



Roots, Revolt, and Redemption: A Comprehensive Review of the Recent Literature on Elif Shafak

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Abstract

In a world defined by displacement and fragmentation, Elif Shafak's works offer a powerful narrative on identity, resistance, and transformation. Her literary corpus intricately weaves themes of home, exile, migration, diaspora, intergenerational trauma, and gender dynamics. This study critically examines Shafak's recent literature through the thematic framework of 'roots, revolt, and redemption,' focusing on identity crises, the deconstruction of gender structures, and the pursuit of reconciliation. Drawing on scholarly contributions published after 2000, the research explores Shafak's narrative techniques, character development, and intertextual references, providing insights into her engagement with cultural hybridity, historical memory, and the quest for existential belonging in a globalized world. The study is structured into four thematic sections. The first focuses on the complexity of Shafak's writing. The second, 'Roots and routes: Identity, memory, and belonging,' explores collective and personal histories, especially the experiences of displaced lives. The third section, 'Breaking chains: Gender, resistance, and autonomy,' examines the struggles for freedom and self-determination faced by women in Shafak's works. The fourth section, 'Sufism, spirituality, and self-Reconciliation: A pathway to healing,' explores Shafak's engagement with mysticism, transcendence, and the healing process leading to self-reconciliation. This structure reflects the interconnected nature of Shafak's exploration of identity, autonomy, and spiritual growth.

1. INTRODUCTION

The present work, entitled “Roots, Revolt, and Redemption: A Comprehensive Review of the Recent Literature on Elif Shafak”, provides a narrative review of the literature published after 2000, devoted to Shafak’s works. The research aims to review the goals of the literature under consideration, to be more precise: (1) finding out what thematic issues have dominated this time; (2) analyzing how theoretical perspectives, such as feminism, postcolonial theory,

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postmodernism, memory studies, trauma studies, and similar critical practices, have been integrated with the thematic repertoire of Shafak; and (3) tracing the course of her stories and identifying the gaps that other scholars can address in the future research. Therefore, the paper involves a close reading of the literature and an identification of the trajectory of Shafak's writing, which has shifted with her recent publications.

The primary goal of the review was to identify, analyze, and synthesize prevailing thematic, formal, and theoretical trends within the academic discourse, with a special focus on publications from after 2000, when she gained international status. A planned methodology was adopted to ensure that it is comprehensive and transparent. The literature search was conducted across major academic databases with broad coverage in the humanities and social sciences. The search strategy incorporated keywords and Boolean operators to refine search results. The core search string, 'Elif Shafak' OR 'Shafak' was used in order to allow for relevant works to be gathered. This was then combined with secondary thematic keywords in order to filter for the central concerns this review was interested in, including: AND (transnationalism OR diaspora), AND (gender OR feminism), AND (memory OR trauma), AND (novel OR narrative).

A strict set of inclusion and exclusion criteria was followed. Primary sources were articles that were published in the period of time between 2000 and 2023 in peer-reviewed journals, academic books, and book chapters, where Shafak's literary works were the main subject of analysis published in the English language. Secondary materials included non-academic publications such as newspaper articles and interviews. The selected texts were close read and coded for recurring themes, frameworks of proper theory (e.g., postcolonial theory, feminist theory, memory studies), and narrative strategies. These codes were iteratively grouped into the larger analytical categories used to structure the findings of this review to ensure that a data-driven and systematic presentation of the scholarly conversation around Shafak's oeuvre is possible.

2. Bridging Worlds: The Transnational Fiction of Elif Shafak

Elif Shafak, a voice of a borderless world, was born in Strasbourg in 1971 and raised in Turkey, a fact that has been recognized as contributing to her narrative style, which combines Eastern and Western points of view. According to the *Sunday Times*, "Shafak is passionately interested in dissolving barriers, whether of race, nationality, culture, gender, geography, or a more mystical kind" (Mustapha, 2022). This boundary-crossing tendency is evident in her varied and provocative storytelling, which has gained her universal praise.

According to Kararti (2010), Shafak's writing is "descriptive and entertaining" (p. 1), for vividly portraying modern Turkey with a particular focus on marginalized communities. The range of her themes and genres is extensive, thereby establishing her capability to address the intricate issues in society. Also, numerous critics argue that Shafak makes the stylistic choices that are intensively influenced by her own background, as Shafak (2003), in one of her interviews, stated that "migrations, ruptures and displacements...have played a crucial role in my personal history" (p. 56). This observation highlights the degree to which her movement and displacement experiences have influenced her literary style and the topics she addresses.

