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SCAPEGOATING THE WEAKER SEX: A MIMETIC ANALYSIS OF ELIF
SHAK'S HONOR

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ABSTRACT

The present study analyzed the seminal novel *Honor* written by Elif Shafak through the lens of mimetic theory propounded by Girard (1987) to find out the mimetic practices embedded in the Kurdish Turkish culture and how those mimetic practices have become rituals and established norms in marginalizing and suppressing the women. The study was carried out to highlight the instances of such cultural practices that scapegoat the women for the so-called values of the society through honor killing. The mimetic study of the novel is also significant because it highlights the women's emancipation against such brutal cultural practices as honor killing. The findings of the study show that women have been subject to suppression, subjugation, violence and injustice in the Turkish culture because they belong to a weak sex. The study also highlights that the societal norms are established and practiced by the men over the women because they are the ones who control the society. Moreover, the study also establishes that Shafak has fought back the mimetic and scapegoating practices of the Turkish culture by highlighting the hypocrisy of the men and women's plight for liberation from the clutches of the men through the character of the protagonist *Pembe*. The study reveals that the novel *Honor* rejects the scapegoating practices and marginalization against women by highlighting the injustice done to women in the Kurdish Turkish women. The society needs to reconsider their values to stop such practices against the women and needs to treat them with

justice and equality. The study concludes that scapegoating the women in the name of women while sparing the men for the same crime is not a just cultural practice.

INTRODUCTION

The present research analyzes Elif Shafak's *Honor* (2011) from the theoretical perspective of mimetic theory given by Rene Girard (1987) to find out the causes of mimetic conflicts in Turkish culture and how the weaker sex has been exploited and wronged through the ritual of scapegoating. The study aims to highlight that the women are fighting against the socio-culturally, religiously and traditionally held mimetic practices that marginalize their status and engulf their existence. Moreover, the study also attempts to analyze the nature of the scapegoating phenomenon as a cultural practice in the novel *Honor*. The study further investigates the role of women in not only the orthodox community practices, but also in the formation of new community based on redefined cultural values. The researcher wants to explore the novel from the view of mimetic theory to point out the inherent flaws in the centuries old unquestioned mimetic rituals that have victimized the weaker sex. The study highlights a need for a positive change in the society by the rejection of the primitive mimetic practices such as scapegoating the women in the name of honor and by the formulation a balanced and civilized society.

Honor is Shafak's seminal work in which she has not only highlighted the marginalized status of the women in Turkey, but also has advocated the plight of women in a male governed 20th century Turkey. The novel is a very significant account of the women suffrage and their outcry in the wake of the advancement of media, education and globalized culture where women can no longer linger on or depend on their indigenous cultural and traditional practices and they urgently need a new community where they are not subject to scapegoating. The present study is aimed at highlighting the unjust practice of mimetic practices to resolve the societal conflicts. The study also aims to shed light on the role of women in breaking the chains of the society for their independence and a better future in Turkey. The beautifully woven story of the novel *Honor* appears to be a subtle and tactful representation of life in general and life in the context of Turkish culture specifically account of women suffering oppression in the indigenous culture and finding solace in the globalized and newly adapted culture. The story clearly reflects that Elif Shafak is highlighting mal-mimetic practices to make the people think and reject the old mimetic conflicts and evolve as new community based on renewed values.

Problem Statement

The present study is a mimetic analysis of Elif Shafak's *Honor* to find out the institutionalization of mimetic conflicts in Turkish culture and the role of orthodox indigenous cultural practices in marginalizing the weaker sex (women) and how far this institutionalization is justified within the context of the mimetic practices of another culture.

Significance of the Study

The present study is significant in highlighting the conflict of mimetic practices in primitive cultures and developing countries as practically barbarous and self-devaluating in cross-cultural context. The present study is also significant as it analyzes the novel *Honor* using the framework of mimetic theory propagated by Rene Girard to highlight mal-mimetic practices in indigenous cultures of the developing countries. Moreover, this frame of study also provides a lens of study for future research in mimetic literary criticism. In addition, the study is also significant in pointing out the shortcomings inherent in mimetic cultural phenomenon as scapegoating of the innocent people, so that the people will reevaluate their orthodox cultural practices as civilized communities. The study also encourages the people to reject the established community practices and stresses on the formation of a new community. Moreover, the study is also significant in highlighting the female identity and female struggle in breaking the cultural and traditional chains of the society to reject and reestablish a new community.

