

# The Experience and the Overcoming of Female Anxiety of Authorship in Elif Shafak's *The Forty Rules of Love*

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**Abstract:** This paper explores in detail how female creativity collides with marriage and motherhood, and how women characters in Shafak's *The Forty Rules of Love* experience and overcome anxiety of authorship. Because women were restricted to traditional and stereotyped confines which shaped their roles, they encountered many obstacles in creating literary works and considering themselves as authors. Hence, they experienced what Gilbert and Gubar call "female anxiety of authorship." The aim of the paper is to show how women characters in Shafak's work are imprisoned in the central role of marriage and motherhood; an imprisonment that leads to their experience of "anxiety of authorship." However, these women prove to be strong and determined in their relentless pursuit for authorship. They succeed to establish themselves as equal to men, or, at least, they are resilient enough to emerge, against all odds, strong and intact.

**Keywords:** Marriage, Motherhood, Female anxiety of authorship, Repression of female creativity, The Forty Rules of Love

## 1. Introduction

The dominant image of the idealized mother that prevailed in both life and literature until the second half of the twentieth century was mostly that of domesticity, passivity, and inferiority. As a matter of fact, marriage and motherhood were considered the most suitable occupations for women. Women were trapped in marriage and the demands of motherhood where their traditional position was restricted in staying at home and running it. Hence, "writing" or "artistic creation" was considered to be a rebellious act because by being "writers" or "creators," women were defying the image of a woman as inherently maternal. Living in a traditional patriarchal society that believes women lack intellectual facilities, women writers struggled to create their own literature against the paralyzing influence of the patriarchal literary traditions and they experience what Gilbert and Gubar call "anxiety of authorship"- "a radical fear that she cannot create, that because she can never become a precursor the act of writing will isolate and destroy her" (Gilbert and Gubar, 1979, p. 11). To use Gilbert and Gubar's words in *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), male precursors "attempt to enclose a female writer in definitions of her person and potential, which by reducing her to extreme stereotypes (angel, monster) drastically conflict with her own sense of self-that is, of her subjectivity, her autonomy, and her creativity" (Gilbert and Gubar, 1979, p.23). This, no doubt, justifies the argument of this paper that if women were not imprisoned in the central role of motherhood, and intellectually inferiorized by male critics, how many women could have been great writers? Undoubtedly, there were many women who could have become great writers but were not allowed to. Ella Rubinstein, Kimya, and Kerra in Shafak's *The Forty Rules of Love* were perfect examples of gifted women whose creativity was repressed by the dominated creeds of the patriarchal society. Hence, the problematic representation of women in relation to writing and to authorship is greatly highlighted in this paper.

This paper is composed of three sections. The first section sheds light on how some women characters in *The Forty Rules of Love* were victimized by marriage, pregnancy and motherhood. The second section analyzes how women characters in *The Forty Rules of Love* experience anxiety of authorship. The third section focuses on women characters' attempt to overcome their anxiety of authorship through their struggle against the phenomenon of "inferiorization" that mark their struggle for artistic "self-definition" in *The Forty Rules of Love*.

## 2. Repressed Women: Perfect Victims of Marriage and Motherhood in Shafak's *The Forty Rules of Love*

In *The Forty Rules of Love*, Shafak presents Ella Rubinstein as a victim of marriage and motherhood. She is an ordinary unhappy housewife with three children and an unfaithful husband. In addition, Ella is "in charge of everything at home: managing the finances, caring for the houses, reupholstering the furniture, running errands, arranging kids' schedules and helping them with their homework" (Shafak, 2010, p. 62). It is obvious; therefore, that Ella is trapped within the endless responsibilities of motherhood. Much of her time is devoted to her children. She is a conventional mother who cares for her children's eating disorders. "„Guilt" is Ella Rubinstein's middle name" (Shafak, 2010, p.36). The source of her guilt comes from her sons. Avi's excuses to order pizza and Orly's attempts not to eat anything were sources of Ella's guilt. Her children's eating disorders leads her to question her record as a mother. Although her children occupy Ella's list of priorities, they seem to have little concern for her well-being. Her children made it plain that they do not need her as much as they once did. Instead of being respected and valued by her children, Ella becomes a sacrificial lamb, one who gives her family selflessly while receiving little in return. As a matter of fact, women are urged to devote themselves to their children and husbands. Whatever ambitions they have for themselves, they should turn into ways of supporting their husbands.