Being a well-known writer, her works are not without critique. Some critics state that she does not fully represent the Turkish cultural identity. On the contrary, her books have been well-received in the United Kingdom and the United States, receiving many awards and nominations. Her books have become popular in France, with *The Forty Rules of Love*

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becoming a bestseller. The literary ability of Shafak has also found echo in other parts of Europe as well as the Middle East (Sharma, 2024, p.3).

Moreover, Shafak holds a doctorate in political science and has been employed in some of the best institutions in Turkey, the United States, and the United Kingdom. She has won such prizes as the Prix de l'Union Interalliee on *The Forty Rules of Love*, the PEN Nabokov Prize, the Halldor Laxness International Literature Prize, and the Chevalier des Arts et des Lettres. The position of her name in contemporary world literature was determined by her novel *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World* (2019) being shortlisted for the Booker Prize.

Regarding her personal life, her father's absence left a gap, as she had grown up with her mother. Nevertheless, she strengthened her emotional resilience and alleviated her frustration through writing. Shafak was inspired and supported by her strong female role models, her mother and maternal grandmother, "which was a bit unusual in 1970s Turkey" (Skidelsky, 2012). Since the early life of Shafak was preconditioned by the frequent changes, and due to the great experience of living in different places, Shafak became doubtful about the concept of stable identity, home, and culture. This ever-shifting and mixing of the influences of different cultures provoked a feeling of identity crisis, which is a theme that echoes in most of her works.

Shafak has been writing since she was eight years old, and she continues to do so. Her book *Pinhan* (1997) was nominated for the Mevlana Prize in Literature, making her one of the bright young writers in Turkish literature. Shafak has since published 19 books, including 13 novels (written in both Turkish and English), which have been translated into 58 languages. Other famous books written by her include *The Mystic* (1997), *Mirrors of the City* (1999), *The Gaze* (2000), *The Flea of the Palace* (2002), *The Saint of Incipient Insanities* (2004), *Honour* (2011). Her other successful books are *The Bastard of Istanbul* (2006), *The Forty Rules of Love* (2009), *Three Daughters of Eve* (2010), *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World* (2019), *The Island of Missing Trees* (2023), and her most recent novel, *There Are Rivers in the Sky* (2024). Shafak has authored six nonfiction books, including *The Rebellion: On Literature and Politics* (2020), and includes her memoir *Black Milk* (2007).

Considering her works, Shafak is proclaimed to be "one of the most distinctive voices in contemporary Turkish and world literature" (Nihad, 2019, p. 2900). The issues covered in her novels are quite diverse, including minority communities, female bodies, gender roles, immigration and subcultures, identity crises, cosmopolitanism, Sufism and mysticism, folklore, political and historical matters, and the complex interplay among them. The themes of identity are abundant in her work, which reflects her personal experience of cultural displacement and her attempt to dismantle boundaries in both her life and her work.

Shafak has continued to add to her literary repertoire with a highly diversified range of essayistic and narrative forms of compositions, columns, short stories, epistolary works, book reviews, forewords, and introductions. Her appearances on such reputable publications as *The Guardian*, *The Times*, *Port Magazine*, *The Spectator*, and *The New Statesman* have been of great assistance in spreading her ideas and enabling her critical voice to travel further afield. In addition, she has increased her visibility through a variety of modern-day channels, such as TED Talks, radio broadcasts, podcasts, and digital social media venues such as Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube. Her authority has been further established by an active participation in interviews, panel discussions, and public intervention events that situates her simultaneously as a literary critic and within the wider discourse of society.

Given her impressive literary output, the next section is devoted to academic analyses of Shafak's unique narrative strategies, including multiplicity of perspectives, nonlinear narration, and intertextuality. The techniques are pivotal to her transcendence of themes such as displacement, identity, and cultural hybridity, as well as in her delicate resolutions of issues, including gender, and the complex nature of cultural belongings.

3. Weaving Narratives: The Complexity and Craft of Shafak's Writing

“Books change us. Books save us. I know this because it happened to me. Books saved me. So, I do believe through stories we can learn to change, we can learn to empathize and be more connected with the universe and with humanity.” From Elif Shafak, *Storytelling, Fake Worlds, and the Internet*.

