



ARTÍCULOS

UTOPIA Y PRAXIS LATINOAMERICANA. AÑO: 26, n.º extra interlocuciones 1, 2021, pp. 248-255
REVISTA INTERNACIONAL DE FILOSOFÍA Y TEORÍA SOCIAL
CESA-FCES-UNIVERSIDAD DEL ZULIA. MARACAIBO-VENEZUELA
ISSN 1316-5216 / ISSN-e: 2477-9555

Dialectical Identity of the Female Discourse of Shafak's Black Milk, on Writing, Motherhood, and the Harem Within

Identidad dialéctica del discurso femenino de la leche negra de Shafak, sobre la escritura, la maternidad y el harén interior

N. B. ABU MADI

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0970-5915>
noorb@hu.edu.jo
The Hashemite University, Zarqa, Jordan

R. K. AL-KHALILI

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0424-6895>
raja@hu.edu.jo
The Hashemite University, Zarqa, Jordan

This research is deposited in Zenodo:
DOI: <http://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4556216>

ABSTRACT

This paper examines Elif Shafak's feminine discourse in her novel Black Milk, on writing, motherhood, and the harem within from a Hegelian dialectical perspective to explore the diversities and multiplicity of the self in a postmodern world. The novel primarily explores a woman's complex identity rather than the conventional man-woman dualism that marked previous feminist ideologies. Her themes that revolve around issues of singlehood, motherhood, and diversity within the self will be discussed in the light of the Hegelian terms "being," "nothing," and "becoming" that are characteristics of the phases of the postmodern-postfeminist character in the novel.

Keywords: Black Milk, Elif Shafak, Hegel, post-feminism.

RESUMEN

Este artículo examina el discurso femenino de Elif Shafak en su novela Black Milk, la escritura, la maternidad y el harem interior desde una perspectiva dialéctica Hegeliana para explorar las diversidades y multiplicidad del yo en un mundo posmoderno. La novela explora principalmente la identidad compleja de una mujer en lugar del dualismo convencional hombre-mujer que marcó las ideologías feministas anteriores. Sus temas que giran en torno a cuestiones de soltería, maternidad y diversidad dentro del yo serán discutidos a la luz de los términos hegelianos "ser", "nada" y "devenir" que son características de las fases del carácter posmoderno-posfeminista en la novela.

Palabras clave: Black Milk, Elif Shafak, Hegel, postfeminismo.

Recibido: 05-12-2020 Aceptado: 10-02-2021



INTRODUCTION

"Diversity is magic. It is the first manifestation, the first beginning of the differentiation of a thing and of simple identity. The greater the diversity, the greater the perfection." Thomas Berry. Elif Shafak (Shafak: 2011, p.18-44) used multiplicity and diversity in most of her literary works to question the meanings of sanity and mental health. In *Black Milk*, Shafak (Shafak: 2011, pp.18-44) could not tell anyone about her internal multiplicity: "I cannot mention them to anyone. If I did, they would have me institutionalized for schizophrenia. But isn't the personality schizophrenic by definition?". The protagonist is not only concerned with her madness. She is reflecting on the identity of the post-modern individual, who is constantly changing because individuality is made and remade in daily interactions due to many factors that are not necessarily pathological (Butler: 1990).

