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## **“The Harem Within”: The Complexity of Female Identity in Elif Shafak’s *Black Milk***

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**Abstract:** In a post-modern world where selfhood is defined by diversity and multiplicity, Elif Shafak’s *Black Milk* outlines how women’s experiences depict a tragic fate. In this memoir Elif Shafak writes about motherhood and authorship and the many stereotypes women face in a patriarchal society. For many women writers, motherhood became a burden, because they had to choose between being a “good” mother and a “good” author. This article aims to explore the complexity of women’s identity in *Black Milk* through a feminist perspective and also to analyse Elif Shafak’s feminine discourse and its empowerment process. Elif Shafak questions the norms of the patriarchal society, because it enforces a “given” identity for both women and men. *Black Milk* also outlines the anxiety women face when it comes to writing, motherhood and many other experiences, describing an enormous pressure put on women to reflect an ideal.

**Keywords:** Elif Shafak; *Black Milk*; Feminine Identity; Motherhood; Authorship; Memoir; Feminist Theory.

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### Introduction

*Black Milk* was written as a reflection on motherhood, authorship and the multiple identities that define womanhood. Elif Shafak explores this diversity through a kaleidoscopic lens, as her own identity is defined by the intersections of various characteristics. In this memoir, Elif Shafak discusses the relationship between motherhood and authorship, as the most dominant question is – is it possible for a woman to be a writer and a mother at the same time? The story begins with Elif writing “The Single Girl Manifesto,” unravelling afterwards the various stages of understanding and defining womanhood and motherhood through her own perspective.

As for the genre of the book, I would begin by differentiating autobiography from autofiction. Even though both use the first-person narratives, the onomastic correspondence between author, narrator and main character, the first one draws the reader’s attention to real events from the author’s life, while the latter creates a more fictional universe. Nonetheless, *Black Milk* cannot fit completely any of these genres, but “as Hans Robert Jauss pointed out,

the genre is a 'horizon of expectation'.<sup>1</sup> Arnaud Schmitt proposes "an alternative concept: *self-narration*".<sup>2</sup> He states that:

[s]elf-narration should be seen as a loosely-referential literary genre. Referential because there is no protective distance between the narrator and author, consequently there is also a degree of assumed responsibility for the text's content. Literary because it resorts to every formal weapon offered by novels and does not make it one of its duties to be true to life. Self-narration is a mature genre that has learned its subjective lesson. It is aware that every life narrative, as honest as it purports to be, is flawed simply because our memory is also by definition flawed.<sup>3</sup>

*Black Milk* is a self-narration, considering the fact that the perspective from which the story unfolds is more significant than the facts, as Arnaud Schmitt claims that

self-narration is particularly well adapted to postmodern times when perspective is more important than facts. For writers who are tired of fiction but not necessarily of all that attributes of novel, and who want to focus on the self – their selves instead of imaginary creatures – through the medium of the written text, self-narration could be the only alternative.<sup>4</sup>

In *Black Milk* the issues of motherhood, feminism, womanhood are the main focuses of the book. Elif Shafak writes about the discrepancy between the

patriarchal order of things and the real image of womanhood, described through women's experiences and views. I stated before that her own identity has a special status, embodying both Oriental and Western cultures. As both of them reflect a more-or-less patriarchal society, *Black Milk* clearly underlines that womanhood cannot be described by one type of experience, but by what Elif Shafak calls "the Harem within."

The main focus of this paper is analysing the different perspectives of womanhood and the undergoing stages of understanding, defining and empowering women to achieve their full potential. *Black Milk* fights the stigma around women's identities, it fights the patriarchal order of womanhood and it gives an alternative that's defined from a woman's point of view. In the following sections I shall begin by analysing the construction of "the Harem within" and each and every perspective that the Thumbelinas represent, then I shall differentiate between motherhood and mothering. Afterwards I shall focus on the disparities between motherhood, "the given act of creation" and authorship, "the chosen act of creation." Ultimately, I intend to emphasize the necessity of representation of womanhood through a feminist perspective, underlining the ways in which the patriarchal society deforms points of views and creates identities representative for patriarchal norms.