Ever since *The Bastard of Istanbul* was published in 2006, Elif Shafak has been both praised and criticized on an international scale. Being a courageous Turkish-British Muslim author, she has focused on the subjects of her works on the Turkish society where men dominate. According to Hooglund (2019), Turkey has, somehow, and still has to deal with dual identity, religious conflict, and multiculturalism because of its geographical location, as it is the bridge between the Islamic Middle East and the Christian Europe. The bridging opens the way for cultural intermingling, identity crisis, and self-discovery, as he states, “It is a Eurasian realm embracing features of two different worlds” (qtd. in Nihad, 2019, p. 2901).

Where cross-cultural interaction in the Eurasian region drives innovation and development, it also requires people to balance their cultural backgrounds with the demands of modernity, which often results in a sense of dislocation. This polarity demonstrates that the Eurasian space is not only promising but also full of contradictions, in which achievements in terms of modernity are secured at the expense of inherited identity. Her characters are observed to be immigrating and having a difficult time adopting new identities, dismantling traditional ones, and finding themselves in the middle of the chaos.

In one interview, featured especially by Chancy, Shafak mused on her own history and family roots. She pointed out that, in the course of her existence, she has always come across different people, cultures, and languages, consequently enabling her imagination of ‘home’ to be in constant transformation. Shafak (2003) famously commented that she “never had a solid notion of home” (Chancy, p. 57), thus indicating a shift in her perception of identity due to constant exposure to different lifestyles and ideologies. A decade later, in a later essay, Shafak (2015) explored the darker side of interpersonal relations and human existence. She noted that “invented fictional characters could be, and often were, more genuine than the people one came across in daily life” (p. 39), a statement which seems to echo her own life path and the emotional scars left by her childhood. Raised in a disintegrated family life, her sense of self was unstable, and her feelings of belonging were compromised. Consequently, she found comfort in the process of writing from the tender age of eight, a claim that “I was a lonely and hopelessly introverted child...Books saved me” (p. 39).

Besides incorporating her own life into her work, Shafak also demonstrates the intellectual capacity to place these stories into a wider historical/political context. Othman (2023) expounds that Shafak's works are overwhelmed with intertextual possibilities, and her fiction is filled with cultural, historical, and sociological allusions, which can serve as an example. It is these interconnections that make her works interesting as well as multilayered. Although Shafak frequently refers to the poem by Rumi and classical literature as her sources

of inspiration, one can also observe a lot of resemblance between her writings and the works of William Shakespeare (p. 275).

Further, Alshehri (2022) and Lemus (2021) discuss the narrative architecture of Shafak, which goes beyond normal limits, as she synthesizes various literary traditions in the creation of her compositions. This synthesis elevates her astonishing narrative genius, making the experience of reading a lot (both in breadth and depth) at once. Scholars always refer to her works as having high language and stylistic distinction, full of figurative diction, poetic imagery, and elements of magical realism. In her narratives, the line between verisimilitude and the fantastical is continually called into question, creating an interstitial space where the ordinary and the extraordinary can coexist harmoniously. The strategic use of symbolic artefacts strengthens the emotive power of her narratives, encouraging the reader to engage in the act of reading as an interpreter and to create multilevel symbolism.

In light of the pedagogical value of creative writing, Mendonce (2024) asserts that the literary devices Shafak uses in her creative production give the interior of the works a magical reading experience that is intellectually profound and has a holistic perception. He elaborates that Shafak's craft is influenced by the course of events in the characters' journeys and the circumstances they encounter. As the story progresses, the richness of the storytelling also changes as the characters evolve. Hence, this kind of writing can be used as an effective tool to introspect, influence, and even change the reader's perception. Secondly, Shafak also uses magical effect in her works by showing sudden revelations and incidences in flashbacks, time complexities, foreshadowing, frame narrative, flashforward and multiple perspectives.

Based on the work mentioned above, it may be assumed that the language and method used by Shafak are effective in creating the complexity of the narrative, the depth of emotion, and the coherence of the theme. For example, in her novel *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World* (2019), the author shifts to the past tense, and the reader learns about the main character, Leila, in her last moments. The use of words is not only reflective but also enables the reader to relate to her past on a personal scale. Using flashbacks and flashforwards, Shafak seamlessly integrates the storyline, creating an intricate timeline that builds suspense. These time changes are not merely increasing the dramatic effect; they also convey the disjointed effect of memory, which adds an emotional dimension to the story. Using this method, Shafak welcomes the reader to a dimensional voyage of the life of Leila.

