

Demystifying Patriarchy: A Feminist Study of Shafak's *Forty Rules of Love*

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Abstract: Efforts to get free from oppression often result in gender-based violence. Patriarchy silences women through a range of assumptions and concepts. The present study investigates the role and condition of women in patriarchal systems using Lerner's theoretical underpinnings. To examine the patriarchal systems, the study has been carried out through textual analysis of Shafak's *Forty Rules of Love*, emphasizing various rituals and events that the author represents. The data of the text have been collected, analyzed, and interpreted through Close Reading. Three female characters, Desert Rose, Kerra, and Ella Robinstein, have been selected from the book and examined in light of societal issues of violence, prostitution, and family. The study finds that the female characters have been viewed as inanimate objects, and their needs are not considered. They are treated inhumanely when they express disdain for patriarchal ideas. It also identifies that patriarchal norms oppress, enslave, and marginalize them.

Key Words: Oppression, Patriarchy, Feminism, Subjugation, Violence, Prostitution

Introduction

The feminist movement emerged in the 1960s when many female writers challenged women's representations in religion, history, culture, politics, and literature, offering a female perspective to counter male-dominated voices. This movement arose in reaction against the marginalization of women in different spheres of life, including the marginalization of women's literature in literary circles. Since women faced blockades in publishing their works, many utilized male pseudonyms to share their thoughts (Shahzad, 2017). Women, in literature, are often portrayed as objects of desire and subjects of the male gaze. They are frequently portrayed in two contrasting ways: as enchanting figures whose attraction captivates men, and as fragile beings whose perceived vulnerability becomes an excuse for men to dominate and exploit them through admiration (Sugihastuti & Itsna, 2010).

A group of researchers illustrated how women writers engage with the concepts of femininity, individuality, and bias to express their worldview, ultimately revealing that 'womanhood' is not a monolithic identity. They also highlighted that race, ethnicity, skin color, and socioeconomic status shape societal perceptions of women and women's self-conception (Moi, 1985; Ruthven, 1984; LeGates, 2001). Dickinson (2003) pointed to feminism's political and philosophical dedication to women. According to her, feminism is the belief in challenging systematic inequalities and fighting for equality for women in society, the economy, politics, and legal spheres. In an environment that has traditional societal structures, men often receive preferential treatment over women. Durrani (1995) breaks the conventional silence imposed by a patriarchal setup. She courageously recounts all kinds of suffering she endured, including sexual abuse, violence, and brutality at the hands of her husband, Khar. She openly described every circumstance she suffered when she married a Feudal lord. Therefore, she exposed the systemic abuse, violence, harassment, and brutality that women have been facing for centuries.

This study examines the writing of a female Turkish writer, Shafak (2011), focusing on her portrayal

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of women's sufferings in a patriarchal social setup and how women face these difficulties in silence. Women are denied the right to self-expression under the patriarchal system, while men consider their control over women as their private property. She highlights the patriarchal setup in her novel, *Forty Rules of Love* (2011), depicting how Ella's husband was not sincere with his wife and spent time with other women. Another female character, Desert Rose, faced brutality at the hands of Baybar, who used to beat her. Under a male-dominated society, women are tortured mentally and physically, not only to control their sexuality but to reinforce oppression and marginalization.

Literature Review

The terms Patriarchy and Subordination have been defined by various feminist writers. Mitchell (1971) used this term to describe the kinship system in which men exchange women. Walby (1990) defined it as social structures and practices in which men are always in a dominant position and exploit women. The patriarchal systems challenge biological determinism. While biological distinctions exist, patriarchy transforms them into a power relation where men always have power and every woman remains subordinate. Jagger and Rosenberg (1984) conceptualize 'patriarchy' as a social system rooted in material conditions, where the relationships between the sexes are organized to maintain male dominance. It fosters solidarity among males while enabling their collective dominance over females. 'Subordination' is defined by the Collins's *Cobuild English Dictionary* (2010) as a state where one entity is taken as less significant than another. Similarly, the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* defines subordination as an unequal power dynamic within a group where certain individuals hold authority (Hornby, 2003).