The present study is also significant because it unveils the power relations and how power is exercised by men in the context of Turkish culture to sabotage and snub the integrity of women and their independence in the name of mimetic practices. Likewise, the study highlights the dual standards and hypocritical nature of Turkish cultural values that leash the women for committing a crime and license the men to do whatever they want to do by justifying their faulty mimetic practice while rejecting many of sensible and religiously acceptable mimetic practices both indigenously and globally. Last, and most important of all, the present research is significant because it voices for the equality of men and women for the development of a civilized and balanced society where mimetic practices are not targeted at discriminated strata of the society.

Story in Brief

Honor is one of the most significant and bold novel by Shafak that advocates the rights and equality of women in all the spheres of life. Through a historical and fictional account of the indigenous cultural practices, she has projected a disturbing and realistic picture of the Turkish people. Shafak opens the eyes of a wide range of audience towards patriarchy and exploitation of women through a well woven story of a mother-son relation which highlights the themes that love without freedom and free will is not possible in the male controlled world. Shafak has started the novel with an anecdote about one of her neighboring ladies who was beaten by her husband almost every day and nobody bothered about her condition. So, Shafak dedicates all those people who care and hear the cries of countless women and become their voice against the atrocities and exploitation of men.

The setting of the novel *Honor* is the 20th century Turkey and England and the story covers a time-span of almost a half century by giving the account of the three generations of a Kurdish *Toprak* family. In simple words, the novel gives an account of honor-killing of a mother (*Pembe*) by her son (*Iskander*). The story opens with the first-person narration of the events leading to the death of

Pembe by *Esma* who is also *Iskander's* sister. The opening chapter lets the readers know about the inner thoughts of the narrator who wants to kill her brother in revenge of her mother's murder but as the time passed, *Esma* was ready to let her brother come out of prison and readapt the everyday life. After we come to know about the murder and *Iskander's* trial, the story travels temporally back from the third to first generation in retrospective manner.

The story takes a leap back and we encounter *Naze*, a lady, who has been burdened with a duty to deliver a male heir to the family. The Kurdish area where *Naze* lives is shrouded by the attitude that females have not only to give birth to boys but also grieve the birth of their daughters. *Naze* gave birth to two beautiful twin daughters who were named by both the husband the wife as *Pembe Kader* and *Jamila Yeter*. As the time passed and both the sisters grew up, a boy in the vicinity named *Adam* fell in love with *Jamila*, but he, later on, refused to marry her on the grounds that she has lost her honor and virginity and married *Pembe* instead. The couple had moved to London and with the passage of time, their marriage did not bring happiness to any of them.

In deciding to marry *Pembe*, *Adam* had no clue of what would happen to *Jamila*. She decided never to marry and became a "virgin midwife". The story reaches to its climax, the immigrant *Adam and Pembe* are divided between the values and practices of their native culture and foreign culture. *Iskander* was a bicultural product; therefore, he had ideological conflicts. No doubt the family had long moved to London, but they still adhere to the traditional customs and values of their native country. For example, *Pembe* still feels that *Iskander*, a male heir, is her sole achievement in her life. The struggle of *Pembe* and *Esma* is to change the world around them, while *Iskander* is not only trying to control it but his mother and sister as well. The rebellious nature of *Pembe* becomes clear after a comparison with the character of her twin sister *Jamila*.

As the time passes in the suburbs of London, *Pembe* and *Adam* start liberating themselves from the chains of their indigenous culture back in Turkey. However, part of their hybrid identity belongs to the cultural and traditional values of their forefathers. In comparison to *Pembe*, *Adam* is more independent in his choices in the foreign country. However, both the husband and wife start chasing the solace from the boredom of their married into the extra-marital affairs. The independent manly nature of *Adam* is evident from his relationship with a woman named *Roxana* in one of the gambling stations that he often visits. He delves too much in that woman and the gambling that he finally abandons his wife and children. On the other hand, *Pembe* is forced by the family circumstances to earn a livelihood for her children by working in a saloon. With the passage of time, she starts taking interest in a man named *Elias* and ultimately develops intimate relation with, but owing to her subordinate status in the Turkish culture, she tries to keep her affair a secret.