Moreover, there is an increasing amount of literature that explores the narrative craftsmanship of Shafak. One of the recent studies explores *The Forty Rules of Love* (2009) by Shafak and finds several stylistic devices that contribute to the story. They are analyzed using simile, alliteration, onomatopoeia, and anaphora, and enhance the emotional impact of the story, drawing clear images (Younas et al., 2025). Similarly, Heynders (2016) views Shafak's works, her rhetorical approaches, and the topics she prefers to address. He continues to believe that Shafak goes a long way in discussing sensitive issues such as the Armenian genocide, politics, ideological politics, prejudiced gender roles, Sufi spiritual culture, and the ideology of honor and shame that exists in a patriarchal society. Continuing on the stylistic variety and the number of techniques, which are used by Shafak, the work provides a kaleidoscopic look at *The Gaze* (1999). It is a tricky novel that explores the mind of a society that is incriminating. The novel focuses on the everyday life of an obese woman, who is constantly judged and feels uncomfortable by those around her (Tanveer et al., 2022). This is the story that is synonymous with the idea of Berger in *Ways of Seeing* (1972), where he focuses on the issue of how women

are often put into the gaze of other people by virtue of their power imbalances. The objectification of women is not only observed, but it is also mainly the result of the male gaze. Berger proposes the concept of Looked-at-ness, which is the manner in which women are diminished to their physical appearance, which may be considered inferior, or reduced to objects of sexuality, and not as people having a sense of their own agency. He claims that, "Men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at" (p. 47). This is a critical lens that reveals how the perception of others forms the identity of women, as it is highly focused on their objectification in a patriarchal society.

In addition to the strong institutions that spread biased ideologies, narratives also play a crucial role. Bainbridge et al. (2021), in their research on the effects of Shafak's authorship and on the topic of narrative consciousness in the book *How to Stay Sane in an Age of Division* (2020), indicate that the means of empowering and representing narratives are central to constructing ideologies and creating societies. In this regard, they consider the works of Shafak as critical to establishing a connection and bringing change in a more polarized and fragmented world, something that unifies in a hyperreal, divided reality. As in the words of Shafak, "For who can know better than us storytellers that the best truths are found in illusionary worlds?" (p.41).

4. Roots and Routes: Identity, Belonging, and Displacement

"Who Am I? Do I have a single identity - based on nationality, ethnicity, religion, class, gender or geography? Or am I essentially a mixture of multiple belongings, cultural allegiances and diverse inheritances, backgrounds and trajectories? How we define our identity will shape our next steps." From Elif Shafak, *How to Stay Sane in an Age of Division*

The notions of roots and routes are essential in Shafak's works, as her characters continually grapple with their identity. They are continuously negotiating, in dialectical terms, between traditional cultural identities and a new identity in the contemporary world, often leading them on a journey towards the West. For most of these protagonists, the process of migration to the West creates a deep existential vacuum, a loss between the grounding of ancestral roots and the paths they pursue. Consequently, they express a desire for stability, a home, and a place to belong, yet they are left in a transitional state and are displaced, both geographically and psychologically. Their paths are defined by exile and migration, driving them to change spatially, affectively, and cognitively constantly. Such unremitting flux keeps their identities in a permanent state of tension between the traditional and the new, between memory and reinvention, in search of an elusive refuge where they can belong.

Ashcroft et al., the authors of the canonical text *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literatures* (2002), challenge the universality of Eurocentric paradigms and show that post-colonial authors do not passively rewrite narratives, but rather deconstruct the paradigms governing language use and re-establish cultural agency in literary works. It has been powerfully voiced by Elif Shafak, Salman Rushdie, Derek Walcott, and Chinua Achebe, who, in their masterpieces of narrative, have highlighted the lost sense of identity, language, and belonging prevalent in post-colonial societies and have rewritten the canon in a decisively Eurocentric, dogmatic manner. Ashcroft et al. also argue that the postcolonial literature has "energizing feature...to interrogate and subvert the imperial cultural formations" (p. 11).