### **The Harem Within – "Chorus of Discordant Voices"**

Six distinct but complementary characters reside inside Elif's mind, she calls them "finger-women" or Thumbelinas:

“Inside my head there were six voices speaking all at once”<sup>5</sup>. “There is a mini-harem deep down my soul. A gang of females who constantly fight for nothing and bicker, looking for an opportunity to trip one another up ... Each has declared a different corner of my soul her residence”<sup>6</sup>. These bizarre female characters represent “the Harem within” or the “Chorus of Discordant Voices” and each of them embodies a different perspective of womanhood: Little Miss Practical, Dame Dervish, Milady Ambitious Chekhovian, Miss Highbrowed Cynic, Mama Rice Pudding and Blue Belle Bovary. Little Miss Practical represents the brain: “There, in a city as neatly organized as Brussels, in a chic and modern flat furnished minimalist style, lives Little Miss Practical. She is the side of me who has great common sense and even greater pragmatism”<sup>7</sup>, she is the one that keeps everything in order so that Elif would reach her fully potential; Dame Dervish represents belief, Elif’s relationship with spirituality, especially the Sufi one: “There, in a spiritual city as spiritual as Mount Athos, beyond a wooden door, sits Dame Dervish – her head bowed in contemplation, her fingers moving the amber prayer beads”<sup>8</sup>; Miss Highbrowed Cynic represents knowledge, she is always reading philosophy, she tries to better herself through reading and learning: “There, behind an ornamented iron door, in a city as bustling with ideas as New York, lives Miss Highbrowed Cynic. Her windows are covered with burgundy velvet curtains and flimsy cobwebs, her walls with posters of Che Guevara and Marlon Brandon”<sup>9</sup>; Milady Ambitious Chekhovian, as her name states, she is Elif’s reflection of authorship, she’s in charge of writing, the

one that keeps Elif’s plans in line so that she can achieve her life-long dream to be a world-renowned author: “There, in a city as crowded as Tokyo, behind a thrice-bolted door, is the relentless workaholic Milady Ambitious Chekhovian [...] there is one by Chekhov that she has taken up as her life’s motto: ‘He who desires nothing, hopes for nothing, and is afraid of nothing, cannot be an artist’”<sup>10</sup>; Mama Rice Pudding is the embodiment of motherhood, but she reflects the “normative” idea of a mother, nonetheless the feelings of nurturing and mothering as a “given” calling for: “My name is what it is because I happen to be a motherly, loving person. [...] I relish hanging bamboo wind chimes on the porch, growing begonias in cute little pots, pickling vegetables in the summer, making pink grapefruit marmalade...You know, keeping the home fires burning”<sup>11</sup>; as for Blue Belle Bovary she represents femininity, she is a seducer, the image of the *femme fatale* that resides in every woman’s subconscious: “My name is a tribute to Emma Bovary, the woman who did everything in her power to escape banality and monotony of provincial life [...] I am a great fan of everything bodily and sensual [...] I enjoy my womanhood”<sup>12</sup>.

Each of the Thumbelinas fight for their supremacy, as Elif starts to question her intentions and life-long decisions about motherhood and writing, the voices begin to disrupt her. Even though their intentions are to help Elif figure life out, they tend to implement their own points of view about life. I’d like to clarify the fact that even though this “Chorus of Discordant Voices” is a product of fictionality, it still reflects one of the greatest struggles that women face every single day. Womanhood

was defined by patriarchal norms, and so was motherhood, resulting in a feeling of inadequacy in a world that dictates your identity. I shall emphasize the fact that patriarchy, as a predominant form of culture, creates and determines the ways in which both women and men should behave. The basis for patriarchy is misogyny, sexism, gendered roles in society and other forms of oppressions (such as racism, classism, ableism etc.). The relationship between patriarchy and womanhood is one that must be taken into account, while there are many studies about how womanhood and women writers explore this experience, what I intend to emphasize is that womanhood through a patriarchal point of view is not a real interpretation of womanhood. A feminist point of view reclaims the symbolic order of societies, and changes the labels and norms that were enforced on gender. "Social hierarchy bound individuals to certain alliances with clear-edged definitions of gender, and its roles forced upon them"<sup>13</sup>, so not only "the Harem within" represents the reaction against the patriarchal order, but also the parts in which Elif fictionalize and gives a voice to other women writers (Sylvia Plath, Zelda Fitzgerald, Jane Austen, Adalet Ağaoğlu, Simone de Beauvoir, Sevgi Soysal, Sophia Tolstoy and many others). These women faced the consequences of patriarchy, they could not find a way to mediate between writing and mothering.

Why did Elif Shafak choose the term "harem" to describe her little women? For many feminists this term has a symbolic power, after all it represents a form of oppression and control, but it also signifies a strong bond between the women inside, as they experience the same feelings and

develop a form of sisterhood. Of course, the harem is prone to create clashes between women, they are in a constant competition for attention and dominance, and this aspect is revealed in *Black Milk*. Each Thumbelina wants the power over Elif's life, even though some of them form alliances, most of them end in coups, dictatorships and different authoritarian forms of controlling. This "harem" reflects the ambiguous state of womanhood, while womanhood is a continuous form of (re)defining and recognizing the significant points of this experience.