The other side of the picture shows the nature and attitudes of *Iskander* and *Esma* growing up in a foreign culture. *Iskander* appears to be resilient to the cultural values of British culture and tries to assimilate himself with his Turkish-muslim culture. His younger brother *Yunus* is quite different from him. In contrast to *Iskander*, *Esma*, influenced by the feminist drive prevailing in

England, wants to be a feminist writer. As the time moved past, Pembe's family discovers the secret love affair between *Pembe* and *Elias*. The story takes a twist and *Jamila*, had a scary vision in which she comes to know that her twin sister *Pembe* is in deep waters. She somehow manages to travel to London to see her sister and to fix her trouble.

After knowing about the heinous crime committed by his mother, *Iskander* finds it his duty to punish his mother on the behalf of his father for tainting the honor of their family. In the final twist, *Iskander* and his aunt *Jamila* arrive at the house at almost the same time. Since both *Jamila* and *Pembe* were twins and had same facial and physiological features, *Iskander* mistakenly murder *Jamila* considering the she is his mother *Pembe*. After the death of *Jamila*, a lot of things changed: *Pembe* broke her relation with *Elias* and started living as *Jamila*; *Iskander* was prisoned and he wanted to redeem his crime; *Adem* committed suicide after *Roxana* broke off; and *Esma* formerly willing to avenge her mother's death, but latter on forgives her brother.

Research Questions

- 1 How does the scapegoating as a mimetic practice marginalize the women as weaker sex and is justified phenomenon in Shafk's *Honor*?
- 2 How far is the mimetic conflict institutionalized in the context of Turkish culture in Shafak's *Honor*?
- 3 How are the indigenous values justified in scapegoating the source of conflict within and other culture/community?

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study are to:

- 1 To interpret and highlight the role of mimetic practices in devaluing and revaluing the indigenous cultural practices Elif Shafk's *Honor*.
- 2 To point out the problems such as rigidity and fixity inherent in indigenous cultural practices and values system.
- 3 To analyze the scapegoating phenomenon is inherently fatal for the community formation in cross-cultural contexts.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The mimetic theory is given by the French anthropologist Rene Girard (1987), who states that all human desires, actions, values are collective and, therefore, are the reason for us to desire, act and value things the way others do. This sense of a collective desire becomes a source of conflict. As a result, there starts a process imitating others that the things become so popular and normal that we start calling them norms. The inevitable outcome of the frequent practice of a norm is that the human beings cannot differentiate between the good and the bad mimesis. So, the historical evidence suggests that the conflicted mimetic situations have been treated through scapegoat phenomenon. The scapegoat phenomenon means a sort of sacrifice to resolve the mimetic conflict.

Girard (1987) says that the scapegoat phenomenon has been also an established norm not in one culture but almost all the culture of the universe from the

inception of civilization to date. The reason behind this is that the religion being the most sacred and important pillar of all the civilizations have institutionalized this scapegoat mechanism into an established and unquestioned ritual. Girard (1987) believes that all human cultures are built on the foundation of the scapegoat mechanism. The present study will analyze the novel *Honor* in the light of mimetic theory and scapegoat mechanism to highlight the victimization behind scapegoat mechanism, religion as a source of rituals and scapegoat mechanism and the role of rituals. The researcher will also highlight a need for rechecking the role of religion, rituals and mimetic conflicts in rejection of the orthodox and formation of a new Turkish community for the development of Turkey in specific and advancement of human civilization in general.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section provides a thorough overview of the previously conducted studies to define the research gap for the present research. Pourgharib, Kiani and Ziadbakhsh (2018) published an article under the title *The Honor of Being Colonized: A Bhabhaian Reading of Elif Shafak's Honour* and analyzed the novel using the *Hybridity* and *Unhomeliness* propagated by Bhabha in postcolonial theory: Commonly understood as the establishment of an inevitable connection between the colonizer and the colonized blurring the indigenous identity of either. So, the unavailability of a third and hybrid space stirs the migrant people to recall the past and feel in a state of unhomeliness. The study concludes that in the context of the novel, the characters with their new diasporic identity are at a loss and feel as if unhomed, therefore, they constantly struggle to fill this void and redefine their hybrid identities. Moreover, the diasporic communities resulting from emigrational hybridity act as the solace space for the characters to fight back their native cultural stereotypes, but the characters' attempt in finding this solace, instead, results in social insecurity, nostalgia, split identity, isolation and a constant feeling of being out of the right place.