Given the aspects of cultural formations and rapid transformations, Shafak has placed her stories in the intersection of the post-colonial and post-modern dialogues, questioning cultural blending, dominance, historical trauma, dislocation, and identity crises. The female characters in *The Bastard of Istanbul* (2008) Armanoush, a diasporic Armenian-American, and Asya, a Turkish adolescent, engage in a critical dialogue on the subject of collective memory and identity, thus predetermining their differences in perspectives. Armanoush says, “despite all the grief that it embodies, history is what keeps us alive and united” (p.184), but to Asya, the past was a painful experience that should be forgotten. Basing her works on the tradition of Armenian genocide and diaspora, Armanoush attempts to reestablish a sense of connection with her ancestral heritage. In contrast, Asya’s struggle with uncertain parentage and outsider status mirrors the broader national denial of history, reinforcing fractured identities and unresolved trauma. Both characters reflect the struggles of historical silencing, trauma, identity crises, and coexistence. Armanoush’s struggle to fit in as a minority is analyzed in Bryant’s *Post-Ottoman Coexistence: Sharing Space in the Shadow of Conflict* (2016), in which he argues that Armenians’ identity in Turkey is shaped by forced assimilation and historical erasure. These motifs of the enduring burden of memory, intergenerational trauma, and diasporic identity are central to Shafak’s works.

Similar Motifs are evidently present in *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World* (2019) and *Honour* (2012). The former novel begins with the retrospective scene of Leila, the protagonist, lying dead in a dustbin and recalling the events of her traumatic life; she lost her sense of home and belonging. Her life projects the post-colonial and post-modern themes of identity crises due to lost roots on a long route to Istanbul, where Leila becomes a sex worker and forms a surrogate family with fellow outcasts in response. In *Honour* there is the diasporic blending of a Turkish-Kurdish migrant family in London. Their relocation challenges traditional values, sparking generational conflicts over identity and belonging. Jamila says, “Why couldn’t human beings live and die where they were born?” (p. 35). This marks the tension of a character who questions the migratory and unsettled human experience, as evident in the novel.

The story systematically cuts the characters out of their natural environment, sending them into a liminal state of cultural displacement and confusion. The motifs of alienation and hybridity play a central role in the novel, as evidenced by both the main characters, Pembe and Jamila, whom Hussein (2022) and Banu & Rafiq (2023) identify. Pembe’s arc brings to the fore the dilemma of migrants and their sense of forging an identity in the context of modern-day integration. Both contributions stress the text’s interrogative nature, foregrounding issues of cultural conflict, identity crisis, and belonging in a polarized global context.

In a similar vein, Al-Zahrani & Al-Sharqi (2022) discuss the notion of prismatic identities and authentic selves in their study of *Three Daughters of Eve* (2016). Set in Oxford, the novel follows the intersection of three women, Peri, Sherin, and Mona, who come together and attempt to define their Muslim identity in a Western world. Through close attention to the lived experiences of these women, “the believer, the confused, and the sinner” (p. 212), the authors shed light on the ways in which gender, culture, religion, and stereotyping combine to support certain notions and ideas among the general public. Similarly, Sabbah and Ayuningtyas (2022) study the experience of the Kostas family displaced in *The Island of Missing Trees* (2021). Being forced to leave their home and immigrate to London, the family has to bargain in terms of shifting identities, cultures, religions, and languages, which creates an existential

and identity crisis. The story is set around a fig tree, a powerful emblem of destruction and anarchy in the 21st century, characterized by mass migration, the blurring of realities, confusion of identities, and the breakdown of traditional structures.

Not any less crucial, in the article, Poole, in her book *Queer Turkey: Transnational Poetics of Desire* (2022), focuses on how Shafak explores themes of migration, history, and identity in Turkey's sociopolitical setting. He discusses how she addresses cultural hybridity, exile, gender, memory, and disputed histories, paying special attention to *The Bastard of Istanbul* and *The Saint of Incipient Insanities*.

5. Breaking Chains: Gender, Resistance, and Autonomy

In her groundbreaking book, *Theorizing Patriarchy* (1990), Sylvia Walby believes that the issue of women's subjugation is highly institutionalized. She carefully shows how the social, economic, political, and cultural structures perpetuate gender discrimination, thus fueling widespread gender biases and, in some instances, fueling violence. Patriarchy, according to Walby, is "a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women" (p. 20). The basic contribution of feminist sociology is its emphasis on the necessity of breaking oppressive institutions to achieve absolute equality in the larger society.

