A FEMINISTIC APPROACH TO ELIF SHAFAK’S THE BASTARD OF ISTANBUL

Abstract

The noteworthy novel of Elif Şafak The Bastard of Istanbul (2007) which sets out the lives of two distinctive families is significant for including feministic components in a wide perspective. Zeliha the younger daughter of the Kazancı family who is independent, obstinate and does whatever she wants is raped and has a daughter by the only son of this family, his brother Mustafa. As she has a daughter without getting married, always condemned to be the “black sheep” of the family; and she gathers virtually all the feministic components on her character, and in a male dominant and patriarchal society, demonstrates how a woman can exist individually without surrendering to the domain of men that nearly all women of her environment are subjected to. In this study, the thinking system of male dominant world and its effects on women have been analyzed, and the character of Zeliha, is examined deeply.

Keywords: Feministic Components, Male Dominant World, Woman

ELİF ŞAFAK’İN BABA VE PiÇ ROMANINA FEMİNİST BİR YAKLAŞIM

Özet


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The remarkable novel of Elif Şafak *The Bastard of Istanbul* (2007) which sets out the lives of two distinctive families “one of which is a Turkish family ‘Kazancısı’, the other one is an Armenian family ‘Çakmakçıyan’"² is significant for including feministic components in a wide perspective. Zeliha the younger daughter of the Kazancı family who is independent, obstinate and does whatever she wants is raped and has a daughter by the only son of this family, his brother Mustafa, who later marries the ex-wife of Barsam Çakmakçıyan. Concealing that rape, Zeliha is always condemned to be the “black sheep” of the family; however, she continues to live in the way she wants; and as the male members of this family do not live long, Mustafa is sent to Arizona in order to escape his fate. The main character of the novel Zeliha gathers virtually all the feministic components on her character, and in a male dominant and patriarchal society, demonstrates how a woman can exist individually without surrendering to the domain of men that nearly all women of her environment are subjected to.

The number of male and female characters of the novel is striking for analyzing the novel in terms of feminism. Yivli states: “There is no father in Kazancı family; all men have been somehow annihilated in that fictional world, and the existence of the unique male of the family is ended before the narration is ended.”³ In that fictitious male dominant world and male dominant family, men of Kazancı family have the fate of short living, and the deficiency of a father and male is profoundly felt. They feel themselves incomplete because a dominant figure especially a man is essential in order to control them in terms of moral values. Actually, although there is no male that can manage and punish them when they have a fault, they pursue their life under an omniscient male character. Moreover, they created a male figure from their eldest member, Gülsüm Mother. Toksöz states: “Because of her physiology, she seems more brutal to her family. She tries to grow up her children without a father, also by taking over the father role in the family. Gülsüm have struggled to survive throughout her youth.”⁴ A conversation between her and Zeliha displays the dominant character of Gülsüm Mother:

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³ Yivli, Oktay, “Baba ve Piç Romanına Fenomenolojik Bir Yaklaşım”, *Turkish Studies- International Periodical For The Languages, Literature and History of Turkish or Turkic*, 8(9), 2013, p. 2643.
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Tipsy! bellowed Grandma Gülsüm. “Mind you, why are they tipsy? Is it not enough that you always bring disgrace to this family? Look at that skirt you are wearing. The dish towels in the kitchen are longer than your skirts! You are a single mother, a divorcee. Hear me well! I have never seen a divorcee with a ring in her nose. You should be ashamed of yourself, Zeliha.5

As seen in the quotation, Gülsüm Ana warns Zeliha in order to change her clothing style because according to her, there are unchangeable things in a society as a divorce woman or a mother cannot do whatever she wants. The work of keeping women in control is devoted to Gülsüm and according to her, Zeliha is subjected to the criticism of others and she should take the rules of their environment into consideration in order not to be judged.