Because life has turned Ella into an industrious housewife with three kids and ceaseless domestic responsibilities, her aspiration of becoming a book critic is not achieved. Being the mother, the wife, the dog walker, and the housekeeper, keeps Ella from achieving her aspiration.

Ella's marriage to David experiences many ups and downs. She is an unhappy wife. Ella's unhappiness and boredom with her husband is clearly shown when Jeannette, Ella's daughter, asks her mother if she is really an unhappy wife. Ella responds to Jeannette's question by admitting that: "Your father and I have been married for a long time. It is difficult to remain in love for so many years" (Shafak, 2010, p. 78). Although she has chosen the man who would be a good father and a reliable husband, Ella sometimes questions herself: "Was she an unhappy house wife? A washed-up mom trapped in a failing marriage" (Shafak, 2010, p.10)? Ella, therefore, is the domestic worker who is trapped in the context of marriage. Regarding her husband's flings and infidelities, Ella blames herself for change because as Shafak says in the prologue, Ella's "life had consisted of still waters- a predictable sequence of habits, needs and preferences" (Shafak, 2010, p.1). Ella asserts that the only thing that remains between her and David after twenty years of marriage is silence:

"Twenty years of marriage, twenty years of sleeping in the same bed, sharing same shower, eating the same food, raising three kids-and what it all added up to was silence" (Shafak, 2010, p.239).

Marriage and motherhood are two great impediments to women's creativity. Both are related to pregnancy which has a negative impact on a woman's creativity. Pregnancy is a horrifying prospect that leaves women feeling trapped within the confines of marriage and motherhood. Shafak depicts Ella's difficult pregnancy that has resulted in Jeannette's pre-mature birth as: "Her daughter had drained all of her energy, which was why she had waited six years before getting pregnant again" (Shafak, 2010, p.9). It can be inferred that Jeannette took her mother's creative energy and power. Ella's maternal self-sacrifice is also apparent in her remembrance of Jeannette's sight as a newborn baby:

"Her skin utterly red and sad, her little fingers wrinkled and almost transparent, her lungs attached to breathing tube- she was so unprepared for this world. Ella had spent many sleepless nights listening to her breathing just to make sure she was alive and would survive" (Shafak, 2010, p.77).

The above passage reveals that Ella was extremely the protective mother. Instead of spending her time on reading and writing, Ella's time was spent with her newborn child.

Kimya is another victim in a society where local customs and beliefs rule its individuals. Shafak attempts at linking this back to an Eastern past through Kimya. The marriage of Shams and Kimya overflows with myth-like customary beliefs, which are mistakenly mixed up with ridiculous rules, reinforcing ignorance and shaping people's life in

one way or another. One of these customary beliefs is that it was deemed to be a bad luck for a young bride to see her reflection on her wedding night. As a result, Shams and Kimya cover the mirror with towel. Another customary belief is that by eating a fruit, a bride and a groom can have as many children as the seeds inside: "Beside Shams and Kimya's head there were a pomegranate and a knife, so that they could eat the fruit and have as many children as the seeds inside" (Shafak, 2010, p. 306).

Giving the bride a necklace with gold coins is considered another customary belief. Shams admits:

"Kerra had told me all about the local customs, reminding me to give the bride a necklace with gold coins upon opening her veil. But I never had gold coins in my life and did not want to greet my bride with coins borrowed from someone else. So when I lifted Kimya's veil, all I did was to give her a comb made of tortoiseshell and plant a small kiss on her lips" (Shafak, 2010, p. 306).

Kimya is strictly controlled by and afraid of the codes of honor in her community. Because her marriage is not consummated, Kimya is afraid of individual's reactions. As a result, she directly informs Shams that people would think she is not virgin and she would have to live in shame. Commenting on customary beliefs, Shams says:

"It made my blood boil that society imposed such ridiculous rules on its individuals. These codes of honor had less to do with the harmony God created than with the order human beings wanted to sustain. People should mind their own business" (Shafak, 2001, p. 307).

