



Beyond Boundaries: Tradition, Identity, and Existentialism in Elif Shafak's Honour

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Abstract- Elif Shafak's Honour (2012) intricately explores the intersections of tradition, identity, and existential struggle within the context of diasporic life and patriarchal constraint. This paper examines how Shafak portrays the clash between inherited cultural codes and individual freedom through her multi-generational narrative that spans Kurdish-Turkish and British settings. By tracing the moral and psychological journeys of the Toprak family, the study analyzes how the notion of honour functions as both a social construct and a source of existential crisis. Drawing on existentialist perspectives—particularly Sartre's ideas of freedom, responsibility, and bad faith—the paper argues that Shafak redefines honour not as a collective burden but as a personal moral choice. Furthermore, the text's negotiation between Eastern traditions and Western modernity reveals the fluidity of identity in transnational spaces. Ultimately, Honour transcends cultural binaries to depict the human quest for meaning beyond boundaries—geographical, moral, and emotional.

Keywords - Elif Shafak, Honour, tradition, identity, existentialism, diaspora, gender, freedom.

I. Introduction

Elif Shafak, one of the most prominent voices in contemporary Turkish and transnational literature, is acclaimed for her ability to bridge cultures, languages, and philosophies. Her novel Honour (2012) offers a deeply moving exploration of the tensions between tradition and modernity, collective morality and personal agency, and the enduring struggle for self-definition within patriarchal societies. Set between a Kurdish village in Turkey and the immigrant landscape of 1970s London, Honour tells the story of the Toprak family, whose lives are torn apart by rigid notions of honour and shame. Through her nuanced portrayal of women and men caught between opposing worlds, Shafak examines how identity is shaped—and often distorted—by the weight of inherited values and the dislocation of migration.

At the heart of Honour lies a philosophical inquiry into the nature of freedom, guilt, and moral choice. The novel's tragic trajectory invites an existential reading: its characters are not merely victims of social determinism but individuals confronted with the anguish of decision and the burden of responsibility. Drawing on existentialist thought—especially the works of Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir—this paper interprets Shafak's narrative as a meditation on authenticity within oppressive cultural



frameworks. The tension between destiny and self-determination mirrors the existential paradox of human existence: the desire to belong versus the yearning to be free.

Furthermore, Honour situates this existential struggle within the hybrid spaces of diaspora, where identities are constantly negotiated and redefined. For Shafak, cultural boundaries are never fixed but porous, inviting dialogue rather than division. Her characters inhabit what Homi K. Bhabha terms the “third space” of hybridity, where new forms of selfhood emerge from the collision of tradition and modernity. In this sense, Shafak’s narrative transcends national and gender boundaries to expose the universal dimensions of human suffering, guilt, and redemption.

This paper, therefore, explores how Honour articulates the complexities of tradition, identity, and existential freedom. It argues that Shafak reimagines the concept of honour beyond its patriarchal confines, presenting it instead as a site of moral introspection and personal transformation. By intertwining cultural critique with existential philosophy, Shafak invites readers to move beyond boundaries—social, moral, and emotional—and to confront the profound question at the heart of the novel: what does it mean to live authentically in a world governed by inherited definitions of honour and shame?

II. Conclusion

Elif Shafak’s Honour stands as a compelling exploration of how tradition, identity, and existential freedom intersect in the lives of individuals caught between cultures. Through the tragic story of the Toprak family, Shafak exposes the devastating consequences of rigid moral codes while simultaneously illuminating the possibility of transcendence through self-awareness and choice. Her narrative dismantles patriarchal notions of honour that confine both men and women within cycles of guilt, violence, and repression, revealing instead that honour is not an inherited value but a personal and ethical responsibility.

From an existential perspective, Honour underscores the anguish of human freedom—the constant negotiation between social belonging and individual authenticity. Characters such as Pembe and Iskender embody the struggle between determinism and self-determination, reminding readers that moral identity is forged through conscious action rather than submission to cultural norms. In this sense, Shafak’s fiction resonates deeply with Sartre’s and Beauvoir’s insistence that authenticity arises only when one assumes responsibility for one’s choices, even in the face of societal constraint.

Moreover, Shafak situates this existential quest within the broader dynamics of migration and hybridity, where borders of geography, culture, and gender are continuously contested. By portraying the diasporic experience as a metaphor for the search for selfhood, Honour transcends the boundaries of East and West, tradition and modernity. It calls for a redefinition of identity that embraces complexity and contradiction rather than rigid purity.

Ultimately, Honour invites readers to look beyond inherited structures of meaning and to confront the moral freedom that defines human existence. Shafak’s narrative thus becomes an act of resistance against cultural fatalism and a testament to the enduring



human desire for authenticity, empathy, and reconciliation. Through her synthesis of tradition and existentialism, she offers a vision of identity that is not confined by boundaries, but constantly evolving toward a more humane understanding of honour and selfhood.

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