

Shafak's *Black Milk*: Mapping Emerging Frontiers of Life Narrative

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Abstract

Literature reflects cultural and personal ethos, manifesting either as fiction or non-fiction. But the emerging trends and demands of contemporaneity have paved the way for an upsurge of life narratives as a hybrid venture, resulting from the influx of fictional elements blended with the non-fictional mode of writing. Elif Shafak, a Turkish-British author and one of the leading novelists in the contemporary era uses this genre for her memoir, *Black Milk: On Motherhood and Writing* (2011). By mapping the various aspects and elements of the genre of life narrative in this memoir through its narrative structure, themes and stylistics, this paper examines how it allows Shafak to engage heuristically with her conflicts between motherhood and a writing career, echoing feminist concerns. The stylistic devices in this structurally fragmented and first person narrative become a means for the writer's own negotiations with self-identity and constructions of the self.

Keywords: Life narrative, memoir, motherhood, postpartum depression, artistic journey, woman writer, self-identity

Introduction

Life narratives are an emerging and rapidly growing trend as in the contemporary world, seeking emotional connection and emotional resonance has become critical to survival. Various factors have contributed significantly to the growth of life narratives such as the growing need for voicing the silent individual emotions, growing number of audiences preferring authentic stories, the growing hybridity of genres,

the need for tools of change and advocacy; for preserving cultural and historical memory; for healing and growing, and so on. Self-narratives help in buffering against complex social, cultural, and political situations. By giving room to empathy and deeper understanding, life narratives bring in societal progress and ensure contemporary resonance with collective memory. Stressing the changed role of 'I,' Peter Heehs in *Writing the Self* (2013) says, "We see that over the last two millennia, the prevailing idea of the self has changed from a ghostly spirit to a substantial soul to an autonomous individual to a centre of expression to a fiction constructed by social or biological forces" (p. 230).

Life narratives can be studied along the lines of their narrative structure, thematic exploration, comparative studies, authenticity, historical and cultural evidences, as well as the perspectives that they bring. With regard to the narrative, Penny Summerfield (2019) writes, "The idea of narrative points to characteristics such as emplotment, description, reflection, and dialogue, signalling the interplay of imagination and invention with the process of creating a record of one's life over time" (p. 5). Themes are explored with respect to their relevance and spread in the hollow contemporaneity, calling out a way in comparative studies as well. Further, authenticity, historical and cultural evidences are all contextual with the mode of the personal narrative being explored. The use of terminology differ widely in accordance with the mode and form chosen by the author, and can be referred to as personal testimony, historical narrative, life writing, ego documents, histories of the self, life narratives, personal narratives and like. Among these, life narratives and personal narratives are the most widely accepted terms because these are flexible in terms of strict chronology, creativity and blending of genres without requiring evidences in support of authenticity.

Multiple themes and motifs run common in these life narratives, such as self-discovery, reflection, trauma, depression, survival, memory, recollection, migration, displacement, healing, diseases, creative and artistic journeys, spirituality, and so on. These themes and notions often overlap and create a panoramic view offering richness to the life narratives. Several major contemporary authors have written life narratives: Shafak's *Black Milk* (2011), Roxane Gay's *Hunger* (2017), Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts* (2015), Cheryl Strayed's *Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail* (2012), Tara Westover's *Educated* (2018), Orhan Pamuk's *Istanbul: Memories and the City* (2003), to name a few.

These litterateurs write in alignment with hybridity of genres, with a non-linear, fragmented structure.

Significance of Life Narratives

Personal narratives are relevant for their literary and cultural magnitude. As Paul John Eakin writes in *Writing Life Writing* (2020) "We just may be programmed, that is, to require narrative in a range of registers including the neural, the social, the literary, and the philosophical" (p. 37). In life narratives marginal identities get centralized visibility and representation; their voices get amplified and get ears too. Personalized stories create the ground for collective assurance and create understanding of the complexities of people from different cultural backgrounds. Dissolving the gaps in culture, the genre of life narratives, ensures a wider accessibility of common experiences. Life narratives have also broadened the scope of literature. By blurring the boundaries between genres, they have given way for fictionalized memoirs on one hand and memoir-based novels on the other, broadening the limits of presentation of imagination and reality. Integrating multimedia and experimenting with timelines, the narrative techniques have led to catalytic activity in literary movements and phases.