From a postmodern point of view, selfhood is defined by multitudes, by diversity and a multi-spectre lens, by intersections that create each and every identity. As the "Chorus of Discordant Voice" reveals itself, as a complex personality, it also shows that we cannot limit Elif to only one of the Thumbelinas. As Elif Shafak states in an interview from 2003:

For me, to find room for my "multiple selves" had always been difficult both abroad and in Turkey. The moment I step outside Turkey; I am this "woman from a Muslim country." Whenever I go back to Turkey, I feel connected to none of the established patterns of thought. It is as if there is always some part of me that I have to censure so that I can find a habitat.... Most of our model of thinking is based on dualities. Normal-abnormal, East-West, traditional-modern, feminine-masculine.... As feminist writers, I think we should be aware of these dualities and see how they operate not only outside our communities but also inside us, inside our minds, our lives.<sup>14</sup>

*Black Milk* is written from a feminist perspective, that clarifies the necessity of defining womanhood at its own terms. The patriarchal norms are insufficient, they represent boundaries and limitations for both women and men. Elif Shafak explores the conflict that resides inside each and every individual, but especially for women that are forced to emulate a form of womanhood that is not representative for their own experiences.

### **Motherhood, the “Other” Act of Creation and Authorship, the “Other” Form of Motherhood**

“**T**he identification of womanhood with motherhood can be traced back to the beginning of human history”<sup>15</sup>, but the 20<sup>th</sup> century marks a new understating of motherhood, that also rises up questions about what being a woman meant. Many feminist scholars denied that womanhood is fulfilled only through motherhood, especially one that followed the patriarchal norms. Still to this day, patriarchal family and motherhood are defined as a “God-given and universal order”<sup>16</sup>, where the father-figure is central and takes all the decisions, whereas the mother-figure has a “cemented domestic servitude”<sup>17</sup>. For many years “the mother had not received attention as that she had mainly been studied from an Other’s point of view; or represented as an (unquestioned) patriarchal constructed social function”<sup>18</sup>, but in *Black Milk* the focus is changed, as the reader enters a world that does not reflect the traditional point of view. Elif Shafak explores her fears and anxieties about everything that defines or used to define motherhood and womanhood.

Feminist scholars differentiate between motherhood and mothering, the first “refers to the patriarchal institution of motherhood, which is male defined and controlled and is deeply oppressive to women”<sup>19</sup>, the latter “refers to women’s experiences of mothering and is female defined and centred and potentially empowering to women”<sup>20</sup>. These distinctions generate an internal conflict, as women are taught the ways of patriarchal motherhood. The moment patriarchal motherhood became “the official meaning of motherhood”<sup>21</sup>, alternative forms of motherhood were often pathologized and criticised, “as a normative discourse, restrains women’s power to challenge and change the oppressiveness their motherhood experience”<sup>22</sup>.

Elif Shafak explores the meaning of creation, in *Black Milk* it carries a double meaning – on one hand the fictional universes that she creates, and on the other hand the process of having a child. She’s facing all sorts of anxiety, the “anxiety of authorship” as Gilbert and Gubar named it and also the anxiety of being a mother. Furthermore, the metaphor of the ‘harem’ is crucial for Elif, because each Thumbelina would define her own style of mothering. As Elif struggles between writing and mothering, she writes about other female writers’ struggles in defining themselves as women, mothers, wives and writers. The image of Sophia Tolstoy is relevant for the internal conflict that each woman faces. In a patriarchal world, a woman’s sole role is being a mother and even though Sophia Tolstoy was a good mother and wife, her life ended up tragic as she was not able to become a writer and live a fulfilled life:

For a long time, Sophia was seen solely a mother and wife. Her great

contributions to Tolstoy's literary legacy was either ignored or belittled. It is only recently that we are beginning to see her in a different light – a diarist, intellectual and businesswoman – and can appreciate her as a talented, selfless woman with many abilities and unrealized dreams.<sup>23</sup>

Another significant writer is Sylvia Plath, who had a tragic life, regardless of her status as a writer and mother: "She was the girl who wanted to be God so that she could create the entire universe from scratch [...] She was made to write. Determined to earn her living from writing, never satisfied with what was placed in front of her, she pushed and shoved"<sup>24</sup>. But as many women that lived in the 1950s Sylvia Plath had to face many stereotypes, anxieties and struggles: "That was the stage in her life when she desired to be many things at the same time, and excel equally in each. A mother, a housewife, a writer, a poet... She wanted everything to happen immediately and flawlessly"<sup>25</sup>. As depression settled in, something well-known for women of that age, she couldn't fight it anymore, but Sylvia Plath remains one of the most legendary and iconic women writers, that not only symbolizes the struggles that women face in a patriarchal society, but also the power they have to fight against all odds: "No other literary suicide has been talked and written about so much. No other woman writer, after her death, turned into such an icon beyond place and time"<sup>26</sup>.

