

Masculine Signifying Economy in The Gaze

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Abstract

Masculine signifying economy is a term given by Luce Irigaray which means that masculinity is considered superior than femininity. It is the notion of such an economy wherein male traits are given preference over female traits. Boys are for example right from their childhood taught to hide their emotions. It is considered very girlish to cry. In her work *The Gaze* (1999) Elif Shafak examines the roles assigned by the society to men and women within Turkish culture. The plot showcases not only the roles but also how a man and a woman is supposed to adhere to the physical attributes designed by the society. A man has to be strong, muscular and tall while a woman has to be very feminine, beautiful and thin. In *The Gaze* by Elif Shafak, the narrator who is a fat woman serves as a lens through which Shafak explores the pervasive dissatisfaction experienced by women worldwide, despite their adherence to societal expectations. The author emphasizes the necessity of reevaluating gender roles in accordance with personal well-being and principles of egalitarianism.

Keywords: masculine signifying economy, patriarchy, agency, performativity, power, gender roles

Introduction

The “masculine signifying economy” is a concept that succinctly refers to a cultural and social system where masculinity and male traits are overvalued than femininity and female traits. Theoretically, masculine traits such as aggression, strength, and assertiveness are valued higher than feminine traits such as empathy compassion, and nurturing nature. This can lead to a Society and Culture where competition and domination is rewarded, while consensus-building and cooperation is devalued; at the same time it gives way to hostility among the genders in society. In the term “masculine signifying economy”, “signifying” indicates the ways in which meanings are constructed and communicated through all cultural symbols including language. The language, media, entertainment industry and other cultural institutions reinforce traditional gender roles and hierarchies, in theory all this is seen as masculine signifying economy. It is argued by the critics that the masculine signifying economy is latently harmful to both men and women, the acceptability of wide range of behaviours and traits for both genders are limited by it. These critics suggest that the equitability and inclusiveness of culture require challenging these traditional gender norms and promoting a wider range of behaviours and perspectives. The French feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray introduced the term “masculine signifying economy” for first time to describe the way in which language, culture, and society are structured around male-centric norms and patriarchal values that privilege masculinity and devalue femininity. Luce Irigaray broadens the scope of feminist critique by exposing the structure of masculine signifying economy. In her two essays, “Any Theory of the Subject Has Always Been Appropriated by the Masculine” and “La Mysterique” in the book *Speculum of the Other Women* (1974), Irigaray reveals Western phallogocentric theories in language culture and popular media images. This system is often associated with patriarchy and the marginalization of women and feminine perspectives and she proposes women’s sexual differentiation as resistance to masculine signifying economy. She argues that the masculine signifying economy is grounded over the linguistic binary of oppositions in which masculine behavioral traits such as logic, objectivity, and rationality are valued over feminine traits such as intuition, subjectivity and emotion. This system of binary opposition is not only affecting how we understand and use language, but it shapes our social and cultural practices and institutions as well.

This system of values perpetuates gender inequality and marginalizes women and other marginalized groups, argues Irigaray; she calls for a new language and culture that recognizes and values the diversity of human experience and expression, and challenges the dominance. In the feminist theory the concept also describes the ways in which patriarchal norms and values are embedded in language and discourse. It has been argued by Luce Irigaray that all the objects of significance such as sun or God are typically marked with masculine gender while less significant objects are feminine therefore it is evident that language effect society. Her stand is accusing towards the traditions which associate women with the subject matter of the Other through linguistic contracts. She propounds that women can assimilate in male subjectivity while a separate subject position for the women does not exist. Her strong argument targets the linguistic differentiation between the sexes in Western theory which in reality is the absence of a true sexual difference. Irigaray analyses exclusion of women from the culture through language, definition of femininity and sexuality, sexual difference and how all these historically oppressed women. Presently, it can manifest in a variety of ways, from the gender pay gap in corporate world to the undervaluing of women’s labour in the domestic sphere. This issue problematically contributes

to a broader cultural context which sees femininity as inferior to masculinity and repeatedly reinforces gender roles and stereotypes.

The fundamental focus of feminist discourse revolves around challenging and redefining the prejudices that have been historically constructed by males about women. Feminism promotes the empowerment of women by challenging the societal construct of male privilege, which perpetuates the dichotomy between the 'self' and the 'other' in relation to women. Women assert agency over their identities within a cultural milieu that is predominantly governed by males, subsequent to achieving self-actualization about their social, moral, intellectual, and economic entitlements. Women has the capacity to subvert the binary opposition between the self and the other by renouncing the mindset of marginalization inherent in macho culture, therefore endorsing the principles of feminism. The present study examines the portrayal of female characters in the literary work titled *The Gaze*.