The major significance of life narratives lies in the weightage given to the personal. The turn to the personal is not a single decision or a phase but a continuous evolution spreading around the four major loci of post-structuralism, feminism, post-colonialism, and psychoanalysis. Post-structuralism focuses on reality and meaning rendered from the text, feminism and post colonialism stress on hearing and supporting the silent and the marginalized while underpinning the gendered history, and the loci of psychoanalysis supports the unconscious and subconscious mind which is unsupported in other intellectual developments. All these together have contributed to the present form of life narratives.

Negotiations with the Self-*Black Milk: On Motherhood and Writing*

Elif Shafak's memoir *Black Milk: On Motherhood and Writing* (2011) is an intermedial life-writing which blends together psychology, allegory, and literary critique. It has enriched Middle East literature by highlighting the author's cultural and social backdrop. Through this life-writing, Shafak has explored post-partum depression that she suffered from after becoming a mother, and offers precautions for other mothers to

safeguard themselves against such a situation. Shafak's self-reflections through her Thumbelinas, and inclusion of brief life studies of literary figures across East and West assure the intermedial calling of the life narrative in this memoir. Furthermore, the 'I' so explored by Shafak is not unitary as pointed out by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson in *Reading Autobiography* (2002): "Because the self is split and fragmented, it can no longer be conceptualized as unitary. At a given moment what calls itself the self is different from itself at any other given moment" (p. 133). Shafak's fragmented self is manifested entirely through her narrative tools. Her preferred pick is the intercalary narrative technique where she writes an embedded text within a primary text; a story within a story. The stories related to the literary figures are meant to resonate with her own life's story of postpartum depression, motherhood, and creative writing.

Like all other species, human physiology too has ensured that the female/woman is the bearer of children. However, other than reproduction, women are also burdened with the tasks of caring and nurturing. The deep-rooted biological essentialism of the patriarchal society and gendered acculturation across not just the Middle East but across all other societies ensures that a woman's identity becomes tied up with motherhood once she becomes a mother. Chodrow (1989) refers to,

how sexual inequality and the social organization of gender are reproduced. It demonstrates that this reproduction happens in central ways via transformations in consciousness in the psyche, and not only via social and cultural institutions. It demonstrates that this reproduction is an unintended product of the structure of the sex-gender system itself - of a family division of labour in which women mother, of a sexual system founded on heterosexual norm, of a culture that assumes and transmits sexual inequality. (p. 176)

Thus the patriarchal institution of motherhood which is male-defined and controlled becomes oppressive for women, with women struggling to find their self-identity and fulfil career ambitions. The "black milk" in the title of Shafak's memoir is antithetical, and metaphorically contradicts the ideas of nurturing and fulfilment that are associated with motherhood. Feasey (2013) contends that "good" motherhood is a romanticized myth that most women struggle to emulate and are burdened with guilt if they are unable to meet these expectations (p.25). Loss of self-identity, frustration, guilt and helplessness arising

out of these struggles eventually lead to postpartum depression as well. Shafak's fears and insecurities regarding the expectations from her own motherhood continuously harass her as she says, "It is a huge responsibility to bring children into this world" (2011, p. 147), ultimately landing her in the zone of postpartum depression.

Shafak's *Black Milk* is a deeply reflective work where the writer's attempts at self-construction are clearly visible. For Guichard et al (2013), self-construction can be linked to the fluidity of multi-dimensional identity, where "individual reflexivity plays a major role in the construction of the self" (p. 61). In this work, Shafak experiments by boldly blending the structural forms of memoir and essay with fictionalized rendering of real individual experiences. It is a blend of imagination with real experiences presented through the narrative device of Thumbelinas, which are finger-sized female archetypes. The Thumbelinas, namely, Little Miss Practical, Dame Dervish, Miss Ambitious Chekhovian, Miss Highbrowed Cynic, Blue Belle Bovary, and Mama Rice Pudding, are the fictionalized renderings on the canvas of Shafak's personality traits. These Thumbelinas "make a choir that does not know how to tone down" (Shafak, 2011, p. 24) and with this "Choir of Discordant Voices", Shafak has woven the heart of her memoir with the head of fiction. The self-reflection of Shafak takes her to the inner labyrinths of her soul where she analyzes the different traits of her personality when she suffers from the dilemma of choosing motherhood or a career in creative writing.