Elif Shafak writes primarily about her attempts in defining motherhood through different other literary examples, and equally about the conflict that she faces – choosing between being a mother or a writer. And for

a while she chose to focus on being a writer, putting all her maternal feelings aside, as the voices of Milady Ambitious Chekhovian, Little Miss Practical and Miss Highbrowed Cynic became the predominant ones. Even if at first they were forming the "Chorus of Discordant Voices", they slowly begin to form political systems: Milady Ambitious Chekhovian takes power through a military coup trying to keep Elif focused on being a writer. After a while Elif starts seeing alternative forms of motherhood:

In the cafeteria, I get in line and end up standing in front of a lesbian couple. One of the women is short and has spiky, carrot hair. The other is quite tall and heavily pregnant [...] "You're expecting a baby, how wonderful" [...] "The father," she says. "We picked him out of thousands at the sperm bank... He's going to be a very special baby."<sup>27</sup>

Elif begins to question her decision of not wanting to have a child: "Everyone is in their own world. But where is Mama Rice Pudding? [...] I wish I knew her better"<sup>28</sup>. She then continues on describing her feelings and emotions, and as soon as she meets Eyup and begins writing about their encounter something changes inside Elif. "The Harem" is once again disturbed, they are trying to suppress Mama Rice Pudding, but as Elif starts thinking about motherhood more seriously she seeks help, and Mama Rice Pudding's ascension begins: "I need to make something very clear', she says. 'I am not advocating democracy here. Actually, I want to go back to a monarchy again, except this time I will be queen'"<sup>29</sup>.

As motherhood and authorship can be viewed as different types of creating life,

I would like to discuss some of the issues of female authority, both maternal and literary. Authorship was mainly viewed as male-dominated practice and the relationship between authorship and gender is also a significant issue to mention. Since gender is a socially constructed concept, the same could work for authorship, so “authorship and gender are thus not only both performative acts in and of themselves: their performativity together constructs each other”<sup>30</sup>. Many women writers talk about their books as if they were their children, because in many cases the energy that is put in creating life (fictional or not) can be analogous with the act of having a child, with both making women feel vulnerable. Even though *Black Milk* can be defined as an autobiographical novel or a self-narration, it is crucial to mention that it “increases attention to the importance of maternal authority, with the reconceptualization of female characters involved [...] it eventually contributes to a reaction against that authority”<sup>31</sup>.

Milady Ambitious Chekhovian dreads the existence of Mama Rice Pudding, as she sees her as an image of the ‘old’ norms. Mama Rice Pudding embodies the patriarchal form of motherhood, as she tries to convince Elif to embrace her maternal feelings, Milady Ambitious Chekhovian tries to subdue her, taking Elif to the Brain Tree:

“So tonight we have all gathered under the Brain Tree,” Milady Ambitious Chekhovian says, launching into a speech. She has climbed onto a branch, where she pouts like a dictator assessing his people’s intelligence before starting to lecture them.

“This is a historic moment, she bel-lows. “This time is ripe to make a choice once and for all.” She points an accusing finger at Mama Rice Pudding. “Do you want to be like her? A forlorn housewife? Or would you rather live your life like a majestic arboreal brain?”<sup>32</sup>

Elif has made a choice to focus on being a novelist, vowing to Milady Ambitious Chekhovian that she’ll pursue her dream: “*No longer will the Body hold sway over me. I have no want for womanhood, housework, wife work, maternal instincts or giving birth. I want to be a writer, and that is all I want to pursue*”<sup>33</sup>.

On one hand, Milady Ambitious Chekhovian represents a progressive woman who wants independency and freedom from the social norms and cannot envision herself as a mother that is defined by the patriarchy. As she writes “The Single Girl Manifesto” something changes inside Elif, as she sees this young mother:

Suddenly I am seized by an urge to needle her. This woman is my Other. She is the kind of woman who has gladly dedicated her life to her home, to her husband and to her sons. Since youth she focused her energy on finding an ideal husband and starting her own family, became a mother before saying farewell to her girlhood, gained weight for the cause, has aged before her time, has allowed her desires to turn into regrets and become sour inside. This woman, with her canned dreams, comfortable social status and bygone aspirations, is my anti-thesis. Or so I want to believe.<sup>34</sup>

And at first, she pities her, she's trying to "otherize" her in order to subdue her yearning of motherhood. Later on, Milady Ambitious Chekhovian admits that the reason she wrote that manifesto was to protect Elif from wanting to become a mother: "God forbid, you were going to get trapped in your dreams of motherhood"<sup>35</sup>, but before that moment Elif met the Turkish writer, Adalet Ağaoğlu. This encounter makes her wonder if it's possible to be a mother and a writer, in an equivalent way: "Little do I know that this encounter will motivate me to think harder about the choices we make between creating babies and creating books"<sup>36</sup>.