Several critics discussed identity issues in Shafak's (Shafak: 2011, pp.18-44) novels. Monica Buşoiu (Buşoiu: 2014, pp. 112-117) states in "Multiple Feminist Identity in *Black Milk* by Elif Shafak" (Shafak: 2011, pp.18-44) that the construction of the postmodern identity is in a constant change due to many cultural, social, and economic factors and provides an in-depth analysis of each of the Thumbelina(s) and their psychological influence on *Big Self* (Buşoiu: 2014, pp. 112-117). Nevin Fadem Gurbuz's "The Perception of Multicultural Identity in Elif Shafak's *Honour*" (Shafak: 2011, pp.18-44) discusses issues of identity faced by immigrants whose identity is reshaped by the multiculturalism found in race, religion, and culture. To achieve the unity of the self, harmony must be created among all the various cultures (GÜRBÜZ: 2019, pp. 130-134). Nihad (Nihad: 2019, pp. 2900-2913) in "Elif Shafak (Shafak: 2011, pp.18-44): *The Voice of the Other*" examines the problem of otherness that emerged from the multicultural society that reshaped the multicultural identity in two of her novels: *The Bastard of Istanbul* and *Forty Rules of Love*. Due to the diversity found in the culture, small groups of people found themselves victimized by the dominant groups of the society by marginalizing them, consequently, treating them as "the other" (Nihad: 2019, pp. 2900-2913). Therefore, identity is always shaped and reshaped manifold in a dialectical manner to reach wholeness, unity, and self-satisfaction.

METHODOLOGY

Hegel's three-phase dialectical approach toward understanding the identity's diversity is linked to his philosophy of history, where "being" is "nothing" because it is an absolute abstraction, an absolute absence of attributes, and merely conceptual. When the two opposites merge, their truth is called "becoming" where "being" represents the world as "is," nothing as it is given, and "becoming" as its reality. The following paper uses Hegel's dialectics in understanding the narrative construction of Shafak's (Shafak: 2011, pp.18-44) personal story in *Black Milk*. The novel traces the "becoming" of the true self of the writer and also the writer's shift from the ideas of feminism to post-feminism.

In post-feminism, the feminist discourse has progressed dramatically, as can be seen in the works of many writers. Now, post-feminist works, according to Hammer and Kellner (Hammer & Kellner: 2009, pp. 219-234), "refers to the challenges of current feminist theory and practices as informed by post-structuralist, post-modern, and multiculturalist modes of analysis" (10). Many contemporary female novelists tackled issues of femininity and postfeminist literary production. Ponzanesi (Ponzanesi: 2014, pp. 156-227) states that feminist writing could be defined as "texts written by women about women for women."

Elif Shafak's *Black Milk: on Writing Motherhood and The Harem Within* (Shafak: 2011, p.29) is a postfeminist work that examines the nature of identity in women. Shafak (Shafak: 2011, pp.18-44), in an autobiographical and confessional style, narrates the developmental stages her true 'big self' has undergone to reach her identity and individuality that was at the beginning characterized by chaos and diversities.

Shafak's (Shafak: 2011, pp.18-44) novel is similar in its themes to Bharati Mukherjee's novel *Jasmine* (Sankar & Soundararajan: 2017, pp. 10-15). Mukherjee's narrative is built on the perspective of a young woman's experiences as an immigrant to the U.S, her journey toward self-discovery, and her quest to find her true individual identity in a land that is alien to her (Sankar & Soundararajan: 2017, pp. 10-15). Another similarity in themes can be found in the Algerian novelist, Ahlam Mosteghanemi, whose novel *Memory in the Flesh* (1993) tackles issues of body and desire; in addition to the love triangle involving the writer and two male artists (Stampf: 2010, pp. 129-158). Mosteghanemi is also the main voice of her character that is not disguised as a fictional name or employed in another imaginary career; rather, she straightforwardly manifests her actual identity as a writer in the novel.

The focus in the new postfeminist ideology and creative writings is on the diversities within the identity of a woman rather than the dualism of man-woman (Gamble: 2004, p. 32). The major concern of the post-feminist writer is different from that of the traditional feminist trend in that it is concerned with gender issues, and Adichie (Adichie: 2014, p. 14) states that "the problem with gender is that it prescribes 'how we should be' rather than 'how we are.'" The third wave feminism paved the way for the sexualized post-feminist to emerge because the voices shifted toward the "physical female power" that is called a "girlie culture." It was characterized by women's interest in wearing high heels, painting their fingernails, putting on makeup, and appearing to be perfectly sexy and charming not because they wanted to be appealing for men and their gaze, but because it's the power of their femininity that they want to show off (Baumgardner and Richards: 2010, p. 243). As a result, there was a shift toward the physical power of women, and according to Gill and Donaghue (Gill & Donaghue: 2013, pp. 240-258), "sex has become the big story." As Attwood (Attwood: 2006, pp. 77-94) describes postfeminism as: "a contemporary preoccupation with sexual values, practices, and identities." Thus, postfeminist writers suggest that a woman is responsible for her life and her choices, and by accepting the physical difference, one can have a unified identity that is characterized by "wholeness." Elif Shafak's (Shafak: 2011, pp.18-44) autobiographical novel *Black Milk: On Writing, Motherhood and the Harem Within* tackles issues relating to women who are not part of the traditional feminist perspectives because she philosophizes the being and the essence of womanhood and the diversities and the differences of the self by aiming at interpreting life in a dialectic manner.

