Feminist Phenomenology and Empathy in Elif Shafak’s “The Forty Rules of Love”

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Abstract

The gender bias in Turkey is contemporary, yet an unsettled struggle, despite the fact that discrimination based on gender is banned by the Turkish constitution, because of the prevailing conditions, women happen to face domestic violence, femicide, honor killing, molestation and domination. Elif Shafak, being a Turkish-British novelist, throws light on the women of Turkey. Shafak uses experiences of women as the key through which the plight of women can be explored in various dimensions based on culture, gender, religion, race and class. As literature holds an integral part in discussions on feminist studies, the idea is subjected to analysis in various fields. Feminism as a theory came into existence by the real taunting experiences faced by women due to patriarchal domination. As experiences are the starting point, phenomenology is brought into consideration in literature. Although, phenomenology comes under philosophical studies, literature makes the best use of the motive, by the connections it has with Psychoanalysis and Feminism in literature. Feminism and phenomenology are two radically differing areas with different superficial underpinnings.

But phenomenology and feminism meet at the same point called experiences of an individual or a group. This paper strives to deal with feminism and phenomenology through the perspective of Elif Shafak in her novel, The Forty Rules of Love.

Keywords: Phenomenology, Experiences, Gender, Feminism

Introduction

Elif Shafak is a Turkish author who writes in both English and Turkish. The writer is an activist, essayist, columnist and speaker. Shafak writes about Istanbul which is her native. The major focus in her writings are women, immigrants, minorities, youth, ethnicity, Middle East and West, race and class. Apparently, the novels of Shafak, have a point that interconnects ethnicity, race, class, gender and social conditions. The author chiefly focuses on women and their experiences in her novels.

Elif Shafak narrates her stories with characters that experience specified issues like domestic violence, femicide, honor killing, molestation and domination based on culture, gender, class and religion. The significance of experiences are given in every novel written by Elif Shafak. Since phenomenology deals with human experiences discretely and based on gender, novels written by Shafak can be subjected to discussion, where phenomenology can...
be culturally and politically motivated and bodily experiences can be given importance. As bodily experiences are gender based, this kind of phenomenological approach towards Shafak’s work can be helpful in exploring feminism and phenomenology together. It can also unite the two ideas at a definite point. As the study is about experiences, phenomenology is very supportive of the idea. As feminism is one of the major areas of study among all the other human related studies, phenomenology is also throwing light at it.

Literature and Phenomenology

The text used for detailed learning of phenomenology is Feminist Phenomenology. Feminist Phenomenology is a collection of theoretical analysis by critics like Merleau Ponty, Edith Stein, Kathleen Haney, Simone de Beauvoir and Lionel Gossman which can be used to analyse Elif Shafak’s novels from a phenomenological perspective.

For example, the introductory chapter in the Feminist Phenomenology talks about Maurice Merleau Ponty’s analysis of phenomenology. The French philosopher’s work helps in finding the relativity between feminism and phenomenology, just as Elif Shafak’s novels have always included women and their experiences. Merleau Ponty does not discuss openly about sexuality and gender. On the contrary, the feminist theory intensely studies sexuality and gender. The introvert approach of Merleau Ponty lacks to explain feminism more clearly. The lack of openness leads to lack of phenomenological approach in the study conducted by Merleau Ponty. By feminist critic, Simone de Beauvoir, it was indirectly subjected as male bias or effects of masculinity. (Bergoffen, 59)

On the contrary, both phenomenology and feminism comes under domains such as radicalism and philosophy. Phenomenology and feminism are not completely distinguishable, because the understanding of the ideas might vary. Such perspectives might have paved way to omit certain or specified gender analyses and discussions pertaining to experiences of women, in the same set of essays in Feminist Phenomenology. This can be due to the phenomenological impact. But for phenomenology, feminism mostly does not limit itself to discuss gender or sexuality. Later, phenomenology became, phenomenology of natural sciences, religion and psychology. Specifically, phenomenology was divided into constitutive phenomenology, existential phenomenology, and hermeneutic phenomenology. In literary studies, phenomenology comes under sociology.

Thus, sociology undertakes phenomenology without femininity and in feminism both sociological and phenomenological studies become incomplete.

On further level of discussion, Mary Jeanee Larrabee who is a feminist and philosopher, in her study Autonomy and Connectedness, provides detailed analysis of numerous significance given to “self” in the areas of literature such as Post modernity, Racism, Feminism and Psychology. The importance of “self” is provided by constant debates on privileged and marginalized, unity and multiplicity and self-identity. Larrabee’s concept of self in this context is focused on feminism and phenomenology. According to Larrabee, the idea of self is distinguished into two as she remarks in Autonomy and Connectedness,

These two pairs, then, show clear differences in notions not just fusion but connectedness; one pair lies along a continuum with fusion of “inner” selves at one end and connectedness of nonmerged selves at the other (a connectedness we have not yet described) while the other pair lies along a continuum with fusion as over identification at one end (an external loss of distinct self) and nonconnectedness or separateness at the other (complete non identification or heightened individuality). (274)

The basic importance is given to self in Larrabee’s perspective where she examines phenomenology. Considering women characters in the select novels of Elif Shafak, experience is given importance because of which the study is conducted on the basis of phenomenology.
The characters go through various types of suppression like patriarchal suppression, subjugation due to certain religious values and cultural practices. The writer is able to do that based on the experiences of women Shafak has witnessed, especially within her family. As the author speaks about suppression through her characters, predominance differs for every social category.