On the other hand, Mama Rice Pudding represents a patriarchal woman, resembling the young mother that Elif saw on the ship – she is nurturing, altruistic, caring, loving and protecting, she embodies everything a mother is "meant" to be. Milady Ambitious Chekhovian and Mama Rice Pudding are total opposites, but they balance each other. One question still remains – can she be both at the same time?

Elif Shafak continues to explore the multi-faceted experience of womanhood, and she notes that: "[i]n traditional Muslim society ... we women can meet our bodies only inside closets or behind closed doors. The same... is reflected in our storytelling... we women writers, especially those of us from non-Western backgrounds, are uncomfortable about writing on sexuality"<sup>37</sup>. In Muslim societies women tend to cover their bodies, as a form of modesty, but many do not have a choice but to follow Sharia. Elif points out that this form of covering the body can influence the way women perceive not only their bodies, but also the expression of their sexuality.

As Elif continues to write about her pregnancy on a daily-basis, she suddenly notices that her pregnant-body becomes a point of interest for everyone around her: "This week I learned that a pregnant woman's body belongs not to her, but to all women"<sup>38</sup>. The pregnant woman's body is not shameful anymore, it is an ideal, because it fulfils the biological function of women. Describing in such detail all the thoughts, ideas, fears she had, also writing about post-partum depression that not only made her question her identity and mothering skills, but also made her lose interest in writing, Elif Shafak gives a voice to all the women that faced the same type of feelings, insecurities and depression.

As she faces the struggles of being a new mother, Elif Shafak starts questioning her identity as well. Another important point of view is that of an oriental woman. How can the western norms match the oriental expectations, and is motherhood a universal act of selflessness or does it translate in different ways? Even though the Western world achieved significant progress along the way, giving women rights and fighting alongside them, there are still many others to be made. The differences between the West and the Orient are still debatable, even if the Oriental world still struggles in many respects, because of the political climate that embraces an authoritarian discourse. Even though the mother fulfils an important role in the Oriental family, it still follows the rule of patriarchy, women being the main caregivers, but this aspect is also encountered in Western cultures. The patriarchal society condemns women to a life in care of others, as they must put all their aspirations and dreams aside so that they can fulfil their "most



important calling". As Elif is trying to understand womanhood, she notes that:

And who exactly is a normal woman? Which womanly attributes are natural? Which others are cultural? Are girls genetically predetermined to be maternal, nurturing and emotional, or do their families and societies mold them that way? Or else, are the natural and the cultural qualities so intricately interwoven that there is no telling which characteristics shape whom anymore? [...] I grew up seeing two different types of womanhood. On the one hand was my mother – a well-educated, modern, Westernized, secular Turkish woman. Always rational. Always to the point. On the other hand, was my maternal grandmother, who also took care of me and was less educated, more spiritual and definitely less rational. This was a woman who read coffee grounds to see the future and melted lead mysterious shapes to fend off the evil eye.<sup>39</sup>

She describes this dualistic nature of things and how women are taught of thinking of themselves in terms defined by the patriarchal order. She questions the definition of womanhood and how people tend to describe it:

How much of my womanhood is biological, how much of it is socially learned? Of the will to become a mother, which part is innate, which part is imposed? Is it sheer coincidence that I have started contemplating motherhood in my midthirties? Is it because my biological clock is ticking? Or is it

because the social chronometer, which continuously compels us women to measure ourselves against one another, is speeding ahead?

When everything is so culturally loaded, how am I going to know what is really natural and what is environmental?<sup>40</sup>

This paragraph underlines the continuous struggle that women face into defining themselves in a world as embedded in the patriarchal order as this one.

