historical scenario during then and incidences from the life of Rumi. Parallelly the plot development in twenty first century dedicates itself to development of love between Ella and Aziz destined to meet by chance because:

But there was a reason: love.

They did not live in the same city. Not even on the same continent. The two of them were not only miles apart but also as different as day and night. Their lifestyles were so dissimilar that it seemed impossible for them to bear each other's presence, never mind fall in love. But it happened. And it happened fast, so fast in fact that Ella had no time to realize what was happening and to be on guard, if one could ever be on guard against love.

Love came to Ella as suddenly and brusquely as if a stone had been hurled from out of nowhere into the tranquil pond of her life. (Shafak 3)

Shafak as a literary artist excelling in fiction, has added gems to her crown of narration by taking her characters as narrative agents and that too not limited to a single timeline. In alignment with the Turkish tradition of storytelling and by using contemporary tools of narration Shafak has made her place in world literature. Her works have fetched her a huge success and a wider fame with wider appraisals worldwide. Shafak's literary genius proves the hybridity in her nurture which mingles the modernity of her mother with the traditional superstitious outlook of her grandmother. This hybridity of nurture is equally reflected in her nature of writing for herein the traditional mingles the modern narrative techniques. Shafak's

choice of words, the figures of speech employed, her art of characterisation, her fictional history, her grip on folk traditions, her global themes rendered with local touch, her symbolism, her parallel plotlines, temporal complexities and so keep on adding lusciousness to Shafak's writings.

To sum up in *Honour* and in *The Forty Rules of Love*, Shafak has aptly proved her capacity as a novelist rendering multi layered narratives at its best. Being a pro feminist and supporter of the rights of the marginalised, Shafak has made it possible through her intricate writings to weave the global theme with a local touch in all her novels, including the selected works under consideration. A well known female writer from the soil of Turkey, has contributed her works in English and Turkish language which have further been translated into various languages. Shafak's magic of narration has been possible through the variety of magic wands and magic tricks of narrative tools and narrative peculiarities giving her novels, be it fictional or semi-fictional, an applause much deserved. The multi layered narrative technique rendered by Shafak has rendered her works a unique place in the canvas of Turkish literature and World literature. Her nurture has made up her nature of writing accordingly as Gertrude Stein delivers in her lectures compiled in the book *Narration* "anybody is as their land and air is. Anybody is as the sky is low or high, the air heavy or clear, anybody is as there is wind or no wind there. It is that which makes them and the arts they make and the work they do and the way they eat and the way they drink and the way they learn and everything" (Stein 46)

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