Shafak (Shafak: 2011, pp.18-44) holds a special place within western feminist writers and Turkish writers as well. Shafak (Shafak: 2011, pp.18-44) is placed among important Turkish authors. Shafak (Shafak: 2011, pp.18-44) shares a dazzling examination of tensions in a variety of contexts especially, political ones, and often resorting to controversial topics related to the history of the Turkish Empire (Kempf: 2007, p. 108). She is unique because her novels reflect her turbulent upbringing, her social problems, and political battles. She grew in a family that was not governed by the traditional patriarchy because she was raised by her mother and her grandmother when she was only one-year-old. In almost all of her novels, she relies on being in multicultural societies and the effects they have on the identity of the individual, especially on women. In *Black Milk*, Shafak (Shafak: 2011, pp.18-44) tries to release all the voices within the self of a woman that are a result of the old battles of the woman's and which constitutes her identity and her true "being." In an interview, she explained:

I believe that in all of us, whether you're a mother, a woman, or a man, there are multiple selves and multiple voices. When we go out into the public sphere, we bring one of those voices to the fore. Before giving birth, I prioritized my intellectual and cerebral voice. Without being aware of it, I looked down on domestic work and rejected my maternal side.

This paper aims to closely examine the challenges that the "Big Self" of Shafak's (Shafak: 2011, pp.18-44) main character in the novel has undergone to regain order, wholeness, and unity in the light of the Hegelian dialectic discourse of "being-nothing-becoming." The original female in the eyes of old feminism is linked to

the “being” stage, the emergence of the sub-identities is linked to the “nothingness” stage where the characters are different and lack the stability of the being, and finally, the post-feminist identity that resembles the rewarding stage of “becoming” when unity can be obtained out the fragmentations that marked the previous stage, confirming that motherhood, writing and femininity can exist in harmony inside of a single woman. Although some critical works tackled the thematic diversity and difference in the identity in Shafak’s (Shafak: 2011, pp.18-44) *Black Milk*, the current paper seeks to relate the understanding of identity to Hegel’s (Hegel: 1998, p. 110) dialectic philosophy concerning the shift of the feminist discourse in post-feminism.

At the beginning of the novel, and before the emergence of the Thumbelina, Shafak (Shafak: 2011, pp.18-44) was on a boat trip sitting next to a young woman with two children. She was single and not involved in a serious relationship. She wrote down a few lines in the Manifesto of the single girl while she was on the boat declaring that: “Since divorcing literature is out of the question and since there is no man among mankind who would agree to become “husband number two,” in all likelihood, I will be single all my life.” Getting married to her seems like a huge burden where the family would come next, and that will not make her marriage happy or even make her mentally stable. Shafak (Shafak: 2011, pp.18-44) thus found her true “essence” like a lady in “being” a productive, ambitious, and free woman without getting entangled without commitments.