Elif Shafak writes the story of Firuze, an imaginary character, the fictional sister of the poet Fuzûlî. She represents on one hand "female anxiety of authorship"<sup>41</sup> and also the tragic fate of many women writers that were ignored by the literary canon, and on the other hand the anxiety of being a woman:

When? Why? How did she switch from girlhood to womanhood? She had always thought becoming a woman was like walking a long, winding road with trees on each side, learning your way step by step. Why had no one told her it was, in fact, a trapdoor you stepped on and tumbled into without knowing it was there?<sup>42</sup>

When Firuze wants to pursue her dream to write and be like her brother Fuzûlî, her nanny asks her "Who has ever heard of a female poet?"<sup>43</sup>, and so Firuze kept her poems a secret. She eventually managed to show them to her brother, who was surprised by what he read, asking her: "Where did you find these poems?"<sup>44</sup> His question implied that women were not capable of writing or reading such poems, "[t]

hus females were suppressed and deprived of self-expression<sup>45</sup>. Elif Shafak understands what it means to be a woman writer in a male-dominated field, as creative skills and performances of women were denied and criticised, because they did not reflect a patriarchal point of view. Though many can argue that the literary field is a continuum and it is always evolving, the literary canon still reflects a heteronormative and patriarchal world. In the end, Firuze stops writing and as she “becomes” a woman, she starts preparing herself for a life in which she will take care of her husband and children: “As she leaves her house, she does not pay a last visit to the hen coop. She doesn’t care. Not anymore. Hidden in a hole under the feeding bowls, her poems go to waste. Her big secret turns to dust and the dust is swept away<sup>46</sup>. Even though, historically Firuze would have lived in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and the same form of oppression and discrimination would have also been present in the West, I think that what is important to note from this story is the lack of women writers from the literary canon, and the ignorance that they faced and many still face to this day. Firuze is a literary example that showcases the struggles women face choosing between writing and mothering, yet for her there was not even a choice, but a given. The story of Firuze is meant to raise awareness that women everywhere face a difficult decision, as long as womanhood and motherhood are still defined from a patriarchal point of view: “Who knows how many women like Firuze lived throughout Middle Eastern history? Women who could have become poets or writers, but weren’t allowed... Women who hid their masterpieces in hen coops or dowry chests, where they rotted

away<sup>47</sup>. Elif Shafak states that “Still today there remains a rule in place: Male writers are thought of as ‘writers’ first then ‘men’. As for female writers, they are first ‘female’ and only then ‘writers’<sup>48</sup>.”

Another important story that Elif Shafak empathizes with is Zelda Fitzgerald’s story, while she was not your typical 1920s obedient woman: “Zelda Fitzgerald was not a ‘normal’ woman who conformed to conventional gender roles. Neither modesty nor passivity was her cup of tea<sup>49</sup>. Living according to her own ways, she remains one of the most influential women of the past century. Also, Elif showcases the fact that Scott Fitzgerald might have often been inspired by Zelda: “Perhaps every writer is pickpocket of some sort, stealing inspiration from real life<sup>50</sup>. Zelda Fitzgerald did not gain the same amount of fame as her husband, and this also illustrates the fact that even though she could have been a better writer, she could not really achieve that status. Women to this day are frequently judged through a patriarchal scope and they have to maintain standards that do not define what really womanhood is, that do not represent the complexity and variety of the female experience.

Last but not least, the theme of post-partum depression is also discussed in *Black Milk*. After giving birth Elif faces a severe form of post-partum depression, that not only made her question her abilities of being a mother, but also her creative skills, because she could not write anymore. Post-partum depression is a taboo subject in patriarchal societies, mainly because women *must* love motherhood, is what they are *meant to do*, but living a life that does not conform to your internal needs and aspirations can be disruptive

and destructive. As Elif Shafak describes the first months of motherhood, and how she let Mama Rice Pudding and Madame Dervish to control her life, she notices that her will to write is gone, and then another character enters her life, Lord Poton, the djinn of post-partum depression. Once he makes his presence known all the other voices are shut off. As the depression deepens, she starts isolating herself, Eyup was gone to finish his mandatory military practice and Elif was all alone trying to figure out what is motherhood to her: "One morning in November when I wake up, I sense a strange presence in the room [...] I immediately recognize him as one of the djinn my maternal grandmother warned me against in my childhood"<sup>51</sup>.

Lord Poton, this image of a man-like djinn that imprisons Elif's "harem," trying to convince her that writing is not her calling anymore, could easily symbolize the patriarchal norm. Lord Poton could have met Firuze and could have easily crushed her dreams, he could have been there when Sophia Tolstoy was (re)writing Tolstoy's manuscripts, or it could have been the voice that made Sylvia Plath question her abilities to be a writer and a mother. He embodies the post-partum depression, "as the lord of the djinn, he is estimated to appear to one out of ten new mothers, [u]sually he pays his first visit within four to six weeks after the delivery"<sup>52</sup>. In the chapter *Lord Poton and You* Elif Shafak puts together a test that might reveal the chances of meeting Lord Poton, ending the questionnaire with three likely possibilities:

*If your answers were overwhelmingly A:*  
You've not only met Lord Poton but you may already consider him your

best friend. Call your doctor immediately and get help.

