



Portrayal Of Gender Disguise And Identity Struggle In Exile: A Postcolonial Study On Elif Shafak's *The Architects Apprentice*

T. SHAINISHA, PhD Research Scholar, Department of English, Thiruvalluvar University, Vellore, Tamil Nadu.

Dr. M. KANNADHASAN, Assistant Professor, Department of English, Thiruvalluvar University, Vellore, Tamil Nadu

Abstract:

The paper aims to represent the concept of gender disguise and identity struggle through the character of Yusuf, one of Sinan's apprentice in the novel *The Architect's Apprentice* written by Elif Shafak. The novel mirrors the broader historical realities of exiled subjects whose gendered and cultural identities become sites of negotiation and struggle in Ottoman society. The paper examines Yusuf's journey through a postcolonial theoretical lens, analyzing how exile disrupts and reshapes identity. Modern refugee crises are paralleled by Yusuf's exile in *The Architect's Apprentice*. These events highlight how marginalized individuals navigate displacement, oppression, and survival in a restrictive society. The paper highlights how exile fosters both loss and transformation. The paper argues that gender disguise not only serves as a preventive strategy but also reveals profound tensions between personal identity and societal expectations.

Keywords: Gender Disguise, Identity struggle, Exile, Postcolonialism, Elif Shafak.

Gender disguise refers to the act of purposely hiding one's assigned gender at birth by behavior, speech, social roles, and varying on different purposes, including access to opportunity, self-presentation, resistance against societal norms, or subversion of rigid gender binaries. Identity struggle describes the contemporary conflict between the personal identity and societal expectations that mostly emerge in the situation of oppression, marginalization or displacement. According to Homi Bhabha "identity is not fixed but is constantly negotiated in third spaces, where cultural and societal influences intersect" (Bhabha 37). Gender disguise can be seen as a form of hybridity, where individuals adopt different gender roles to navigate oppressive structures.

Elif Shafak is a prominent Turkish-British novelist, recognised as the most widely read female author in Turkey. She received prestigious awards including the Booker Prize 2019, the Halldór Laxness International Literature Prize 2021 and the Women's Prize for Fiction 2022. Shafak's novels explore themes intensely rooted in Turkish history, culture and identity. Her blend of historical narratives with contemporary themes has made her an influential voice in both Turkish and global literary circles.

The Architect's Apprentice 2013 was shortlisted for RSL Ondaatje Prize. The novel is set in the Ottoman Empire during the 16th century, particularly in the vibrant city of Istanbul, which was the heart of the Empire. Most of her novels are set in Istanbul because of its cultural diversity. Shafak has a profound emotional and intellectual bond with Istanbul, often describing it as both beautiful and melancholic.

The story follows Jahan, an Indian boy who arrives in Istanbul under false pretences as a caretaker of chota, a white elephant gifted to Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent. While caring for the elephant he captivates the attention of Mimar Sinan, who recognizes his talent and recruits him as an apprentice. Under Sinan's mentorship, Jahan and three other apprentices Davud, Nikola and Yusuf learn the intricacies of architecture while contributing to the construction of some of the Ottoman Empire's most magnificent buildings, including mosques, bridges and aqueducts. Later Jahan navigates the political intrigues of the palace, war and love.

The presentation of human lives in all of their manifestations on a larger scale via language is called literature. Despite cultural, sociological, political, and geographic barriers, there are similarities in the content, style, concerns, and writing forms of twentieth-century literature from countries such as America, England, Africa, Australia, India, and the Commonwealth. The entire world appears to have become a single global village. Every practice and trend found in international literature is common. (Dr. M Kannadhasan 65)

Yusuf is the chief apprentice to master Sinan appearing as a quiet, reserved individual and mentioned as mute apprentice which adds an air of mystery throughout the novel. The preference to remain silent serves as both protection and symbolic representation of the silencing of women in history. Yusuf reveals his true identity to Jahan that his name was Sancha.

Sancha loses her family due to plague and experience isolation. Though her father was an educated man, adheres to the patriarchal belief that women are not capable of learning medicine which reflects the colonial and patriarchal knowledge system that marginalize women and decline them to access intellectual fields. "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, psychic, or economic destiny defines the figure that the human female takes on in society" (Beauvoir 283). The voices and intellectual pursuits of women are often suppressed under dominant structures. "The subaltern cannot speak" (Spivak 14).

Due to her father's declining health she was forcibly sent to meet her distant cousin and the ship was captured by pirates. Her journey is marked by involuntary displacement as she is taken from her homeland, enslaved and forcibly incorporated into Ottoman society. Later she was sold to a court musician whose wives tormented her everyday highlights how oppression is internalized. She was converted to Islam and named Nergiz illustrate colonial control over identity and religion.