Hegemony applies to a particular individual or group which is interdependent on systems that lead to diversified discriminating patterns. Thus, the interconnection between the phenomenological inspection and culture in Elif Shafak’s novels is examined.

Bringing back, Larrabee’s idea of self, which can be associated with characters from Shafak’s novels. As an example, Elif Shafak has elaborately discussed the importance of freedom in one of her versatile novels, The Forty Rules of Love. The novel is about The Rumi, a mystic wanderer, simultaneously, importance of love is placed concurrent to the life of Ella Rubenstein, mother of three children, left with a husband David who cheats on her. Throughout the novel, Shafak has spoken about the importance of love and how Ella takes the freedom to choose what she wants in her life. Ella is shown as a non-rebellious, meek woman who still prefers to stand up for herself. Shafak states, ‘When she looked back at her life, she realized that rebellion had never suited her… “Why can’t you be like Ella?” the mothers in neighbourhood asked their daughters. “See, she never gets herself in trouble”’ (p.130). Larrabee’s concept of self can be understood by Ella’s character sketch.

Elif Shafak has given importance to individuality. Larrabee discusses the idea of individuality and self as empathic fusion. (274) The critic states, “Empathic fusion tags the experimental identification with the other, empathically perceived wants and needs of the other affectively entering the self and becoming one’s own, even at risk to one’s own needs” (p.274). Ella Rubenstein from The Forty Rules of Love has depicted the difference between what one wants to be and what one is allowed to be. The experiences of Ella leads to an understanding where she gradually prioritizes herself first. Women, have their own choices is a message conveyed by Shafak through Ella. The unhappiness and dissatisfaction in Ella’s life is purely because of Ella’s lack of freedom of choice and longing for love.

The preferences in Ella’s life becomes self-centred because she chooses to enjoy what brings peace and satisfaction. Ella’s renewal in the perception of life takes place because of her involvement in reading the life of Rumi. The importance of love in the life of Rumi, brings confidence to reader Ella. The significance of love is the key that helps Ella in identifying herself. Such self-identification occurs with one’s own empathy towards the self.

Elif Shafak has always shown ambition as an important criterion in her novels. The concept of love can be depicted as an element that Ella uses to fulfi l her emotional requirements. Ella is ambitious and her goal is searching for what is lost within herself, because Ella was married at a very young age. The reality does not match with what Ella feels because her life is filled with compromises and unhappy settlements. Shafak, thus quotes, ‘…Jeannette said in a voice so flat as to be unrecognizable. “I’m thinking you’re projecting your own fears onto me. But just because you married so young and had a baby when you were my age, that doesn’t mean I’m going to do the same mistake”’ (8-9). For a middle aged woman, full of attempts to strike a balance between her reality and expectations, Ella starts to explore about the importance of love through the book Sweet Blasphemy written by A.Z.Zahara. Shafak uses intertextuality in the novel, simultaneously to show the connection between Ella’s life and love.

The strong connection Ella develops while reading Sweet Blasphemy, helps her in understanding the divinity of love as love is given at its purest form by A.Z.Zahara in his writing. Shafak has highlighted it in The Forty Rules of Love as,
For despite what some people say, love is not only a sweet feeling bound to come quickly and go away… Because love is the very essence and purpose of life. As Rumi reminds us, it hits everybody including those who shun love---even those who use the word “romantic” as a sign of disapproval. (15)

Bringing back Larrabee’s idea of empathic fusion, it is an experimental process through which the self identifies with the other. During this process, the other is considered and obliged to receive empathy. This can cause risk to the self. (Larrabee, 274). But empathetic fusion of emotions necessarily doesn’t have to be harmful. In that case, in the novel *The Forty Rules of Love*, Ella Rubenstein empathically associates herself with A.Z.Zahara’s point of view, as they begin interacting and sharing their insights over mail.

Through lines like,

During this time Ella started exchanging multiple e-mails with Aziz. Z. Zahara every day. Two, three, sometimes up to five… But it didn’t take her long to become addicted to his words… And every time she received a new message from him, she couldn’t help breaking into a smile, half grateful, half embarrassed by what was taking place. For something was taking place. (142-143)

Shafak shows the intensity of attachment that gradually grows between Ella and A.Z.Zahara. A.Z.Zahara also known as Aziz, with his thoughts and insights, exerts a positive influence on Ella as Shafak quotes “Aziz was that rare type of man a woman could love without losing her self-respect” (143). The personal bond that Aziz and Ella shares, pave a way to emotionally grow in love with respect.

Although, reality of Ella starts to shift, she remains empathically fused with Aziz’s views on love which he gave through *Sweet Blasphemy*. Elif Shafak’s novel has become a subtle representation of Larrabee’s empathic fusion. An ambitious woman like Ella, thriving to identify her true self stands as an example of Larrabee’s phenomenological perspective of self.

**Conclusion**

Phenomenology gives importance to generic human individual. Whereas, feminism takes bodily experiences and is politically and culturally motivated. Feminists like Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler, Linda Fisher and Mary Jeanee Larrabee tries to prove that women are treated with gender bias and biologically different. The experiences of women is the route to subject Elif Shafak’s novels to phenomenological studies. Thus, the experiences of women help in identifying themselves as they are empathically fused with self, reality and emotions. Hence, Shafak’s novels proves that the experiences pave the way to self-development, receives and emits empathy. It is proved by applying Mary Jeanee Larrabee’s concept of empathic fusion.

**References**