*If your answers were overwhelmingly B:*  
Your self-esteem is not at its highest and you show signs of passive-aggressive behaviour. Be on guard. Lord Poton may knock on your door at any moment.

*If your answers were overwhelmingly C:*  
You don't have to ever worry. Depression is to you like Earth compared to Jupiter. In all likelihood, you will never cross paths with Lord Poton<sup>53</sup>.

Writing about post-partum depression is important, because even though we live in a post-modern world, women still struggle to come at terms with it. Post-partum is still treated as taboo, but choosing to write about it can provide insights on what motherhood really feels like:

As I researched, I understood that it was not only "unhappy" or "unfulfilled" women who suffered from postpartum depression. New mothers of every class, status, religion and temperament were susceptible to it. There were no golden formulas to explain each and every case. Yet, there were a number of causes that triggered the process, such as previous experience with depression, physical health issues during pregnancy, ongoing marital, financial or social problems, lack of cooperation of close relatives and friends, a sudden change in surroundings and so on.<sup>54</sup>

*Black Milk* tells the stories of many important writers that faced the decision between writing and mothering. These

stories give different approaches to what is like being a novelist and a mother at the same time and of how women molded their identities finding a balance between the two callings. She also points out that many, like Muriel Spark, could not. But she gives examples of poets and writers that did not have children, and focused only on writing: Virginia Woolf, Emily Dickinson, Gertrude Stein, Adalet Ağaoğlu and so on. Nevertheless, she also describes Toni Morrison's and Audre Lorde's relationship with motherhood whose works are redefining motherhood.

### Selfhood and Representation

Elif Shafak states that “since early childhood I have believed that an ‘imaginary world’ could be more authentic than the so-called real world”<sup>55</sup> and that “the boundary between what is imaginary and what is real has been, from the very beginning, blurry and permeable”<sup>56</sup>. Thus, *Black Milk* explores not only issues about motherhood and writing, but also distinguishes between what is real and what is not. Another aspect that was explored in the book is the relationship with her origins, even if she stated that “there was an identity given to me at birth – a nationality, a religion, a class, a culture, a gender... But in the abyss of stories, this identity, no matter how solid and secure it seemed, began to evaporate”<sup>57</sup>, it still defines a great part of her writings. Elif Shafak's identity reflects a post-modern world, defined by plural-perspectives and an intersection between different selves. She even stated that “[m]igrations, ruptures and displacements... have played a crucial role in my personal history”<sup>58</sup>, as she found herself moving between two

“utterly different worlds”<sup>59</sup>. In addition to this, when she moved with her mother in Madrid, she faced another type of cultural shock:

It is there that I learned about hierarchy of nationalities, about an unwritten hierarchy even children knew about and were perhaps more cruel in expressing. Being Dutch or English, for instance, was most prestigious. An Indian girl and I in the class were the lowest ranks. [...] There are lots of other examples but the underlying pattern is the same: you are associated with your nationality. I have also observed how foreigners cling to their religious or national identities as a reaction to this process of “otherization”. In a way, the more they are “othered” because of their national background, the more they glue themselves to it.<sup>60</sup>

This quote reflects a very important point of view, while it underlines the fact that her identity is strongly defined by this feeling of otherness, it also symbolizes the possibilities to adapt to any situation, having a greater understanding of the world. I shall also point out another essential quote that clarifies the internal conflict depicted in *Black Milk*, as Elif Shafak mentioned that:

Family, home, nationality... the ways in which we define and categorize these terms are deeply interrelated. I myself have never been raised in a family structure, never had a solid notion of home and was never happy with the national identity or religious labels attached to me. It astonishes me

to see how people so wholeheartedly advocate the values of the systems in which they were born, without giving serious thought to one simple fact about life: had they been born into that, rather than this family, they would be equally eager to propagate the values of some other religion, other nationality, race and ethnicity from which they distance themselves so harshly now.<sup>61</sup>

In *Black Milk* the reader can understand this position very clearly, but there is also a sense of conflict, because as she tries to define herself as a woman, mother and writer, she finds it hard to waver between all these facets of identity, this is why the “Chorus of Discordant Voices” appears. However, she states that the very different aspects of the Thumbelinas are also what define her identity: “I am a writer. I am a nomad. I am cosmopolite. I am a lover of Sufism. I am a pacifist. I am a vegetarian and I am a woman, more or less in that order”<sup>62</sup>.