The term Feminism encompasses women's efforts to articulate and demand rights. It is a movement and theory aiming to secure women's democratic rights as equal human beings. It is a transformative act seeking to enact real-world change (Fetterley, 1978). Feminist thought challenges androcentric ideology rooted in language, social life, literature, media, politics, and culture, as well as the notions of the 'Female Self' (Culler, 2011; Green & Lebihan, 1996; Ruthven, 1984). Contemporary discourse increasingly identifies countless *Feminisms* rather than a singular Feminism (Bucholtz, 2014; Culler, 2011), reflecting the movement's diverse priorities to end sexism in social, political, and cultural contexts, as their needs are multi-layered and diverse (Sunderland, 2011). Such pluralization acknowledges how race, class, and sexuality fracture monolithic notions of gendered oppression.

Feminist analysis exposes the ways patriarchal structures suppress women, making them silent or voiceless, and losing their identities. Since the late nineteenth century, feminist activists have addressed these issues through different practices. Walker (2005) uses the term *Womanism* to highlight how patriarchy and misogyny limit the social roles of women. Walker (1982) explores black women's struggles for autonomy and survival within oppressive systems. Through her female characters, who excel in skills like letter-writing, tailoring, driving, and blues singing, she portrays resistance against gendered oppression. The female characters foster collective solidarity, supporting one another against patriarchal injustice. She delves into existential themes like the quest for life, the search for self and identity, the potential for male transformation, and above all, the power of female unity. Ultimately, Walker (2005) advocates for mutual respect and balance between genders as a foundation for the just existence of humans.

Women have always been considered voiceless creatures. As the traditional discourse is patriarchal, women are not able to express their experiences. They cannot express their bitter reality (Smith, 1990). Millet (1977) points out that whoever can speak about something must know about the name and describe themselves. To this end, the feminist writers and theorists emphasize redefining phrases that may replicate and mimic women's abilities (Luke, 1994).

A group of researchers discussed the perspective of feminism in Austen's work, *Pride and Prejudice* (1813). Suaidi et al., (2016) explored the role of women in the early 19th century, a time that was always viewed as weak, and women had no right to property, marriage, or education. The influence of patriarchy was deeply rooted in the social, legal, political, and economic structures across various cultures. The study revealed how society embraces the patriarchal culture, particularly in pressuring women to marry a wealthy man. The researchers also discussed the protagonist Elizabeth Bennet, who fights against the



desire of her parents and independently pursues her happiness in love. Her character shows resistance, aligning with the feminist theory.

Patriarchy establishes the male as the head of the house, having authority over domestic affairs and decision-making. This system enforces male dominance, enabling men to subordinate women through institutionalized power structures (Bhasin, 1993). A patriarchal society views women as inferior beings, reinforcing gendered hierarchies that result in women being subjugated in multiple ways (Mehmood, 2019). Gender roles assigned by patriarchy condition women to accept male authority and discourage their participation in critical decisions. Literature plays a crucial role in exposing patriarchal injustices, particularly in addressing issues deemed sensitive for women, including violence, domestic and public oppression, sexual assault, and enforced silence. Writers have critically examined such themes to challenge systemic gender-based discrimination.

In a patriarchal setup, a male is always the head of the house, where a male administers all the activities. He has the authoritative power to control the home. Generally, it refers to male supremacy to influence relationships by which men dominate women and to depict a system whereby women are kept inferior in several ways (Bhasin, 1993). Patriarchal society believes that women are inferior to men. Resultantly, women are subjugated by the patriarchy in multiple ways (Mehmood, 2019). The patriarchal system governs gender roles. The existing social construction has captivated the sexes so much that males have only to become the decision makers. Writers have also been particularly involved in developments discovering the issues which have been 'sensitive' for women, for example, the issue of violence, oppression (domestic and public), rape, silence etc.