The Thumbelinas become a reflexive device for what Geluk (2017) calls "identity negotiations" (p. 64). This leads to what Guichard et al. (2013) refer to as the dual process which involves "synthesis and stabilisation (of multiple identities)" on the one hand, and "self-transcendence and seeing oneself from other perspectives" (p. 61) on the other. Cognitive psychologist Ulric Neisser points to a 'conceptual self', wherein the 'self' emerges as a category with social roles, personality traits and preoccupation with concepts of mind and body which "the extremely diverse forms of self-information—social roles, personal traits, theories of body and mind, of subject and person—that posit the self as a category, either explicitly or implicitly" (cited in Eakin, 1999, p. 23). Shafak, in her memoir, presents herself as a conceptual self where she explores the notion of motherhood as a responsibility which conflicts with her career as a writer.

Navigating with the aid of the Thumbelinas, the reading of this particular self-narrative becomes an intricate and delicate luxury because each of the traits that unfold one at a time reveal their say on the central theme of motherhood versus the career of creative writing. The Little Miss Practical believes that choosing motherhood over her career of writing may derail her life's engine as she is "used to measuring, calculating and planning everything" (Shafak, 2011, p. 49), but it is possible if Shafak manages time. Dame Dervish makes it her calling to preach the basic principles of Sufism and calls on Shafak to stop asking for God's opinion on motherhood and to ask for the gifts that are good for her. Miss Ambitious Chekhovian too does not support Shafak's thought of motherhood owing to her fear and insecurity that it might interfere with her ambition: "Better leave motherhood to women who are born to be mothers. We both know you are not like that. Motherhood would upset all of my future plans" (Shafak, 2011, p. 54). Miss Highbrowed Cynic holds the stance that envy is central to existence as she states, "Whichever path you choose, your mind will be obsessed with the option you have discarded" (Shafak, 2011, p. 56). Blue Belle Bovary portrays the long suppressed bodily and sensual instincts of Shafak and censors her for not writing boldly on the topic of sexuality and eroticism unlike the male writers. She criticises Shafak's dressing sense and her seriousness in her interviews. Mama Rice Pudding is the only supporter of the maternal instincts of Shafak, and elucidates on the needs and profits of motherhood even after being "silenced, suppressed and denied" (Shafak, 2011, p. 110) for long. While only one Thumbelina supports motherhood, the other five Thumbelinas go with the flow of their instincts. Thus, the central theme of motherhood and writing have been delineated by Shafak not as a direct confession but as a complex story compiled by the personified Thumbelinas, reflecting her own inner conflicts. Apart from these Thumbelinas, the other personified entities include Lord Poton and his family, personifying different levels of postpartum complexities and depression.

The Fractured Narrative

"My memories of those days are vivid and intense, but they are far from being chronological" (Shafak, 2011, p. xi). In her memoir, like most of her works, Shafak has scant regard for chronology. Memory anyway plays an important role in memoir writing, as Smith and Watson assert

in their work, *Reading Autobiography* (2002): “Narrated memory is an interpretation of a past that can never be fully recovered” (p. 16). Shafak has created the meaning of her past experiences in her act of remembering the same. In her fragmented and episodic memoir, she seamlessly flutters from writing her lived experiences to philosophical reflections and literary musings, bringing out the compiled exploration of her journey from being a single woman to a mother, her suffering and eventual healing from postpartum depression. The fragmented narrative structure becomes representative of her own fractured self.

The memoir is divided into seven parts with the chapter ‘Lucky Dishwasher’ serving as a prologue in detail with an Epilogue at the end for giving the final glue of cohesion to the structure. In the section preceding part one, Shafak summarizes the content of her memoir, and asserts the commonality of her suffering bringing consolation for other mothers too. Part one of the memoir titled, “Life Before Marriage”, weaves Shafak’s life before marriage, but again that too is not chronological but haphazard, going along with the flow of Shafak’s stream of consciousness. No clear incidents are shared from Shafak’s childhood or adulthood but after giving us a peep into the manifesto of a single girl, she directly hops into what she calls the ‘harem’ within her mind where a choir of discordant voices share their verdicts. Smith and Watson (2002) note that:

Sometimes the exactness of chronology is of little importance to the narrator. Always there are moments in the text when that impression of narrative coherence breaks down, in digressions, omissions, gaps, and silences about certain things, in contradiction. While we may read the narrator’s recitation to us as one long, continuous narrative, the text signals discontinuities that will not bear out our own fiction of coherence. (p. 64)

The narrative richness of *Black Milk* unquestionably lies in its intertextuality. While revealing the lived experiences of her personal life, Shafak refers to anecdotes from the lives of different writers from across the world. The narrative tool of writing a story within a story is a device commonly used by Shafak. She interweaves her personal experiences with the lives of other women writers both from the oriental and occidental upbringing, such as Sylvia Plath, Simone de Beauvoir, Doris Lessing, George Eliot, Leo Tolstoy’s wife Sophia Andreevna Bers, Sevgi Soysal, Virginia Woolf, Toshiko Tamura, Yuko Tsushima,

Zelda Fitzgerald, Audre Lord, and many more. This universalizes her experiences as these writers too suffered similarly the dilemma of balancing motherhood with their own personal growth as artists. The stories of the other writers become exemplary for how each of them resolved this dilemma for themselves in their own unique way, implying that Shafak too must find her own path. Shafak takes a creative tour through the "Valley of Babies" and "Forest of Books":

In the Valley of Babies, I will invite you to take a closer look at the many roles that make up our lives, starting with womanhood, motherhood and authorship. In the Forest of Books, I will discuss the lives and works of various women writers, past and present, East and West, to see how they have dealt with similar topics, successfully or unsuccessfully. (Shafak, 2011, p. xii)

The embedded brief narratives of the writers have been used to demonstrate parallel conflicts in their own lives and consequent mental health issues arising out of gendered expectations of motherhood. Shafak critiques patriarchy and sets her own life as an example to prioritize her dreams over motherhood and family responsibilities.

Yet another significant aspect of Shafak's negotiations is with her sexual self. Part four of the memoir titled "Never Say Never" introduces us to everything sexual and bodily, and brings out Shafak's fears and insecurities regarding her body and that of writing boldly about eroticism and sexuality. She gives a free flow to her sexual self through Blue Belle Bovary and expresses the problems of female writers where sexuality is concerned. As she mentions, "We all are a little desexualized, a little defeminized. We can't carry our bodies comfortably in a society that is so bent against women" (2011, p. 161). Shafak becomes a strong feminist voice "by encouraging women to produce woman-centred art and literature" (Lorber, 2010, p. 169), and which also gives voice to their desires and sexuality.

Shafak's use of the Thumbelinas as well as the stories of other women writers in her memoir can be seen as heuristic in its negotiations between motherhood, and women's careers. The term heuristic is derived from the Greek word *heurism* meaning 'to discover'. According to Moustakas (1990), it refers to "a process of internal search through which one discovers the nature and meaning of experience" (p. 9). It is important to note that the multiple perspectives on motherhood in *Black*

Milk bring out the difference between the patriarchy-defined notions of motherhood on one hand, and “women’s experiences of mothering which are female-defined and centred and thus, potentially empowering to women” (O’Reilly, cited in Geluk, 2017, p. 63) on the other.

Conclusion

Shafak’s life narrative has some critical drawbacks as well. While the use of Thumbelinas, the finger-sized female archetypes, adds multi-perspectivity to the memoir, it also disturbs the narrative authenticity and consistency in terms of the exploration of self. Hybridity in genres raises questions with regard to the authenticity of testimonials and the diversity of experiences of motherhood which have been narrowed down to sufferings under postpartum depression. Nevertheless, Shafak’s *Black Milk* remains a significant contribution to the genre of the life-narrative, shaping it into a feminist discourse of women’s struggles with their self-identity and mental health. As a genre, the memoir demonstrates how it can become the voice of the silent and the marginalized, and can challenge social and cultural frontiers. The rise of digital media with personal experiences being shared on social media platforms further complements the use of the life-narrative as a genre. Contemporaneity demands literature with emotional connectivity, literature to heal and recover; literature to offer consolation; literature which is democratic; and literature to support advocacy and change, particularly with respect to the lived realities of women.

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