In an attempt to keep Kimya's name remain pure and clean, Shams cuts his left palm and his blood drops on their bed sheet, leaving dark red spots. It is obvious then that Kimya is a married woman in the eyes of her society.

### **3. The Experience of Female Anxiety of Authorship in Shafak's *The Forty Rules of Love***

Kerra is a female character who experiences anxiety of authorship in Shafak's *The Forty Rules of Love*. Like most women in patriarchal society, Kerra "does experience her gender as a painful obstacle, or even a debilitating inadequacy" (Gilbert and Gubar, 1979, p. 24). Being "a girl" in a patriarchal society, Kerra's creativity is repressed. Hence, her experience of anxiety of authorship is caused by lack of education which denied women the possibility of being creators and it inevitably disempowered women:

"When you are born a girl, you are taught how to cook and clean, wash dirty dishes, mend old stocks, make butter and cheese, and feed babies. Some women are also taught the art of love and making themselves attractive to men.

But that's about it. Nobody gives women books to open their eyes" (Shafak, 2010, p. 167).

Gilbert and Gubar (1979) attribute some of the female writer's anxiety to the fact that she has constantly been a subject of art, rather than a creator. Women have been indoctrinated into a society which teaches them submission through patriarchal institutions like education; "each of the 'subjects' in which young girl is educated may be sickening in a specific way because they teach her to become a beautiful object" (Gilbert and Gubar, 1979, p. 15). It can be inferred that women were deprived of reading books and therefore, of intellectual freedom. Kerra wishes if she were more knowledgeable in religion, history and philosophy. No one gives women books to teach them. Yet, everyone teaches them how to be beautiful girls, domesticated wives and mothers. Kerra, therefore, is victimized by what Mitchell calls "the inferiorized and 'alternative' (second sex) psychology of women under patriarchy" (Mitchell, 1975, p. 402).

Kerra's anxiety of authorship is metaphorically presented in her fear to enter Rumi's library. She fears to enter the library that symbolizes the patriarchal aspect of literature. However, Kerra tries to overcome her fears by entering the library to dust the books which is a manifestation of her domestic role: "I took out all the books from the shelves and wiped their covers with a piece of velvet dabbed in rosewater" (Shafak, 2010, p. 167). When Rumi enters his library and finds Kerra dusting the books, he asks her in a harsh tone: "What do you think you are doing here?" (Shafak, 2010, p. 168) His question reveals his annoyance and antagonism. Rumi is annoyed because Kerra violates the patriarchal code that prevents women from entering the male literary world. As a result, he orders her to stay away from his books and prevents her from entering the library. From that time, Kerra understood that "the world of books was not and never had been, nor ever would be for her" (Shafak, 2010, p. 168). It is important to note that Kerra's references to male writers illustrate the domination of male discourse and reveals her anxiety at creating her own story. Kerra alludes to Attar's *The Book of Secrets*, Ghazzali's *Vivification of the Religious Sciences*, Baha'al-Din's *Ma'arif*, and *The Divine Sciences* which are examples of literature written by male authors.

As Gilbert and Gubar note, "Bloom's paradigm of the sequential historical relationship between literary artists is the relationship of father to son, specifically as defined by Freud. Thus, Bloom explains that a "strong poet" must engage in heroic warfare with his "precursor," for, involved as he is in a literary Oedipal struggle, a man can only become a poet by somehow invalidating his poetic father" (Gilbert and Gubar, 1979, p.22). Bloom's metaphor of "literary paternity" is applicable to Rumi and his father. Rumi considers that his books are valuable because they refer to his male predecessors:

"Even if they paid me sacks of gold, I would never exchange my father's books. Each of these books is a priceless legacy from my ancestors. I took them from my father, and I

will pass them on to my sons" (Shafak, 2010, p. 167).

Thus, Bloom's notion of the "artists' anxiety of influence" is evident in the relationship between Rumi and his father named Baha'al Din.

The absence of a female model reflects cultural anxiety about the possibility of a female voice of authority. Unlike female writers, male writers have many literary "precursors". While Kerra is prohibited to enter the library, Rumi and Shams lock themselves in the library for forty days:

"It has been forty days since we retreated here. Every day we discussed another of The Forty Rules of the Religion of Love" (Shafak, 2010, p. 163).