Elif Shafak was widely regarded as a prominent representative of the high modernist aesthetics until the late 1970s. The majority of reviewers have regarded her as an exemplary figure in the realm of feminist writing practice. Shafak's literary works may be subjected to analysis from several theoretical frameworks and perspectives. In the article "Elif Shafak and Postmodernism (1996)," Adil examines the connections between Shafak's innovative use of language and narrative techniques and contemporary theories in the field. Her paintings interrogate the interconnections between modernism, postmodernism, and feminism within the context of narrative discourse. The novel *The Gaze* challenges traditional notions of sexuality and language through its exploration of androgyny, transsexualism, and transvestism.

Elif Shafak's literary works focus on those who have been marginalized, othered, and suppressed, with the intention of bringing attention to their existence and amplifying their voices to a wider audience (Nihad, 14). Shafak's literary works prominently feature female protagonists, with the majority of narratives being conveyed via a distinctly female lens. The authors engage in a discourse pertaining to the position, perspective, and societal standing of women within the context of Turkish culture. The books encompass the author's contemplation on several issues such as the societal position of women, the institution of marriage, the concept of identity, the influence of patriarchy, the experience of motherhood, and the role of religion, among others. Both women and men appear to experience persistent societal and religious expectations that frequently necessitate sacrificing personal well-being.

Throughout history, many civilizations worldwide have established distinct gender roles for men and women, mostly influenced by perceived shared qualities, distinctions, and prevailing gender stereotypes. According to Blackstone (336), gender roles may be defined as the societal expectations placed upon people, organizations, and societies, which are influenced by an individual's biological sex and the prevailing values and ideas regarding gender within a given culture. As highlighted by the author, the formation of gender roles is a result of the dynamic interplay between individuals and their surrounding surroundings. This process involves the internalization of societal norms and expectations regarding the proper behaviours associated with each gender (336). Women, who are commonly seen to possess more caring instincts, are typically allocated domestic tasks and responsibilities related to raising children. In many societies, males are commonly attributed with more strength, both in terms of physical and cerebral capacities. Consequently, they are often entrusted with the role of providing for the family's financial needs and assuming leadership in making significant choices (33).

Turkey is situated in a strategically strategic location between Europe and Asia, resulting in its exposure to and integration of both cultural spheres. Consequently, Turkey has evolved into a nation characterized by a dualistic nature. The nation adheres to a unique amalgamation of conventional and contemporary customs, encompassing both religious and secular observances. The majority of the populace has embraced urbanization, yet religion and custom continue to exert significant influence in moulding gender roles. Despite being a relatively liberal nation, Turkish culture continues to grapple with the conflicting forces of patriarchal and modernism. Patriarchy and religion exert significant influence over the establishment and enforcement of gender norms within Turkish culture. Instances of deviating from established rules of behaviour are frequently stigmatized and occasionally addressed by acts of violence.

The Gaze (1999) and the Masculine Signifying Economy

I didn't say anything. I didn't return his smiles. I looked at him in the wide mirror in front of where I was sitting. He grew uncomfortable and avoided my eyes. I hate those who think fat people are stupid.

The Gaze (1999), a beautiful and gripping novel with forceful narrative by Elif Shafak, considers the damage, visible or invisible, which can be inflicted by our simple desire to look at others who seem different from us. It was originally published in Turkish entitled *Mahrem*, the novel comprises of four separate parts that are split according to the place and the age; however, all parts are coherent and interrelated even though each being an independent story. All the four parts have different characters and narrators, exploring the philosophy of "gaze". The stories prevail through characters' impact of the gazing. They may either gaze or become the subjects to be gazed, and the essential distinction between the perceptions of male and female. The novel is loosely weaved around an anxious obese woman and a dwarf, it unfolds with parallel plots and digressions, from sophisticated residential apartment in Istanbul to a 19th-century Turkish freak show and fur hunts in 17th-century Siberia.

The novel vividly portrays an obese woman and her lover, a dwarf, both are sick of being stared at, of being gazed, of being watched wherever they go. Out of innocence and disgust for the consistent patriarchic cultural surveillance, they decide to reverse roles. Their unconscious will to hide themselves from the perpetual gaze; the man goes out wearing make-up and the woman sketches a moustache on her face. However, while the woman wishes to conceal and fade away from the world, the man meets directly confrontational stares from passers-by, and he compiles his "Dictionary of Gazes" to explore the boundaries between appearance and reality. Elif Shafak has created a spectacular and splendid novel with seriously complex and yet simple, fictional yet life-like characters and circumstances around them. Along with complex characters, plot has deeply profound symbolism and appropriate narrative twists taking reader up and down the roller coaster of gazing and being gazed, and making a simple process of looking very complicated socio-psychological act.