Paraschiv (2018) wrote a review article entitled *Elif Shafak's works: A Means of Preventing Honor based Violence* which is published in *Violence Prevention and Safety Promotion in Higher Education Settings*. He critically evaluated the novels *Honor* and *The Bastard of Istanbul* and declared that the novels function as fighting weapon for the freedom and rights of women against the indignant codes of honor in the male governed modern Turkey. The study further suggests that both the novels portray the women in a divided state between tradition and modernity that create a void in Turkish culture. Moreover, the study concludes that Elif Shafak's novels raise voice against the unjust and brutal honor killing and advocate for the emancipation of women through higher education.

In the similar vein, Dundar's (2016) article *Immigrant Food and Trans-memory of Home in Diana Abu-Jaber's the Language of Baklava and Elif Shafak's Honor* was published in *New Horizons of Muslim Diaspora in North America and Europe*. The researcher analyzed the fictional account of Abu-Jaber in *The Language of Baklava* and Elif Shafak's *Honor* to compare how food production is portrayed in the experiences of immigrant writers from the Global South. The study concludes that the novelists associate experiences of migrants with the cultural fusion observed in cuisines. Moreover, new identity, nostalgic past and

homesickness function as metaphor in culinary memoirs and diasporic fiction. The study concludes that in Abu-Jaber and Shafak's works, the struggle for new identity, self-discovery and journey to the past are portrayed through ethnic foods.

Nurikić and Botalić (2019) conducted a study with the title *The Impact of Environment on Male Gender Roles in the Novel Honor (Iskender) by Elif Shafak* and noticed that she portrays the male and female characters as she found in her society. Her perspective of gender highlights the reason behind the patriarchal spirit and behavior of the men against women. Shafak has portrayed this stereotypical behavior of men through the character of Iskender in the novel *Honor*. His character represents the typical upbringing of males in Turkish culture. Moreover, the protective and other gender roles associated with males find support inside the home. In case, a male deviates from the traditional cultural practices is considered a deficient traitor. The study concludes that Shafak creates the male characters as children growing from childhood to adult age, who have to bear the unavoidable consequences of their unwise choices and decisions.

Rafique, Tariq and Khan (2021) published an article entitled *Negotiating the Societal and Cultural Impact on a Perpetrator's Psyche in Elif Shafak's Honour*. They conducted a psychoanalytic study of the novel *Honor* using Social Cognitive Theory given by Albert Bandura, and focused on the psychological behavior of Iskander who supposedly murdered his mother. The theory highlights that the actions and behavior of an individual are based on observational, imitational and social learning in a society. Based on these factors of the theory, Iskander's guilt after the crime showed that he acted because of the already coded ideology of honor killing in the Turkish society. The study concludes that Iskander as a victim of traditionally held ideology than a killer.

Safa (2018) wrote a master's dissertation with the title *Men violence, culture and women determination in Elif Shafak's honor (2011) and Alice Walker's color purple (1983)* in which a comparative research was done on the portrayal of women and the role of patriarchy in the context of the societies in the both the novels. The study focused on the role of society, patriarchy, masculinity, tradition and violence in construction of gender and how the women react to the violence against them. The study uses Bandura's theory of violence to conduct this study. Both the writers highlight domestic violence and believe that this violence results from conventionally inherited beliefs and practices of the society. The study concludes that the female characters are not only opposing to the domestic violence, but they are also challenging the conventionally constructed norms, values and gender roles.