Representation is one of the most important aspects that should be taken into account, as we try to comprehend the post-modern or the post-post-modern human being. For centuries identities were and still are divided into marginal and central identities. The marginal identity or “the Other” was studied from a Eurocentric point of view, often viewed as an exotic or unusual form of expression, many non-heteronormative/non-patriarchal identities found themselves stereotyped and controlled, labelled as “Other.” *Black Milk* offers this perspective from the *inside*, a feeling of *in-betweenness*, and it also signifies the voice of many mothers that maybe had put their aspirations aside. Even though

“autobiography is by definition particular, not general; and though autobiographers may tend to generalize from their experiences, plausibly or not, the genre does not aspire to the breadth of historical or social studies”<sup>63</sup>, Elif Shafak illustrated the many different aspects of female identity. The parts in which she fictionalized the “harem within” reflected the complexity of womanhood. As the patriarchal order dictates social norms and attributions for both women and men, Elif Shafak argues that the experiences that she describes cannot be simply put into concepts given by the patriarchy. Throughout *Black Milk* Elif Shafak continues to create a vision of a self, placed between reality and fictionality, a reflection on the role of the multitudes defining oneself. Furthermore, the “harem within” describes the tension between historical-cultural experience and authentic female experience, as even though the women complement each other, they symbolize the spectrum of female identity. The “harem within” is a form a liberation, as it empowers women to accept every part of their identities in order to live their lives free of social constructs. This “Chorus of Discordant Voices” is representative for “all the thing any woman aspires to have: to be practical, spiritual, educated and powerful”<sup>64</sup>. Thus, *Black Milk* attempts to outline the complexity of female identity, it seeks to understand womanhood and motherhood through a woman’s point of view, outside of what is known about being a woman.

### Conclusion

**B**lack Milk offers an insightful perspective on issues that are considered taboo, some may be generalized, but every

single one of them intersects with one important aspect – being a woman. Although it is unclear if this novel is an autobiography or an autofiction, as I previously stated I would prefer the term *self-narration*, and going a little further than that I would like to think that this book also works as a manifesto. Elif Shafak's feminist perspective is undoubtedly evident in her attempt of understanding feminine experience, because it is “set out to break *both* taboos – those surrounding the experiences of the mothers and the non-mothers”<sup>65</sup>.

While trying to understand the mechanism of the text and the ways in which it works, I would like to add the fact *Black Milk* changes the focus from the patriarchal order, encouraging women to question the norms and the “natural” order of things. As Pam Morris stated, “women are taught to think as men, to identify with a male point of view, and to accept as normal and legitimate a male system of values, one of whose central principles is misogyny”<sup>66</sup>, but in *Black Milk* the readers enter a world dominated by the woman-gaze, more exactly a non-patriarchal world. Of course, to say that *Black Milk* does not sometimes reflect the norms of the patriarchal world would be amiss, but what's crucial about this novel is that it represents resistance, empowerment and redefinition, because “women readers as much as women writers seem to desire the sense of community that comes from ‘encountering in another woman's voice what they believed [is] the sound of their own’”<sup>67</sup>. But the main reason why *Black Milk* shall be studied from a feminist point of view is because it encourages women to write and talk about motherhood, to question what being a woman means, and it gives them different approaches and understandings

that womanhood could never be defined by the patriarchal norms, because it is as vast as every single female experience.

As the construction of self takes place, we must take into account the fact that “subjectivity has to be constructed in relation to objectivity: for a sense of ‘me’ to be conceived there has to be a sense of a separate ‘other’”<sup>68</sup>. Elif Shafak creates through her “harem” an “I” reflecting of “a polyvalent play of the multiple possibilities of self: ‘I’ and ‘you’ not ‘I’ or ‘you’”<sup>69</sup>. Thus, identity cannot be defined through a single definition, but by a pluralized one. Elif Shafak's feminist discourse clearly underlines the need of representation and exploring womanhood and mother subjects through a female point of view. *Black Milk* increases attention to the importance of exploring female experience, maternal authority, and women's authority and it also describes aspects that women are taught not to question or discuss further.

Nonetheless, *Black Milk* takes the reader through different sides of the spectrum, questions every part of identity, constantly trying to (re)define it and (re)construct it. The fact that Elif Shafak is a feminist must enable the conversation around feminist motherhood or as the feminist scholars call it, “mothering.” As motherhood is still a “given” choice for many women around the world, exploring the anxieties, the fears, and the inconsistencies of our societies, which enforce gender norms that will only reflect an oppressor-victim relationship. Elif Shafak through her own experience and the experience of other women writers is giving a voice to a group that was marginalised and taken out of their rightful place (even if it is the literary canon or the family).

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