The novel has two plots unfolding side by side; Shafak has set one in "Pera" in nineteenth century which revolves around "a man with slanted eyes, Keramet Mumi Keske Memis Efendi. While he took the first breath under the sun in this world his mother breathed her last and the midwife did not notice the death of the mother. Elif Shafak explains everything with an indifferent and unsympathetic attitude: "Because the midwife couldn't take her eyes off the baby, it was sometime before she noticed that the mother had left.... There was something else about this baby; some...thing...else..." (33-34). Therefore, the baby becomes subject of gaze with his first step in this world for being featureless or having strange feature. But one sure thing about this new born baby is that he lacks the accepted "normal" in human baby and the comment goes "it was featureless, made of wax." This feature of unlike the normal remains with him even though he grew up a very clever man but it was not his intelligence that attracted people towards him but his eyes.

Another plot has been set in Istanbul in late twentieth century where we witness a women's perspective being changed. In this plot, Shafak shows us everything from the perspective of an obese women, the narrator. She and her lover are gazed upon where ever they go, thereupon their situation, reactions, perceptions and through their interaction with each other, "the gaze" made impactful for the readers. The story of their opinion though a meeting comes in a very simple manner of meeting for the first time on a bus. They start to like each-other, they spend time together and gradually fell in love. The couple is most comfortable in each-others company and during the honeymoon period of their relationship, BC proves to be a perfect boyfriend. Getting consistently gazed and judged through male parameters, BC made her accept her own frame, he made her comfortable in her skin, he taught her fall in love with herself as she is. Even though "she was so fat that wherever she went, people would stop whatever they were doing and stare at her. The way people looked at her made her so uncomfortable that she would eat even more and become even fatter" (The Gaze 242).

In the novel "The Gaze," Elif Shafak explores the idea of a masculine signifying economy, particularly in relation to how it shapes the identity and experiences of women in Turkish society. The novel follows the lives of several characters, including an overweight woman who becomes obsessed with the act of looking. Throughout the novel, Shafak portrays a society in which men hold the power and control the dominant discourse. This discourse is characterized by a focus on visual pleasure, objectification of women, and a narrow definition of femininity based on youth, beauty, and sexual availability. Women are forced to navigate this environment and either conform to these norms or risk being marginalized and excluded. Women's bodies are constantly under scrutiny and judgment from men, who use them as a means of asserting their power and dominance. For example, obsession with looking is portrayed as a way to exert control over the women, reducing them to objects of desire, possession and domination. In the same way, the narrator is subjected to constant criticism and shaming for her weight, which is seen as a sign of her failure to conform to societal expectations.

The novel systematically explores the complex patterns of gender and power in contemporary Turkish society, referring to the ways in which patriarchal structures privilege and empower men while marginalizing and oppressing women. Shafak portrays male characters as the dominant figures, in Turkish society in particular and any society in general, with their behaviours, roles and actions often reflecting a sense of entitlement and superiority. The women characters have been portrayed as being forced to navigate between the desirable roles under male surveillance in order to survive. For example, the women in any society are aware of the ways in which their gender and class intersect to limit their opportunities and define their worth. The narrative of the novel spells out the ways in which patriarchal structures continue to shape and define gender relations in contemporary societies, and sketches the importance of challenging these structures in order to create a more just and equitable world for all. However, under the persistent male gaze, women feel perpetually uncomfortable like "She felt her dress with her hands. It was a great relief to her, that she was wearing the dress her grandmother had bought her, and therefore wasn't naked in front of this strange man" (The Gaze 216).

Elif Shafak's novel, deals with the characters' struggle with their own sense of identity and place in society however at the center remains patriarchal society's control over gender identity and the impact of gender norms on individuals' lives as defined by the masculine norms. The masculine traits such as strength, power, and aggression are valued over feminine traits such as empathy, vulnerability, and nurturing. The novel explores how this system affects the lives of women, how it perpetuates gender stereotypes, and how it limits individuals' freedom and self-expression. Through the force of male norms in culture, language, beliefs, customs and institutions, women are complicit in perpetuating and internalizing the societal norms and expectations that reinforce male dominance. Even though Shafak suggests that true liberation and equality can only be achieved through a rejection of these patriarchal norms and the creation of new, more inclusive and equitable social structures. But "this is a world of spectacles about seeing and being seen. (The Gaze 263)

Whether it is stare (the gaze) of B-C on the Narrator or the gaze of any man over any woman, the way she is looked and observed, the way she is stared and directed, the way she is seen and forced, and the way she is observed and judged, woman is forcefully subjected to patriarchal norms. It is through this manner and method men control and dominate women manipulating language, discourse, and communication. Shafak's representation of the traditions in which gender inequalities are reinforced and perpetuated throughout; her powerful commentary on the pervasive nature of patriarchy and the need for women to reclaim their voices and assert themselves in male-dominated spaces is like "trying to pull the woman away from the crowd's gaze" (The Gaze 264).