In the novel, the biggest concern for the identity of Shafak (Shafak: 2011, pp.18-44) or her “Big Self” was not loneliness, because she found in writing a good loyal companion that won’t abandon her to the grave, rather according to Falk (Falk: 2007, p. 31): “The real fear, however, is to be with one’s self.” Shafak’s (Shafak: 2011, pp.18-44) uncertainty about her future can be seen in the protagonist’s description, who referred to time as one that “flows so fast that I feel a surge of panic as though I’m late for something, but what exactly, I don’t know. How old am I? Thirty-five,” She asks, “How many more years can I postpone the decision to have children?”. Shafak (Shafak: 2011, pp.18-44) was aware of the fact that she was growing old and that her body was aging fast, but she still repressed that urge to get married and have children. She seems not to follow the radical thoughts of the second-wave feminists who, according to Gamble (Gamble: 2004, p. 32), wanted a feminist utopia where reproduction was controlled to guarantee “the collapse of those social and cultural structures—the family, cultural myths of romance, marriage, and motherhood—which have provided the ideological support for this sexual division.”

The post-feminist Shafak (Shafak: 2011, pp.18-44) managed to come to terms with the needs of her femininity to become a mother to reach “wholeness” instead of the nothingness status that a woman might go through when she suppresses her motherly instincts. The physical-psychological challenge that Shafak (Shafak: 2011, pp.18-44) underwent as a result of being single marked the beginning of the epic battle among the finger-women or the “Thumbelina,” where each finger-woman stood for one of the essential components that form the overall “Big Self” of Shafak’s essence. It was no longer Shafak (Shafak: 2011, pp.18-44) confronting the world; rather, it is Shafak (Shafak: 2011, pp.18-44) versus her multiplicities that she had to confront every day in a desperate quest to reach wholeness, unity, and balance.

RESULTS

Shafak (Shafak: 2011, pp.18-44) marked the shift of the dialectic discourse among the pint-sized women inside of her or the “Thumbelina,” as she called them throughout the novel and the “Big Self.” These ‘Harem’ were constantly fighting over power to control the “Big Self” and chaos was prevailing:

There is a mini harem deep down in my soul. A gang of females who constantly fight for nothing and bicker, looking for an opportunity to trip one another up. They are teeny-tiny creatures, each no taller than Thumbelina. Around four to five inches in height, ten to fourteen ounces in weight that is how big they are. They make my life miserable, and yet I don’t know how to live without them. (Shafak: 2011, pp.18-44)

Those inner voices represented all the things any woman aspires to have: to be practical, spiritual, educated, and powerful. The basic "being" of the "Big Self" was not in a quest to challenge the male power. Instead, she desired to bring all the voices of those harems to peaceful negotiations. The presence of the male power was confined within the edges of romance and procreation; he was no longer the challenge, but the diversity within the self was the new obstacle to fulfillment.

The Big Self of Shafak (Shafak: 2011, pp.18-44) represents in Hegelian terms as the "being" of the self. This being is unfinished, incomplete, and inadequate. The Big Self in the novel was always bullied and under the attack of the other Thumbelina, who seems determined to impose their ideology over the Big Self, which is a symbol of wholeness. The Big Self thus stood for the female writer who was estranged from her femininity because she wanted to maintain a middle ground to become a woman and a writer at the same time without jeopardizing any of them. The journey from "being" to "becoming" was to confront the multiple desires that grew within the self in a quest to reach stability and wholeness.

Each one of the Thumbelina represented the "Nothing" stage and which could be described in the illustrations provided by Hegel (Hegel: 1991, pp. 192-193) in the three-stage dialectics. These finger-women were distinct in existence as each one of them represented one of the sub-identities of the big self. They seemed perfect, but they only represented one part of the narrative. Shafak (Shafak: 2011, pp.18-44) gave a name for each one of those little harems that match the traits they embody. Even the setting was carefully designed to match each one of them. The first one was Little Miss Practical that lived in a super clean environment in Brussels. She was functional, organized, and sophisticated in her choices of toiletries and food. Moreover, she thought that Big Self could be a mother and a writer with a baby sitter and proper time management.