In this context, Shafak's literary works are an exciting example. In her stories, gender is always seen to be a socially constructed category that is influenced by cultural and historical contingencies, particularly in patriarchal contexts that dictate the role that women can play. The heroines of her books are habitual targets of strict moral law, demands of submissiveness, and limitations of individual freedom. Indicatively, the novel *The Bastard of Istanbul* (2006) depicts women in Turkish and Armenian societies as they face the demands of societal conventions, and the female characters are bound to honor their families. In contrast, their male counterparts are given relative freedom. The quote mentioned below captures the same idea:

"The Iron Rule of Prudence for an Istanbulite Woman: If you are as fragile as a tea glass, either find a way to never encounter burning water and hope to marry an ideal husband or get yourself laid and broken as soon as possible. Alternatively, stop being a tea-glass woman!" (p. 227-28).

The passage outlines the widespread inconsistency in the way men and women are viewed in society. Women receive moral and virtuous ascriptions while men are not subjected to these normative constraints. The novel asks questions of the deeply ingrained double standard of the era, which constructs a woman's value on the basis of sexual purity, and which offers men an apparently free-flowing social success in life. Asya's non-compliance within the novel, that is, refusing to accept society's imposed-defined identities and living a life totally outside society's expected norms, reflects that she is characterized as a loser, cannot achieve perfection, face disapproval, even punishments and insults from society. Her mother and aunts, in turn, are the epitome of behavioral conformity, which further highlights the differences in generational gender expectations: obedience and revolution. The text further goes on to say that women, despite varied cultural settings, re-evaluate concepts of honor and modesty by invoking agency, resistance, and a vocal position, as the author expressed in the text. One good case is that of Shafak's *Honour*, where the female lead, Pembe, gets tangled up in an extramarital affair. Through her epistolary exchanges with her sister, she confesses a change in her notion of honor after her resettlement in London. She admits that she does not have the

same responsibility for the honor of her family as she would have had if she had stayed in Kurdistan.

Several researchers have discussed Shafak's work in relation to gendered politics and resistance, emphasizing the socio-cultural forces that shape discrimination. For instance, Zacharia and Senthamarai (2023), in their analysis of *Honour* and *The Forty Rules of Love* emphasize the social programming of boys and girls as preeminent in Turkish society. They extend that boys are conditioned to be strong, active, and independent; however, girls are socially programmed to be submissive, passive, and dependent. Such conditioning causes women to bear the brunt of social injustice, and so their paper raises concerns regarding redefining gender roles based on an individual's happiness and equality. Bushra and Maqbool (2023) advocated for the patriarchal dilemma of honor killing concerning Shafak's novel *Honour*, which is the story of a mother killed by her son in the name of family reputation. Scholars have taken the stance of Margot Badran's (1994) Islamic feminist theory to draw a comparison between the patriarchal representation of women and the Islamic representation of women. Islamically, women enjoy the same rights and status as men, and the consequences for defying the boundaries of chastity are equally borne by both. Still, ironically, men escape punishment in a male chauvinistic society, whereas women are held accountable if they break the norms. Similarly, probing into the novel *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World*, the scholars Mehdi et al. (2022) delve deeper into the themes of societal intolerance and the plight of marginalized individuals, particularly through the lens of the protagonist, Leila. Leila's journey from societal rejection to finding solace in the bustling yet unforgiving streets of Istanbul's red-light district highlights the pervasive nature of stigmatization and abjection faced by women in the novel. Her life is shown to be miserably pathetic, as she becomes the conscience of "manic old city" (Shafak, 2019, p. 202).

In a row, Yunusoglu (2022) offers insight into Shafak's memoir *Black Milk* (which outlines women's experiences regarding motherhood, authorship, and other stereotypes women face in patriarchal society. *Black Milk*, instead of highlighting male dominance, encourages women to write and question "the norms and the 'natural' order of things". He claims that the autobiography, sometimes considered self-narration, allows its readers to see through a diverse spectrum, raising questions to redefine and reconstruct identities. As stated in *Black Milk* (2012), "For many women writers, motherhood became a burden because they had to choose between being a "good" mother and a "good" author" (p. 354). Adhania and Djohar (2022), drawing from Walby's concepts, propose that Shafak's works depict patriarchy in Turkish society. She has thoughtfully used animals and plants to symbolize women's struggles and resistance. Some examples can be pondered to elaborate Adhania and Djohar's exploration. Use of garden roses and butterflies in *The Forty Rules of Love*, use of fig trees, birds, and insects in *The Island of Missing Trees*, description of thorns and weeds in *Three Daughters of Eve*, cats in *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World*, wolves, butterflies and flying bird in *Honour*, etc., depict the journey of female characters from confinement to liberation. Furthermore, a study examines Shafak's contributions to Turkish-American writing, emphasizing her and Halide Edip's criticism of patriarchal motifs in Turkish history and religion.