Zeliha is the most important character of that novel because her life circumstances, her being a tattooist, her style of living, her appearance, behaviors and beliefs separates her from her elder sisters, Feride, Cevriye and Banu, and form her mother, Gülsüm, and with all her being she displays a woman’s rebellion against patriarchal society. These female characters of the novel have accepted the rules of society and consistently warn Zeliha to correct and ameliorate her behaviors and appearance. They are so bound to an accepted system of life that behaving in the other way can cause being a “bad woman” in society. According to their belief, they should always obey their fathers, husbands, brothers and the other males in society, and thus, they aspire to gratify and aggrandize their men because, men are the ones that make them happy, support their lives. In this regard, Ellis states: “If woman owes her being to the comfort and profit of man, ‘tis highly reasonable that she should be careful and diligent to content and please him.”6 In addition to the statement of Ellis, Gilbert and Gubar assert: “The arts of pleasing men, in other words, are not only angelic characteristics; in more they are the proper acts of a lady.”7

Grandma Gülsüm was a woman who had never been reciprocally loved; one of wrinkles, never given the chance to dwell in the middle. She had fully dedicated herself to her only son and valued him often at the expense of her daughters, trying to find solace in him for everything that life had taken from her. Yet, once in Arizona, the boy’s existence had been reduced to Istanbul to visit his family.8

The mother figure of the novel, Gülsüm, although had not been made happy neither by her husband nor by her son cannot help differentiating her only son from other members of the family as stated. Mustafa’s love is uniquely bigger than all the loves of her daughters. She and her daughters dedicate themselves for the sake of Mustafa. At that point, Zeliha is distinct from other women in that family. She does not live to make men happy but she only cares for her beliefs and what she desires. She is the only one who responds to her father and is obstinate. Beside Gülsüm Mother, she is evaluated and regarded as incompatible with society even by men on the street. At the very beginning of the novel, Zeliha is on the stage with her inadmissible and repugnant appearance and at the center of insulting looks:

8 Shafak, p. 218.
She managed to ignore their gaze, just as she managed to ignore the gaze of all the men who stared at her body with hunger. The vendors looked disapprovingly at her shiny nose ring too, as if therein lay a clue as to her deviance from modesty, and thereby the sign of her ‘lustfulness’. ...there was no power on earth that could prevent Zeliha, who was taller than most women in this city, from donning miniskirts of glaring colors, tight-fitting blouses that played her ample breasts, sanity nylon stockings, and yes, those towering high heels.  

As seen in the quotation, due to the fact that Zeliha does not fulfill the tasks that are waited from her and does not wear in a way that is acceptable by society, she always has a weird glance on her. But, is she not disturbed with all these things? Actually, she has not total annoyance of these glances as she already explains: “A woman who smoked on the streets was not highly regarded in Istanbul, but who cared? Zeliha shrugged. Hadn’t she already waged a war against the entire society?” She with all her being has a decisive stand to what others think and say. An occasion of antagonism encompasses her as can be seen in the novel: “She looks at her clothes, the dozens of skirts, all of them short, all of them flamboyant, her own way of protesting the moral codes she was born into.” She generally behaves different from other women, Toksöz asserts: “She swears and curses a lot, which is not a suitable behavior for women, especially in Turkey.” Zeliha is defined as: “She was the only woman in the whole family and one of the few among all Turkish women who used such foul language so unreservedly, vociferously, and knowledgeably…” She is the abolisher of an unquestioningly accepted rule of the society: a woman is the honor of a family and her responsibility is to protect this honor no matter what are the conditions. Zeliha is a shame for her family, and she is always exposed to scolding and condemnation of Gülsüm Mother: “Shame on you! You have always brought disgrace to this family. ... Look at your nose piercing! ... All that makeup and the revoltingly short skirts and oh, those high heels! This is what happens when you dress up... like a whore!”

Not only Zeliha’s appearance but also her humor puts up a wall between her and other women. “...all-embracing female cheerfulness that she sorely lacked in life. Some women were devoted smilers; they smiled with a Spartan sense of duty. How could one ever learn to do so naturally something so unnatural?” The common characteristics of women seem irritating to her, and she is a fascinating example to show how strong a woman be:

And that was one thing she truly hated. Harboring profound contempt for weepy women ever since she was a little girl, Zeliha had promised herself never to turn into one of those walking

9 Shafak, p. 3-4.
10 Shafak, p. 8.
11 Shafak, p. 221.
13 Shafak, p. 4.
14 Shafak, p. 29.
15 Shafak, p. 10.
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miseries who scattered tears and nitpicky complaints everywhere they went and of which there were far too many around her. She had forbidden herself to cry.16