For thousands of years, women have endured patriarchal systems that devalue them as human beings and suppress their fundamental rights. Women are often relegated to marginalized positions where they must conform to authority. Their lives are marked by exhausting labor and restrictions on personal freedom. Such lived experience equips women writers to articulate gendered struggles as seen in Shafak's novel (2011), where she vividly portrays female suffering under patriarchy. The life of a woman lies in domestic work, as Ella's character managed all household work, and her husband pursued extramarital affairs. She faced an unhappy life and kept silent to save her marital relationship. Such sufferings are always neglected in a male-dominated society. The systematic injustice forces females to remain silent and internalize their subordinate status.

Objective of the Study

This study examines the patriarchal structures as portrayed by Shafak in her work, *Forty Rules of Love* (2011). It also aims to explore the women's resistance against male control and dominance, which the female characters have to endure, and its effects on them.

Research Question

To achieve the above-mentioned objectives, the research question formulated for the study is:

1. How do the male characters subjugate the females in Shafak's *Forty Rules of Love*?
2. How do the female characters suffer because of their resistance against patriarchy?

Research Methodology

Textual analysis has been employed on Shafak's *Forty Rules of Love* (2011) to examine the portrayal of women's suffering and oppression in a male-dominated society. Drawing on Lerner's (1986) theoretical underpinnings in *The Creation of Patriarchy* (1986), the current analysis explores systemic gender oppression depicted in the novel. As a qualitative study, the research relies on close reading to extract relevant textual evidence. The methodology involves an in-depth examination of the text to identify the patterns of patriarchal brutality.

Theoretical Framework

To explore the position of women in patriarchal structures, the text of Shafak has been selected, and the framework for analysis is Lerner's "*The Creation of Patriarchy*".

Lerner (1986) argues that Patriarchy is the appearance of a society dominated by males, within the family structure and in a broader social context, where men monopolize institutional power. The male-dominated system systematically excludes women from influential positions. Lerner, further, clarifies that such oppression does not indicate total deprivation of rights. Though marginalized, women still can retain limited access to rights and resources.

Lerner (1986) discusses how patriarchal society creates a system to marginalize women. Different kinds of violence are used to control and subjugate women. Men consider that this violence is legitimate, and women face it in the daily routine of life. Violence, rape, sexual abuse, beating, and prostitution keep them bound at home and socially suppressed. She explained the origin of prostitution in Ancient Mesopotamia. It is widely known as the world's oldest profession and can be traced throughout recorded history. She argues that prostitution emerged from slaveholding practices, where surplus enslaved women were commodified for sexual use by male elites. This established a pattern of sexual dominance where women served the males of the upper class without their consent. This framework resonates in Shafak's novel, particularly through the character of Desert Rose and other brothel women whose experiences mirror the exploitation that Lerner describes. She used the phrase 'subordination' instead of the word 'oppression'. In subordination, one is a force to control the power of the other. The latter represents the power of men, for which women have been suffering for centuries.

Aristotle's philosophy also reinforced patriarchal ideologies by framing gender roles through a binary lens, which talked about males as active, rational rulers and females as subordinate beings. He conceptualized women as biologically and intellectually inferior or 'mutilated males,' which justifies women's exclusion from autonomy, making them a natural subject of governance. His saying "the courage of man is shown in commanding, of a woman in obeying" (p. 94) manifests how classical philosophy naturalized gendered oppression. Lerner (1986) critiques such justifications that systematically legitimize female subjugation. Patriarchal systems institutionalize biases against females through violence, exclusion, and exploitation. Shafak's *Forty Rules of Love* exemplifies such struggles through the female characters. Portrayed as inferior, submissive, and powerless, they suffer both physical and psychological violence. By applying Lerner's framework, this study interrogates how patriarchal structures perpetuate such oppression.