Shafak deconstructs these issues from a matriarchal perspective, thereby questioning the existing Kemalist and Islamic orthodoxies. By elevating the voices of female subalterns, she and Edip use literary devices to reconstruct Turkish cultural narratives, thereby establishing

Shafak as a key figure in the preservation of Turkey's cultural identity (Furlanetto, 2017). As a result, the women in Shafak's works break down the traditional structures that keep them in captivity and redefine their position in the socio-cultural environment. Therefore, they disrupt oppressive patriarchal metanarratives, but face illiberal consequences when they challenge deeply rooted patriarchal ideologies.

Along with the gendered relations, Shafak's introduction of spiritual, mystical, and erotic notions of love is a significant departure in her work. Scholars have commented on how such elements offer her characters a kind of reparative agency in relation to the disorientations of the post-modern condition, and the specific strains of gendered politics. These redemptive forces provide the characters with a way to redeem themselves, giving them the strength needed to live through the turbulence of society.

6. Sufism, Spirituality and Self-Reconciliation: A Pathway to Healing

Shafak's interest in Sufism and its spirituality provides a dense prism through which her characters question the complex questions of identity, belonging, and self-reconciliation in the postmodern world. Trying to cope with dislocation and social constraints, her characters turn to spirituality as a form of healing and seek refuge in introspection, Islamic teachings, and Sufism. This praxis is not simply a vehicle of personal healing; it is an active refutation of patriarchal structures, an active protest against current social structures, and it offers a transcendental perspective on identity and self-discovery.

To characters who are struggling with gendered oppression, Sufism would offer a place where strict dichotomies are broken down, and a more fluid and accommodating sense of self is generated. The above philosophical framework is also exemplified by Hourany (2022), who confirms that the interest in Sufism exhibited by Shafak bloomed during her university days. Shafak claims that she was a rebellious young woman who was drawn towards a number of ideological 'isms' but was attracted by the readings of Sufism more. In this interaction, she applied the teachings of Sufism in order to confront social norms, and a dream of individual freedom became part of her work. This can be seen through her literary examination of Sufism as observed in her works like *The Forty Rules of Love* because the characters are taken through spiritual pilgrimages based on love, tolerance, and self-discovery. In this story, love is a way to divine connection, which is the Sufi belief that love and seeking God cannot be separated.

The recent works have explored the different facets of Sufism and spirituality as depicted in the works of Shafak. In general, Sufism is a mystical tradition of Islam, whereas Spirituality is rather more about the inner world and personal development without attention to religion. Anjum and Ramzan (2014) have tried to establish the meaning of these key words in the view of Shafak. She considers Sufism as a "way of life" (p.1) and an "inner journey of Love" (p. 2). One can assume that she has highlighted universal Sufism, which breaks the boundaries in terms of religion, culture, and geography. Meanwhile, the names of Shams of Tabriz and the utilization of Sufi practices, also indicate a particular Islamic Sufism, as Shafak mentions in the book *The Forty Rules of Love* (2009)

"When a true lover of God goes into a tavern, the tavern becomes his chamber of prayer, but when a wine bibber goes into the same chamber, it becomes his tavern. In everything we do, it is our hearts that make the difference, not our outer appearances" (p. 94)

The quote emphasizes Sufi belief that the inherent worth of an action lies in its intention, and not in its outer expression. This observation summarizes the Sufi teachings that

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spirituality depends on the purity of the heart and inner communion with God and does not depend on external appearances. Expanding on the theme of love, Naeem et al. (2024) explore the meaning of love as a catalyst for self-directed spiritual growth. He asserts that Shafak deals with the notion of love very intellectually, as she sees love not only as an emotional feeling but as a transformation of a person who finds a connection with the divine.

Similarly, Gray (2020) explores the relationship of teacher and disciple and Sufi spirituality in Shafak's *The Forty Rules of Love* maintaining that Shafak provides a purified version of Sufism, making it look like a permeable way that breaks the rules of society and offers individuals to transform, thus keeping her account to a simplified version of Sufi teachings. Selim (2024) emphasizes the therapeutic aspects of Sufism, such as dhikr (remembrance of God) and sema (whirling), in promoting inner tranquility, thereby strengthening the power of Sufi philosophy in personal healing. These practices are illustrated in the novel *The Forty Rules of Love* in which characters are on spiritually inspired journeys towards their self-discovery.