It is obvious then, as Gilbert and Gubar argue, "Not only do these precursors [Rumi and Shams] incarnate patriarchal authority, they attempt to enclose [Kerra] in definitions of her person and her potential" (Gilbert and Gubar, 1979, p.23). In fact, women have literally been painted and written by men who metaphorically reduce women to objects. Thus, the position of the female author is extreme stereotype of the angel or the monster.

In *The Forty Rules of Love*, Kimya experiences her gender as a "painful obstacle." Shafak depicts Kimya as a gifted and an unusual girl. Believing in her creative talents, a hermit informs Kimya's father to send her to school. However, her mother directly rejects the idea: "What would a girl need an education for? She should stay by my side and weave carpets until she get married. She is a talented carpet weaver" (Shafak, 2010, p.170). Hence, Kimya's mother believes that a girl does not need books; a girl needs to learn housework and childcare. It is obvious that Kimya's foremothers were discursively and historically silenced. Being born in a society where girls are deprived of attaining education, it is not surprising of Kimya's mother to have such beliefs. In *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), Betty Friedan argues, "We did not want to be like our mothers, and yet what other model did we have?" (Friedan, 1963, p. 74-75) Perhaps Kimya does not want to be like her mother but wonders then, who would she be like? What Friedan sheds light on is a lack of a model and a "fore-mother" to follow, in particular for women writers. This lack is a cause for the anxiety of authorship because as Gilbert and Gubar claim, the woman author suffers feelings of alienation from male predecessors. This anxiety is emphasized in Kimya's realization that her "foremothers struggled in isolation that felt like illness, alienation that felt like madness, obscurity that felt like paralysis to overcome the anxiety of authorship that was endemic to their literary subculture" (Gilbert and Gubar, 1979, p. 51). Hence, the hermit's reference to a male scholar named Mawlana Jalal ad-Din Rumi is evidence of Kimya's anxiety at authoring her own story. Metaphorically, Kimya's fear of authorship is symbolized by her fear to look up at Rumi; a male figure: "I was too embarrassed to look up at him. Instead I looked at his two hands. His fingers were long, supple, and slender, more like an artisan's than a scholar's" (Shafak, 2010, p. 170-171). In addition to Kimya's mother, Rumi, too, reminds Kimya of her gender:



"But you are a girl, even if we study intensely and make good progress, you'll soon get married and have children. Years of education will be of no use" (Shafak, 2010, p. 171). Thus, Kimya's mother and Rumi view her gender as an obstacle to her intellectual development. Both believe that "girls" are born to get married and be domestic housewives.

In Shafak's *The Forty Rules of Love*, Ella Rubinstein embarks on a journey to author a Self, a life free from the endless demands of motherhood that stifled her creativity. Both maternity and the act of writing involve the feeling of anxiety since both are related to creation and Ella fears that she is able to create nothing original; she is afraid that her work on the report would be nothing but only an imitation. During her journey to author her Self, Ella experiences "anxiety of authorship." Her struggles to author a Self-free from patriarchal prescriptions and limitations illustrate how authoring a Self is much like authoring a text, for the act of self-definition is an act of creation. Ella's first assignment, which is to write an extensive report on a historical novel, worries her because she "was not sure she wanted to evaluate the manuscript at all" (Shafak, 2010, p. 12). For Ella, it was thrilling to be the first one to read her precursor's novel and to play the role of a creator. It is important to note that the novel Ella reviews is written by a male author and it is about the encounter of a poet named Rumi with Shams of Tabriz. Her anxiety of authorship is caused by having to confront with the "traditions of genre, style, and metaphor" (Gilbert and Gubar, 1979, p.22) that exist in Aziz's novel. With absence of a female model to follow, Ella suffers feeling of alienation from male predecessors. In fact, she encounters the "tensions, hostilities and inadequacies writers feel when they confront with the achievements of their predecessors" (Gilbert and Gubar, 1979, p.22).