As seen in the quotation one of the features of woman ‘weeping’ is regarded nearly disgusting by her. The strong personality that she has avoids her displaying emotional impotence as: “Recently she had promised herself she would never become one of those weepy women and that whenever she needed to shed tears, she would do it alone.”17 Not only her inner voice and feelings but also others’ thoughts of her prove her feminist character. She has an extramarital daughter, Asya, and this is only because she is raped by her brother. Maybe, she would not be judged so mercilessly if she confessed this reality. However, she rejects to be pitied and cause the thought that she willingly had a sexual intercourse with a boy. Through a conversation Asya, her daughter says: “My mom is a unique species! … She is the most stubborn, the most iron-willed woman you could ever chance upon. I don’t think the others know my father’s identity either, I doubt if my mom has told anyone.”18 Furthermore, she does not like living under boundaries. Zeliha is a reflection of Virginia Woolf’s portraying a woman in her essay A Room of One’s Own. Woolf desires to have a room of her own and this is the thing that all women of that time dream for.19 Indeed, today women can have their own room and even their own house; however, the society and the rules of families restrict them. Especially because of her mother’s and sisters’ repressions and criticisms, Zeliha wants to go out of the konak that they live in.20

A substantially significant point is clarified in novel in order to understand the unfair difference and concession between a female and a male and to observe feminist units. After being raped at the age of 18 and giving birth to a baby, Zeliha does not marry although she is 38. Is it because she cannot find a suitable man for herself and a man that can understand what she has experienced? Indeed, it is merely because of not forgetting what happened to her. She has a boyfriend, Aram and he is quite fond of her. Armanoush, the step daughter of Mustafa, wonders why Zeliha and Aram do not get marry and Asya says that it is not about Aram but her mother: “My guess is that it’s all because of Auntie Zeliha’s experience with my dad whoever that was, that must be why she is so against marriage. I think she has a trust issue with men.”21 After that conversation Armanoush draws attention to the above mentioned unfair concession between men and women:

But don’t you think there is a huge difference between the two sexes when it comes to recovery after an affair? I mean, when women survive an awful marriage or love affair, and all that shit, they generally avoid another relationship for quite some time. With men, however, it is just opposite; the moment they finish a catastrophe they start looking for another one. Men are incapable of being alone.22

16 Shafak, p. 15.
17 Shafak, p. 309.
18 Shafak, p. 175.
20 Shafak, p. 310.
21 Shafak, p. 256.
22 Shafak, p. 247.
As clarified, the personality of a woman is different from man. Although Zeliha had not a real relation with a man, due to what she experienced, she cannot dare to construct a new life. The situation is different when the subject is a man. Mustafa raped his sister and went to another county in order to continue his education. He married and began a new life and did not even wonder what her sister did. He has had a burden of conscience; however, it did not make him feel responsibility for devastating his sister’s life. He himself was so relaxed that when he heard that Zeliha has a child from another man believed it and assumed that she got over this demolition. He succeeds in leaving the past behind him by repressing it:

Yet at other times he had been satisfied impersonating a man without a past, a man with a cultivated denial. This amnesia of his was deliberate, though not calculated. On the one hand, there was somewhere inside his brain a gate that wouldn’t close no matter what; some memories always escaped. On the other hand was the urge to dredge up what the mind had neatly expunged.\(^{23}\)

As in the quotation, he controlled his brain and memories. Leave aside his feeling guilty and punishing himself, he erased his sister’s psychology, her situation in the house and possible accusation that can be made upon this event from his life. Having a future is more important than carrying the burden of bad deeds. “For me to exist, the past had to be erased”\(^{24}\) he thinks.

As a conclusion, in a male dominant and patriarchal family and environment where all women sustain their lives according to the norms of the society and the desires of men, Zeliha is a rebellion against all the established system in *The Bastard of Istanbul*. She consciously and wisely challenges to everything trying to restrict her, and continues on the way she chose for a free and ideal life although she experienced the worst incident that a woman can have, being raped. Her body is captured with nasty deeds of a man but she does not permit this bad event’s seizing all her life. In a society where women are at the back stage and under the command of men, Zeliha in one respect enter into modern age of their environment, and by gaining her own money, raising her daughter, she demonstrates how a woman can stand on her own legs without submitting to rules of society.

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\(^{23}\) Shafak, p. 334.

\(^{24}\) Shafak, p. 337.