Ikram and Waheed (2018) debate about the role of western media in tainting the image of Muslims through a constant coverage of the instances of honor-killing in the Muslim countries in *Inferiority Complex: A Character Analysis of Elif Shafak's Honour*. They opine the view that the west does not take into consideration the socio-psychological reasons behind such acts. They employed the psychoanalytic theory with the theory of inferiority on the novel *Honor* to explore the socio-psychological factors that instigate the perpetrators they

conclude that the reason behind the instances of matricide are society, culture, traditions, values and male dominance. The literature review clearly highlights the research gap for the present study.

Mäkelä (2014) analyzed the novels *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1961), *Sula* (1973), *The Secret History* (1992), *Amsterdam* (1998) and *What I Loved* (2003) using Girard's theory of mimesis to find out the relation between the narrated self and other in these novels. The researcher conducted the study by incorporating the mimetic theory into the narrative theory of implied author and narrative perspective structures. The analysis was done through a close textual reading of all the novels. The study concluded that the imitation of Desire is the most important aspect prevalent in the contemporary fiction. Moreover, Son and Jung (2017) studied the movie *The Servant's* (2010) protagonist through Girard's theory of mimetic triangle of desire. The study analyses the structural transformation of desire in character because of the adaptation of the novel *Chunhyangjeon* into the movie. The study concludes that there is an indirectness of mimetic desire in the main character of the movie is similar to the vanity of the modern man in the today's capitalistic world. The published literature shows that the text has not been studied with reference to the variables of present research. Moreover, the frame of study i.e. mimetic theory has also not been used to analyze the text from feminist perspective. It highlights that the researcher has the scope and required research gap to carry this research.

METHODOLOGY

The present study takes a qualitative orientation in exploring the novel *Honor* written by Elif Shafak. The study adopts the mimetic theory of literary criticism to explore the text to highlight the reasons of institutionalizing faulty mimetic practices i.e. unjust scapegoating so that such practices may be discarded to formulate a new community. The researcher takes a close textual reading to find out the instances in the novel that correspond to the variable of the study. The found events and episodes are analyzed one by one considering the tenants of mimetic theory (Girard, (1987)). Then the collected data is interpreted to seek the answers of the research question. After the data analysis, the findings of the study are written under the heading data analysis and discussion. In this portion, the discussion of the findings is discussed in detail to address the research question. The study on the whole is divided into following headings: Abstract, Introduction, Theoretical Framework, Literature Review, Methodology, Data Analysis and Discussions and Conclusion.

DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

This section provides an analysis and comprehensive discussion on the given research question in the light of the Mimetic theory given by Girard (1987). The novel *Honor* is written by a Shafk who is a Turkish writer. Therefore, the part of the novel is contextualized in the indigenous Turkish culture. The very title of the novel is suggestive of a cultural value that is held sacred in as a cultural practice. As a result, honor becomes a very strong ritual to be upheld and practiced by every community. However, a close textual reading of the novel provides an insight into the fact that the honor has been a source of scapegoating the women in the Turkish cultural practices to resolve and sort out the clash of

cultural values against the violation of honor as an established and acceptable behavior.

The text provides a clear insight into the biased and patriarchal control of cultural superior men over the women. The same ritual does not stand strong in case of the violation of honor by a man. The ritual finds its justification in the orthodox culture owing to the social construct that women are the custodians of the family honor. The non-observable underlying problem for the average think tank in the culture is that the practice of scapegoating the women goes unnoticed as a sheer injustice, marginalization and brutality against the women as a part of the community. The practice of killing the women for the sake of honor is recursive in many of the culture around the world owing to the undeniable fact that women are the weaker sex.

The above given discussion on the role of culture in practicing the scapegoating phenomenon to resolve the community conflict of honor violation by the women is artfully projected by Elif Shafk in her novel *Honor*. The novel deals with the story of the three generations of a Turkish family living in Turkey and England. The treatment of cultural norms and values over a period of almost half a century highlights the transition of cultural values from orthodox to liberal values system that provides women a space to exercise their liberty. This also highlights the women's plight in rejecting the orthodox values system by forming a new community based on the hybrid and newly acquired values system.