Sancha was forced into a new identity but she secretly sketches Christian symbols, resisting complete assimilation which reflects hybridity, where the colonized subject navigates multiple cultural influences, neither fully belonging to the oppressor's world nor their original one. "The musician explained to Sinan that it belong to a concubine of his, a young damsel, though no longer a virgin, pretty as sunshine, whom he was happy to give to Sinan as a gift" (Shafak 320). The musician gives Sancha as a gift to Sinan which underscores how women, particularly in colonial and patriarchal system are commodified and traded as objects. "Women are usually the creatures of a male power fantasy. They express unlimited sensuality, they are more or less stupid, and above all they are willing" (Said 207).

The Ottoman society maintains rigid gender role, as a female captive her fate would be a concubinage, servitude or subjugation. She cuts her hair short and wears a boy's clothes to gain agency in the male dominated society. "Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears" (Spivak 102). She, disguised as a man named Yusuf, reflects a survival strategy shaped by exile. Her transformation challenges the binary understanding of gender, emphasizing exile as a space of fluidity rather than fixity. "She was his apprentice. She was his

concubine. She was his slave. And she was no older than his daughter. Yet Yusuf Nergiz Sancha Garcia de Hurrera, a soul who carried too many names in her slender body” (Shafak 322).

When Yusuf spoke for first time to save Sinan from accident reveals her true identity to everyone around here. “There is a hunsa among us, someone who was half woman, half man, forever stuck in limbo. The possibility that Yusuf was a woman had not occurred to anyone” (Shafak 354). This reinforces the idea that colonized and displaced individuals are forced to exist in liminal spaces where their identities are constantly questioned and reconstructed. She was forced to return to her life as a concubine reflects the limited agency afforded to women. “She had gone back to the life she abhorred: the life of a concubine” (Shafak 354). This reveals the oppressive structures that determine women’s fate within patriarchal systems.

After Sinan's death his wife gave freedom to Sancha which represents the delayed and conditional liberation of the colonized subjects. She struggle with her identity whether she is Sancha, Yusuf the builder, or Nergiz the concubine. She dressed as women and wore a headdress which reflects her origin and perhaps of desire to embrace that part of her identity. “A lad who was a girl, a mute with the gift of speech, a concubine yet an architect, she had lived a life of lies and layers - no less than Jahan” (Shafak 374).

Sancha experiences a deep sense of displacement and identity crisis. “It's been very long time since I was torn from my father’s land that I’m a stranger to their ways now” (Shafak 376). It indicates that time and distance have eroded her connection to both her homeland and the new land she inhabits. This reflects the postcolonial concept of hybridity, where individuals exist between cultures without fully belonging to either leaving them in a state of perpetual exile.

Sancha was ready to leave Istanbul and shedding of her feminine identity, preferred her apprenticeship clothes. “Make sure nobody finds out you’re a woman” (Shafak 377). She rejected the wealth given by Kayra as an attempt to reclaim an authentic self beyond material or social markers imposed by colonial and gendered oppression. “The social articulation of difference, from the minority perspective, is a complex, on-going negotiation that seeks to authorize cultural hybridity that emerges in moments of historical transformation” (Bhabha 2). The duality reflects the experience of many colonized people who must negotiate between erasure and adaptation to survive.

Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted. And while it is true that literature and history contain heroic, romantic, glorious, even triumphant episodes in an exile’s life, these are no more than efforts meant to overcome the crippling sorrow of estrangement. The achievements of exile are permanently undermined by the loss of something left behind forever (Said 180).

Like many exile figures in literature, Yusuf encounters an unbreakable rift between it's homeland and self. After being captured and displaced by pirates Yusuf undergoes continuous identity reinvention first as Sancha, next Nergiz and finally Yusuf which reflects exile's instability. Yusuf's loss of her original self remains unresolved, her achievements are shadowed by estrangement, focusing on exile's psychological and emotional toll.

Historical figures such as Hua Mulan, who disguised herself as a man to take her father’s place in the army, and Deborah Sampson, who served in the Continental Army during the American Revolutionary War under the name Robert Shurtliff and fought in several battles. Like Yusuf, Hua Mulan and Deborah Sampson navigate patriarchal societies by assuming male roles, revealing how gender fluidity enables access to opportunities traditionally denied to women. Even today, many refugee women adopt similar survival strategies, altering their appearance by cutting their hair short and dressing as men to avoid gender-based violence, forced marriage, and other forms of persecution. “Every single one is unique from

the others. Every individual has a unique perspective on the world, a unique set of experiences, and a unique style of acting out their roles” (Dr. M. Kannadhasan 65).

Yusuf's character in *The Architect's Apprentice* represents both historical and contemporary women who have altered their identities or disguised themselves as men as a survival strategy and a means of gaining agency in patriarchal societies. By assuming the identity of a mute male apprentice, Yusuf navigates the complexities of identity, exile, and survival within the Ottoman Empire. Future scope of study where the novel can be analyzed through feminist perspective which symbolizes the struggle of women to break free from gendered oppression and also advocating for women's autonomy, and reshaping gender roles.

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