Criticizing Bloom's model, Gilbert and Gubar ask: "Where does the female poet fit in? Does she want to annihilate a "forefather" or a "foremother"? What if she can find no models, no precursors? Does she have a muse and what is its sex?" (Gilbert and Gubar, 1979, p.22) The repetitive use of references supports Bloom's suggestion that authors seek to recognize and overcome their predecessors. Ella's reference to Aziz's *Sweet Blasphemy* illustrates the domination of male discourse in society. Thus, Aziz, Shams and Rumi act as authorial precursors. They also act as literary models that are not suitable to female situation. Throughout his novels, Aziz deliberately bases his character's looks on himself. As a male writer, he wants to create his central character in his own image, just as "God had created human being in His image." As God fathers the universe, Aziz fathers his novels because he owns authorship over them. Ella's anxiety of authorship is also illustrated in her determination to write her own set of basic rules. Here, it is worth to mention that while Aziz names his rules "The Forty Rules of Love and Life," Ella decides to name her rules "The Forty Rules of the Sedentary, Suburban and Earthy housewife." From the name she chooses, it can be inferred that Ella's life is motionless and she is the rural, homely and unsophisticated housewife. It is apparent that Ella uses Aziz as her forefather. This can be linked to Ella's foremother because in a rural and patriarchal culture, traditional roles for women are defined by their being in a subordinate relationship to men. Hence,

Ella's foremothers are restricted to the domestic world and they are kept away from the literary world.

#### 4. The Overcoming of Female Anxiety of Authorship in Shafak's *The Forty Rules of Love*

In *The Forty Rules of Love*, Kerra overcomes her anxiety of authorship through sneaking into the literary world. She enters Rumi's library and sits amid the books "breathing in their dusty, moldy smells, wondering what mysteries they hid inside" (Shafak, 2010, p. 167). Kerra's sneaking to Rumi's library symbolizes her attempt to steal what Gilbert and Gubar call "a right to write." Thus, her anxieties and fears are overcome by entering the library that symbolizes the patriarchal aspect of literature. Furthermore, Kerra's reading from Ghazzali's *Vivification of the Religious Sciences* signifies her attempt to defy the image that considers reading and thinking as "not only alien but also inimical "female" characteristics" (Gilbert and Gubar, 1980, p. 489). By entering Rumi's library and reading his books, Kerra follows Gilbert and Gubar's path of overcoming anxiety of authorship. That path can be made through the "recovery and remembrance of the lost foremothers who could help women authors find their distinctive female power" (Gilbert and Gubar, 2001, p.2035). Perhaps, literary reawakening may come in Kerra's visiting the frightening library to become accustomed to the literary foremothers that lay in wait but not in silence.

Kimya overcomes her anxiety of authorship through her rebellion against the beliefs that tied women to domesticity and deprived them of attaining education. She plainly rejects to be like her mother whose role is housework and childcare. Contrary to her mother, Kimya asserts that all what she needs is education and books. Her rejection of adopting her mother's role is evident when she travels to Konya seeking for education. Rumi's adoption of Kimya symbolizes her release from the established patriarchal constraints of her society. Kimya succeeds in her rebellion. This is clearly shown when Rumi calls her "a gifted student" and "an excellent student. Better than many boys" (Shafak, 2010, p. 172). Thus, her creativity has not been identified virtually and completely with men. Furthermore, Kimya proves to be a determined female character in *The Forty Rules of Love*. Her determination is apparently shown in her decision to study the Qur'an. Although she finds al-Nisa verses troubling, hard to understand and harder to accept, Kimya does not surrender. In an attempt to understand its unpromising teachings on women, Kimya asks Shams who is her precursor for a help. She tells him that some parts in al-Nisa verse are superior to women and even says that men beat their wives. Shams recites the verse by saying: "*Men are maintainers of women because Allah has made some of them to excel others and because they spend out of their property; the good women are therefore obedient, guarding the unseen as Allah has guarded*" (Shafak, 2010, p. 196). Believing that verses should not be understood literally, Shams recites the same verse with different translation because he believes that verses should not be taken for their outer meaning but for their implied meaning: "*Men are the support of women as God gives some more means than*

others, and because they spend of their wealth(to provide for them). So women who are virtuous are obedient to God and guard the hidden as God has guarded it" (Shafak, 2010, p.196). Kimya acknowledges that the texture of the two verses is different: "The former sounds as if it gives consent to married men to beat their wives, whereas the latter advises them to simply walk away" (Shafak, 2010, p.197). Her ability to read, think, interpret, and deduce the texture of the two verses shows her intellectual abilities and proves that reading and thinking are not inimical female characteristics.