The second Thumbelina is the Sufi Madam Dervish, who was humble, religious, and peaceful. She lived in a religious place called Mount Athos and seemed a little bit disconnected from reality because she was spiritual and distant from the rest of the world. The third one, Milady Ambitious Chekhovian, was a workaholic, ambitious young woman who believed that having a child was not destined to Big Self because she was born to be a great writer, not a mother. The fourth one was Miss Highbrowed Cynic, who lived in New York. She was an undecided vegetarian melancholic smoking hippy. She was also a book worm and had no time to waste. Also, she questioned Big Self's readiness to become a mother.

DISCUSSION

The fifth one was the seductress Blue Belle Bovary who appeared in the novel when Big Self met her husband. She was feminine and cared about her looks the whole time. Bovary symbolized the sensual part of Big Self that was absent for a long time in her life because she was overly consumed with working hard as a writer. The last and yet most important Thumbelina was Mama Rice Pudding that showed up at the end. She represented motherhood, domesticity, and traditions and was in physical appearance similar to the lady Shafak (Shafak: 2011, pp.18-44) met on the boat at the beginning of the novel.

In the Hegelian dialectics, the Thumbelina of the last phase represented the dynamic one, especially because the finger-women were constantly shaped and reshaped throughout the novel. The clashing contradictory chaotic relationship among the Thumbelina was intense, as noted by Buşoiu (Buşoiu: 2014, p. 112-117), especially between "the other career-driven Thumbelina" and Mama Rice Pudding who, according to Stone et al. (Stone et al.: 2012, p. 7): "Being, nothing, two markers which thought, turned in upon itself, cannot reconcile, cannot hold together peacefully, cannot somehow ignore." In the novel, when Big Self was pregnant, Mama Rice Pudding's voice was prevailing over the other voices in a dictatorial manner because she wanted to make sure the preservation of the mother and baby: "We suppress many aspects of our

personalities to conform to the perfect image we try to live up to. In this way, there is rarely—if ever—a democracy inside of us, but instead a solid oligarchy were some voices reign over the rest” (xii). Yet, Big Self suffered from postpartum depression as a result of the dramatic change in her essence. She was unable to resume her writing career because all of the other voices were shut down, and she was transformed into a full-time mother. This chaotic phase exemplifies the second phase of the Hegelian dialectics of “nothing”: Kochi explains that “this then is shown up as inadequate, indeterminate, (as always presupposing something else – a missed step behind) and therefore needing to be cognized again, recognized.”

Reaching the phase of wholeness is exemplified in the Hegelian dialectic as “becoming,” and it came as a result of challenging the other voices within the identity of Big Self. After recovering from postpartum depression, Shafak, or “Big Self,” as a postmodern character, realized that she could not repress her other voices because, without them, she would be lost:

Black Milk is an attempt to topple that oligarchy through peaceful means, to move forward into a full-fledged, healthy inner democracy...Only when we can harmonize and synchronize the voices within can we become better mothers, better fathers, and, yes, probably better writers (xiii). The ability to reach the knowledge of the self, as the novel illustrates, had been achieved through dialogue.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Shafak’s (Shafak: 2011, pp.18-44) first struggle appeared when she realized that she was single and a career-oriented finger-woman and that it was not her desired state because it resulted in an unbalanced feminine existence and a fragmented identity. Her novel marked a new postfeminist ideology that ought to fulfill the roles of being a mother and a writer. According to the novelist, a woman should not be left to struggle with multiplicity and instead should embrace wholeness. The Hegelian dialectics of “being, nothing, becoming” philosophically summarizes and confirms the shift of the feminine discourse toward the inner struggles and battles to fulfill desires and to reach wholeness and unity rather than conforming to the external pressures of society and the patriarchal limitations that constituted the radical feminist ideology.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

ADICHIE, CN (2014). "We should all be feminists". *Vintage Books, a division of Random House LLC, New York*. p. 14.

ATTWOOD, F (2006). "Sexed up: Theorizing the sexualization of culture". *Sexualities*, 9(1), pp. 77-94.

BAUMGARDNER, J, & RICHARDS, A (2010). "Manifesta (Revised and Updated with a New Preface): Young Women, Feminism, and the Future". *Farrar, Straus and Giroux*. p. 243.