There are a lot of instances that provide insight into the inherent patriarchal control of men over the women. First, the mother of *Jamila* and *Pembe* has been forced by the narrow-minded society to produce male heir that she failed to do so. Their mother, like so many other Turkish women, mourns their birth. This highlights the fact that in order to need the security and respect, they must give birth to boys only. Second, the grown up *Jamila*, *Pembe's* sister has been rejected by her boyfriend *Adam* on the grounds that she has lost her virginity before marriage. He, instead marries to *Pembe* who, in his eyes, was virgin and respected lady. The very duality and hypocrisy of men reveals the mindset and attitude of men towards women in Turkish. It is evident that the future of *Jamila*, later on, has been in dark owing to the tag of rejection and loss of virginity. She has been scapegoated to uphold the norm that women are forbidden to have an affair with a man before marriage. The stigma and social norms transform her into a nun who can no more enjoy the happiness of lives with all its colors like rest of the women of her society. It is because of the fact that women are a weaker sex and they have been subject to exploitation and violation by men in the Turkish culture and values system. But, on the other hand, *Adam* has to suffer from no stigma of loss of virginity because he is a man. He, instead, gets married to her sister *Pembe*.

Third, the protagonist *Pembe*, though born and brought up in the traditionally rigid family norms and values systems, exercises her independence by maintaining an extra marital affair to make her monotonous life and no more compatible with indigenous values. The same has been done by her so called husband *Adam*. The very incidents highlights the way patriarchal chains work

in sidelining and sacrificing the women for the sake of family honor. Had *Pembe* been a man liker her husband, nobody would have questioned her morality and violation of the cultural practice of refraining from an extramarital affair. So, in the line of the traditional values system, *Pembe's* liberation from indigenous values cannot be tolerated and accepted by even her son. So, he kills his aunt *Jamila* considering her as his mother because both the sisters are twins and bear face resemblance. Fourth, *Esma*, daughter of *Pembe* and sister of *Iskander* wants to take revenge on her brother for killing her mother. She can do nothing about it not because she forgives out of filial love for her brother but also because of the fact that she is woman and belongs to a weaker sex.

The irony of the fate of the women in the traditional cultural and values system is evident from the fact that, in order to resolve the conflict caused by *Pembe* by violating a so called sacred cultural norm, *Iskander* has no other option but to kill his mother to restore the family honor. The act of killing finds its justification in the practices of the Turkish culture and values system. So, *Iskander* has to scapegoat his mother to side by the culture and values that he carries as his cultural legacy. On the contrary, nothing of the sort happens in case of his father owing to the fact that he is man. Moreover, the weaker and marginalized status has also been highlighted by Shafk through the irony of situation. The narrator and the audience knows that though scapegoated in the eyes of *Iskander* and the rest of community, *Pembe* still lives on disguising herself as *Jamila*. Had she had not done so, she should have lost her own life.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that Shafk opens the eyes of a range of audience by highlighting the patriarchal chains that bind women to suffer. The men are stronger members of the society and are the ones who are the custodians of cultural norms and values, while the women have to obey and follow the norms. The novel *Honor* highlights the hypocrisy of men to maintain a balance in the society the way it pleases them. The study concludes that women suffer because of the fact that they are the weaker sex. Men can even kill women to resolves the conflict between a rebel (the one who violates the established norms) and the society he/she is part of. The study concludes that a dichotomy exists in the culture and values system of Turkey that allows men to scapegoat (kill) women and spare men.

The Turkish Kurdish values system is such a conservative and oppressive set of norms that women cannot do the same to men. For example, *Esma* cannot do the same to *Iskander* to take revenge or resolve her cultural conflict by scapegoating her brother in the name of justices. Additionally, *Pembe* cannot reveal her identity and has to live the rest of her life as *Jamila* because the society (i.e. *Iskander*) would not spare her because she will remain a reason of conflict by violation of cultural norm in two ways: By committing adultery she violated the family honor; and by the fact that the culture cannot afford a specimen of violation going unnoticed. In short, the study concludes that women, being the weaker sex, have been violated, scapegoated and killed by scapegoating them in the name of culture, values and honor of the family in Turkish Kurdish culture, and Shafak has highlighted the case of Kurdish women through the characters of *Esma*, *Jamila* and *Pembe* to outcry her voice for the

rejection of traditional and orthodox community and formation of a new community, culture and values system where women are no more a violated and killed as a weaker sex.

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