Ella Rubinstein overcomes her anxiety of authorship through breaking free from her traditional role and at the same time breaking into the realm of intellect, creativity and writing from within her domesticity. Ella's departure from traditional female roles allows her to be a writer, as she is associated with the stereotypical persona of the male author. Her distance from traditional female roles allows for the possibility that she might be able to write a report for the literary agency. Thus, Ella struggles against the definition of her as an "angel of the house" by revising the role of "motherhood" that keeps her from living a life of her own and prevents her from authoring a Self. The position of author is neither extreme stereotype of the angel nor the monster, and thus must be created. Art, which has forced women into the role of angel or monster, becomes the tool for female writers, and they "must kill the aesthetic ideal through which they themselves have been killed into art" (Gilbert and Gubar, 1979, p. 17). Ella's work in a literary agency is a celebratory moment for her because it signals her release from domestic chains and her chance to author a story of her own without imposition and limitation. Her attempt at authoring her own story is evident at the narrative level. Ella's efforts are apparent in her constant imagining of Aziz and her journey will be a happy one full of love and passion. She, therefore, is ready to take on a new adventure; an adventure which leads to a new world, a new life. Bold and brave, Ella looks forward to a new definition, a new Ella.

Ella's role as a reader and a book reviewer of Zahara's *Sweet Blasphemy* is extremely important because it shows her as a creative woman who is able to analyze, criticize and write. Shafak presents her as a professional reader: "Although she was dying to discuss the details of Aziz's novel with him, her sense of professionalism stopped her" (Shafak, 2010, p.184). There were times when she wants to share views with Aziz about his novel, but she thinks that will not be right. It can be inferred that Ella refuses to accept Aziz who is a "male precursor" as a literary model. Her rejection of accepting Aziz as a "model" symbolizes that she is able to create her own report without a male help.

Disobedient, Ella begins to give and take and her ideas begin to sound argumentative. Her report on *Sweet Blasphemy* reveals that she takes hold of the power that comes with authorship. Ella does not only want to have a voice, but she also wants to have an audience. Being an editor in a literary agency, her report is going to be read by someone. This, of course, signifies successful authorship of her report. In addition, her involvement in conversation with Aziz and her

position as subject of conversation is a confirmation of her creating a story that is heard.

Gilbert and Gubar illustrate that authorship for a woman does not come without woes because "a life of female rebellion, of „significant action,“ is a life that must silenced, a life whose monstrous pen tells a terrible story" (Gilbert and Gubar, 1985, p.824). Ella becomes a monster in the eyes of her patriarchal society because she leaves her husband for a man with no future: "Ella had come to understand that if there was anything worse in the eyes of society than a woman abandoning her husband for another man; it was a woman abandoning her future for the present moment" (Shafak, 2010, p. 346). Furthermore, she is monstrous because she dares to have a voice and to take over authorship.

Ella Rubinstein leads a life without any financial support. She chooses a brave decision when she decides to leave her home and her husband. In her attempt to earn money, Ella starts to give private lessons in English and works for her a literary agency. Not only this, but she also rents a flat to live one day at a time. Perhaps in her own apartment, Ella would have the time and the space to produce and edit creative works and therefore to become a great fiction editor. Her new apartment would offer her the space she needs to think and write; a space she lacked in her own home. It can be said that when Ella is away from the domestic sphere that imposes on her many restrictions, she would be able to create and write independently and overtly.

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, in the lives of the women's characters in Shafak's *The Forty Rules of Love*, it is proved beyond doubt that marriage and motherhood can be stifling to creative and ambitious women, shaping women's lives and suppressing their talents. Motherhood, which implies marriage and domesticity, stands as a metaphor for the woman writer's repressed side and for anxiety of authorship. Nevertheless, whether they are obedient or rebellious, the women in the selected work attempt to overcome their experience of anxiety of authorship despite all odds.

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