Discussions and Findings

Women face a patriarchal society when they open their eyes to the world. In literature, the patriarchal concept is highlighted in different works of writers. Women are subjugated not only at the domestic level but in all spheres of life. Feminist writers always struggle to raise their voices against patriarchal social norms. Among them, the Turkish writer Shafak tried to explain women's subjugation through the characters of Ella Robinstein, Desert Rose, and Kimya. She elicits empathy from the readers by portraying the suffering of women under patriarchal oppression. Ella and other female characters' suffering runs through the veins of the reader and reaches the skeletons of the sensitive readers.

The personality of Ella Robinstein represents a casualty of the male-centric social arrangement being a customary and despondent housewife with three youngsters and an untrustworthy spouse; She is "responsible for all that at home: dealing with the funds, really focusing on the houses, reupholstering the furnishings, getting things done, orchestrating kids' timetables and assisting them with their schoolwork" (p. 62). She looks after her family, but her husband tries to cheat on her: "Her husband could flirt with other women, and outwardly even spend the night with them, but he would rather..." (p. 61)

It is common in society that women save their house due to children and society, because of what other people think about their married life. They always become puppets in the hands of fate and remain silent in patriarchal society due to the fear of people. Therefore, women have no authority to raise their voice because the power structure is always inculcated in males, and women remain at the periphery.

Ella tries to bear her husband's disloyalty due to social norms. The word "unfaithful" points out how he tries to cheat on his wife and spend time with other women instead of his wife. It means he has no affection or love for his wife. Rather, he prefers other women. Her husband finds sexual pleasure with other women instead of her. Robinstein finds herself confined by the relentless demands of motherhood. As a traditional



mother, she dedicates most of her time and energy to addressing her children's needs. According to Lerner (1986), a patriarchal society keeps women bound to the four walls of their house to take care of their home, and husbands do whatever they want. They cheat their wives as they cannot raise their voices against injustice. Such a thought is obvious in Shafak's novel *Forty Rules of Love* (2011).

Ella's domesticated existence is described in the prologue. She compares her life with still waters, having no current, and focuses on still things as part of her life. Shafak says in the prologue, "*Ella's life had consisted of still waters- a predictable sequence of habits, needs and preferences*" (p. 1). The metaphor 'still waters' creates a powerful comparison with her calmness and unnatural stasis. Water must flow to remain fresh. It shows how her identity has been reduced to a static domestic object. At another place, Ella asserts that the only thing that remains between her and David, even after twenty years of togetherness, is silence: "*Twenty years of marriage, twenty years of sleeping in the same bed, sharing the same shower, eating the same food, raising three kids-and what it all added up to was silence*" (p. 239).

The few sentences spoken by Ella suggest that nothing is common between them; only the silence that occurs in her life remains. The unnatural silence reflects internalized oppression. She spends her twenty years living in silence due to patriarchal norms. In a patriarchal society, women are always considered inferior, and males are considered dominant. A discourse is created that marginalizes females and binds them to domestic work, and no identity is given to them. Consequently, they accept this as their fate and bear it in silence. Shafak represents the power structure in her novel, where men have power and women are powerless due to the patriarchal norms that are still common in the twenty-first century. Women have been facing such norms for a thousand years; they are always portrayed as second-rate persons, while males are represented as authoritative.

As a woman in a patriarchal society, Kerra's novelty is suppressed. Her struggle with knowledge of anxiety about authorship stems from a lack of education, which is a deliberate exclusion of women from creative spheres: "*When you are born a girl, you are taught how to cook and clean, wash dirty dishes, mend old socks, make butter and cheese, and feed babies. Some women are also taught the art of love and how to make themselves attractive to men. Nobody gives women books to open their eyes*" (p. 167)

The above sentences reflect Kerra's creativity being suppressed due to patriarchal norms. If a man wants to learn, he is allowed to get an education, but if a woman wants the same, she is not permitted to do so. Such a mentality exists in a patriarchal society and always tries to neglect the creativity of a woman in a male-dominated society. Males are dominant; that's why they gain education, but women are inferior. Therefore, they are forced to do domestic work like Kerra's character. The only purpose of her life is to look after a home and perform multiple tasks.