Mehdi et al. (2021) discuss the way in which Sufism provides a specific model through which one can solve the problem of existential crisis and enhance psychological recovery. Empirical readings suggest that spiritual practices based on self-surrender to the Divine (taslim), patience (sabr), and divine love (ishq) help to cope with social alienation, despair, and anxiety in order to promote psychological well-being. This theme is at the core of Shafak's entire body of work, and it reveals her obsession with restoration and resilience. In her narrative, characters practice these spiritual practices to achieve psychological solace by developing Sufi doctrines. Sufi teachings of love, tolerance, and unity have pervaded interfaith discourse. As societies become modern, Sufism has evolved to create contemporary expressions of Sufism that deal with present-day issues. In this context, the scholarship included in Laschinger and Geaves is of particular interest.

Laschinger (2020) offers a critical analysis of *The Flea Palace* (2004), asking questions about the use of Sufi symbolism and narrative techniques used to create a path to healing and intra-cultural cohesion in a fragmented socio-cultural environment. Geaves (2007) examines Sufism in an era of modernity, using case studies in Iran and Turkey, and traces the way that Sufism has been transformed by the tension between state power and reformist forces this "confrontation with modernity has been especially traumatic" (p. 3).

According to Assadi (2023), Shafak's corpus is a powerful commentary on the deeply embedded gender conventions in society, especially in her portrayals of women in a Sufi context. He notices that *The Forty Rules of Love* presents women as active seekers of the divine; this is a break with patriarchal stories. Shafak rearranges femininity in Sufism, giving her characters freedom over their spiritual paths. This narrative strategy is indicative of Shafak's own encounter with Sufism while at the university, which enabled her to challenge putative ideological dogmas. As a result, her characters are internalizing the tenets of Sufi belief and utilizing them to defy social norms and express individuality.

Nonetheless Shafak's description of Sufism has been criticized by scholars. In this vein, Zaouil (2023) argues that her representation of Sufi philosophy is simplified for a Western audience, often omitting the theological complexities inherent in traditional Islamic mysticism. Fox (2023) shares this criticism and argues that Shafak's novels, such as *The Forty Rules of Love* and *Three Daughters of Eve*, rebrand Sufism as a universal, self-help philosophy that serves modern spiritual needs rather than upholding its deep Islamic roots. These criticisms

point at how Shafak's writing is still entertaining and easy to read but might not yet be able to capture the rich theology and cultural situation that is inherent in the teachings of Sufism.

Despite these criticisms, Shafak's novels are a convenient entry point to Sufi philosophy, as the genres of mysticism, love, and spiritual transformation are integrated into the current stories. Whether genuine or adapted for the world market, her literary works still provoke academic discourse on the amalgamation of love and faith, as well as on individual growth.

7. Discussion and Conclusion

The data gathered from the previous decade on the literature on Shafak's works, the review paper indicates that much of the academic attention has shifted to Elif Shafak's work, and an increasing number of people have begun focusing on issues such as gender empowerment, feminist analysis, displacement, trauma, and healing. The scholars have determined that these complex issues are highlighted in Shafak's narratives. Further, it highlights that Shafak is not merely a writer seeking to unveil the struggles of female characters in patriarchal settings, but also offers insights into the life trajectories of characters who attempt to find their own identities in a globalized, fragmented world.

In conclusion, Shafak's works have had an enduring and evolving impact on literary discussions, particularly through recurring themes of roots, revolt, and redemption. The themes reflect the universal struggles of individuals torn between tradition and transformation. Shafak's characters engage deeply with their cultural heritage (roots), challenge societal norms and personal limitations (revolt), and ultimately seek healing, love, and self-discovery (redemption). These thematic explorations offer profound insights into her broader message, that the journey of self-realization and spiritual growth is both personal and collective, shaped by individual histories and global contexts. The integration of interdisciplinary approaches to Shafak's works opens new avenues for future research. Moving forward, there is immense potential to explore eco-feminism, transnational literature, physical and symbolic displacement, the impact of trauma, and cultural hybridity.

Hence, the current study sets the stage for further exploration of Shafak's oeuvre, encouraging continued analysis of her role in shaping discussions on contemporary global issues. Through the lens of gender, identity, migration, and spirituality, Shafak's literature offers timeless insights that remain as relevant today as ever, making her a pivotal figure in modern literature.

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