BUTLER, J (1990). "Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity". *Routledge: New York*.

BUȘOIU, M (2014). "MULTIPLE FEMINIST IDENTITY IN BLACK MILK BY ELIF SHAFAK". *Annals of the University of Oradea, Romanian Language & Literature Fascicule/Analele Universitatii din Oradea. Seria Filologie, Fascicula Limba si Literatura Romana*, 21. p. 112-117.

- FALK, FA (2007). "On My Own: The Art of Being a Woman Alone". *National Geographic Books*.
- GAMBLE, S (Ed.). (2004). "The Routledge companion to feminism and postfeminism". *Routledge*. p. 32.
- SANKAR, G, & SOUNDARARAJAN, R (2017). "Immigrant experience and self-identity in Bharati Mukherjee's Jasmine: A study". *Scholedge International Journal of Multidisciplinary & Allied Studies*, 4(2), pp. 10-15.
- GILL, R, & DONAGHUE, N (2013). "As if postfeminism had come true: The turn to agency in cultural studies of 'sexualisation'". In *Gender, agency, and coercion*. *Palgrave Macmillan, London*. pp. 240-258.
- GÜRBÜZ, NF (2019). "THE PERCEPTION OF MULTICULTURAL IDENTITY IN ELIF SHAFAK'S HONOUR". *Journal of International Social Research*, 12(62). pp. 130-134.
- HAMMER, R, & KELLNER, D (2009). "Third-wave feminism, sexualities, and the adventures of the posts". In *Women, feminism, and femininity in the 21st century: American and French perspectives*. *Palgrave Macmillan, New York*. pp. 219-234.
- HEGEL, GWF (1998). "Phenomenology of spirit". *Motilal Banarsidass Publ.* p. 110.
- HEGEL, GWF (1991). "The Encyclopaedia Logic: Part I of the Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences with the Zusatz". pp. 192-193.
- KEMPF, A (2007). "Turkish delights: The varieties of Turkey's literature". *Library Journal*. 132(2), p. 108.
- STONE, M, RUA WALL, I, & DOUZINAS, C (Eds.). (2012). "New critical legal thinking: law and the political". *Taylor & Francis*.
- NIHAD, M (2019). "Elif Shafak: The voice of the other". *Opcion*. 21, pp. 2900-2913. Retrieved September 28, 2020, from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/335201590_Elif_Shafak_The_Voice_of_The_Other
- PONZANESI, S (2014). "Postcolonial Chick Lit: Postfeminism or Consumerism? In The Postcolonial Cultural Industry". *Palgrave Macmillan, London*. pp. 156-227.
- SHAFAK, E (2011). "Black Milk: On Writing, Motherhood, and the Harem Within". *almohreradbi*. p. 29.
- STAMPFL, T (2010). "The (Im) possibility of Telling: Of Algeria and "Memory in the Flesh"". *College Literature*, pp. 129-158.

BIODATA

N. B. ABU MADI is currently an instructor of English at the Hashemite University. She teaches courses in English Language and Literature. The courses include English 101 and Technical Translation. She has published several articles on modern English and American literature. She can be contacted at: noorb@hu.edu.jo.

R.K. AL-KHALILI is an Associate professor of American and British Literature and Drama in the English Department at the Hashemite University. She has published numerous articles. She is a reviewer for scopus-indexed journals. She taught courses in American literature, English literature, cultural studies, and comparative literature for B.A and MA students. She can be contacted at: raja@hu.edu.jo.

BEWARE! DON'T BE SCAMMED

This is a table of contents checker. It is an anti-scam system. Clicking on the TOC checker logo will open in your browser a preserved file with the table of contents: AÑO 26, N.º extra 1, 2021. TOC checker, to ensure the reliability of your registration, does not allow editors to make changes to the tables of contents after they have been deposited. Check that your paper is present in the registry.

User: ei12021
Pass: ut28pr02at21

Click logo