The female characters, Robinstein and Kerra, face patriarchal influences. Robinstein belongs to modern society, and Kerra belongs to the thirteenth century. They are bound to do household work rather than showing their creative capability. They are interested in studying books and want to become authors, but patriarchal societal norms suppress their desire. Robinstein looks after a home and is always ready to prepare breakfast and dinner. Similarly, Kerra also does her domestic work due to the norms. For a century, women faced restrictions in society. They remain unable to express the oppression against them because they are conditioned to be so. Having internalized their subjugation, they refrain from resistance against set structures: "*What neither my mother nor the midwife knew was that there wasn't one baby but three. All were boys....*" (p. 118)

Desert associates herself with her mother, who died while giving birth to triplets. Out of three, one survived. In a patriarchal society, women's purpose is to bear children, and nothing is more important in their lives. Their sole purpose is to care for their husbands and boys to make them strong in society. In the view of Lerner, the biological difference exists: males are active, and females are passive. The males hold on to institutions and ways of earning, but women try to be their subordinates. The few lines of Desert's mother reveal that the pain of giving birth doesn't matter in a male-dominated society. All they need are boys, not girls.

Prostitution is also evident in Shafak's work. The practice of prostitution is considered an old practice, as it dates back to the time when people rented out women to serve the elites. As a result, brothels arose where women were confined to the status of objects of pleasure. Going out to explore the town, Shams

stumbles upon the brothel in the "seamy side of the town" (p. 132). The brothel is an avowedly patriarchal space constructed out of the trajectory of "illegitimate" (p. 133) male heterosexual desire, as the characters of Desert Rose and other brothel girls are the customers of the males. Baybar's character is considered one of those pesky customers none of the brothel workers would willingly service. He exemplifies paradoxical cruelty as he wanted to be served but was violent too. The hostility manifests so much in his character that, once, he assaulted a girl so badly that the profit-driven brothel's owner banned him.

The lines show how the customers make women slaves and consider them objects. Elif depicted the character of Baybar as carrying the authoritative power of a current male who beats the women brutally to satisfy his male ego. The girls in the brothel wanted to earn, but even for this earning, they never wanted Baybar because of his brutality and bestial nature.

The mentality of males reflects in the phrase: *I had seen nice boys turn into monsters and monsters into nice boys* (p. 135). It indicates the manner man turns himself into a monster creature to exert power over a woman. Men have always used women for their sexual pleasure. They always took women in the form of beautiful objects and later treated them as some lower creatures. Therefore, there is no difference between a monster and a man in how they treat women. Such a patriarchal setup is dominant in various writings all over the world. The woman is not always considered a human being but a poor creature, and men try to subordinate them. Women from the 13th century to the 21st century endured this sort of social setup and remained silent instead of raising their voices against the peripheral status.

Conclusion

After analyzing the shreds of evidence, it is evident that women are always weak and inferior, and males have always been in the dominant position and hold all power in the institutions. In a patriarchal society, women are bound in the four walls of a home, and they try to neglect their creativity instead of showing it. Different female characters are analyzed based on how they face oppression and injustice in society. Women bear all kinds of pain and brutality in silence. Shafak, in her most renowned and award-winning novel, presented the issues of women in a male-dominated society. She exposes the systemic subjugation of females, including oppression, abuse, and physical violence, which causes havoc. Her work reveals the injustice not only as a culturally specific phenomenon but as a universal manifestation of patriarchal structures. By talking about the interconnected injustices, it can be summed up that Shafak highlights the need for collective action to dismantle patriarchal ideologies that are centered around the system of oppression.



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