The Gaze is organized as a sequence of stories that come out from one another, the major narrative encapsulating in a manner that underlines circularity. Thus, these stories add up to a whole that creates the impression of both the circular "evil eye" of Turkish culture. The conventional evil eye symbol includes four circles: three outer circles of blue, white, and occasionally yellow surrounding a central black disc, and this center circle is usually interpreted as the eye that looks out toward the object of the gaze and actively imposes bad luck as well. The importance and implication of the three outer circles is that they give a spiritual protection against the gazer's conscious or unconscious infliction of evil effect. The narrative of the novel thus inclines to represent the image both at structural and semantic levels. That is to say, *The Gaze* discovers the notions of looking and being looked at within a polyphonic and reflexive narrative space where the gazer tends to speculate the object of the gaze in different temporal spaces with varying positions. Zeynep Z argues "In her novel, Shafak engages with the complexity of the gaze through the construction of her three principal female characters' competing and conflicting experiences of the gaze" (289).

The female characters in the novel are relegated to the role of passive objects of male desire, and they struggle to assert their own identities and agency in a society that values and rewards traditional masculine traits only. "The Gaze is a novel of recurring structures, enabled by use of parallels, oppositions, and symmetries, and each narrative tends to tell the same story based on extreme forms of appearance—the most desirable and the most detestable—via different viewpoints voiced in different spatial temporalities" (ibid 289). The novel highlights the ways in which gender roles and expectations are constructed and reinforced by society, and the challenges that individuals face in breaking free from these norms and asserting their own identities. The narrator explains her struggle under the staring eyes: "moving in order to do something I didn't want to do, it was not just my body that resisted, but also my soul. As I struggled up the hill, passers-by gave me worried looks" (The Gaze 109).

The most significant symbol of the gaze in the text is the "Dictionary of Gazes", a sequence of epigrammatic entries vividly document how the gaze and its associated power play permeate of human experience. "The Gaze" highlights the ways in which women are marginalized and oppressed within a society that is structured around the masculine archetypes of cultural patterns. According to Irigaray, language is a system that has been created and controlled by men, and as such, it reflects their values, perspectives, and interests. This system of language privileges the masculine voice and marginalizes the feminine voice. The female characters in the novel are constantly subjected to the male gaze and are judged based on their appearance and their ability to conform to societal beauty standards. The entries in the "Dictionary of Gaze" are scattered throughout the narrative but at the same time these scattered comments or statements about the gaze, provide a living structure to the narrative. Shafak depicts the tools of suppression, asserting the power of the gaze and the incessant power of play through the simple act of looking. The narrator says, "it wasn't their stomach that could not be filled, but their eyes" (The Gaze 108).

The Gaze explores the ways in which societal expectations and cultural norms shape our perceptions of gender and identity. Nevertheless, the novel encourages readers to question and challenge these norms, and to seek out more inclusive and equitable ways of understanding and valuing gender and sexuality. In addition to that, there are several references to the way in which the Turkish language itself reinforces gender roles and stereotypes, such as the use of masculine pronouns as default, and the way in which certain words and phrases are associated with either masculinity or femininity. At the same time, Shafak challenges these assumptions and shows that there is no inherent connection between gender and modes of expression or thought. She highlights the ways in which gendered expectations can be limiting and destructive, and calls for a more inclusive and diverse approach to identity and expression. In general, *The Gaze* offers a powerful critique of the way in which the masculine signifying economy shapes the experiences and identities of women in Turkish society. By portraying the lives of a diverse group of women, Shafak highlights the complexity and nuance of their experiences and invites readers to reconsider their own assumptions and biases about gender and power.

To conclude Shafak's works always address the issues of masculine signifying economy and the injustices meted out to women particularly in the context of conservative societies. The societies that are dictated by patriarchy always impose gender norms curtailing and marginalising the identities of women, preventing them from leading a healthy and autonomous lives. Society prescribes that a woman should prioritise her family and society and the last position should be given to her own wishes and likes. A woman is considered successful in the society when she has a husband, children who are all looked after by her. One may say that plight of women in Turkey is similar to any other woman living under patriarchal system. Shafak voices her concerns for all the marginalised individuals in the society and contends that we need to revisit gender role assignments.

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