

GENRE EXPERIMENT IN ASIA: A CIXOUSIAN READING OF ELIF SHAFAK'S MEMOIR, *BLACK MILK*

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the narration and point of view in Elif Shafak's memoir, *Black Milk*, which deviates from the traditional, self-centred narrative structure of the genre. Shafak employs various techniques to create a more diverse form of narration, which, in some aspects, overlaps with Hélène Cixous's principles of feminine writing. Her memoir not only recounts personal memories but also engages with broader themes and voices, creating a narrative that extends beyond the individual self. A similar trend is also observable in some Malaysian writers, such as Shih-Li Kow, who employs various tools to write her experimental novel, *The Sum of Our Follies*. This inclusive approach in writing can be understood through the lens of Cixous's ideas, which challenge conventional writing forms and allow different voices and texts to interact. This article argues that Shafak has written her memoir by adapting Western theories of memoir writing to demonstrate her own experimental and personal writing strategies, which reflect her cultural background. This approach serves as a reminder of Cixous' definition of feminine writing, and I believe some traces of it are also observable in other Asian female writers, such as in Kow's novel.

Keywords: Experimental writing, Memoir, Feminine writing, Genre

INTRODUCTION

The universal notion of literature becomes apparent in the way writers from different parts of the world employ similar literary theories and tools in an attempt to craft a personal text that is compatible with their respective societies and cultures. These modifications can be seen in the attempts of Asian writers to craft texts that convey their perspectives on the world and literature in relation to their cultural backgrounds. The Turkish writer Elif Shafak uses certain literary tools and an innovative narrative form to write her pregnancy memoir, *Black Milk*, while Shih-Li Kow, from Malaysia, also personalises some well-known literary techniques in her novel, *The Sum of Our Follies*, to depict her view of Malaysia through a literary form.

To investigate how Shafak has crafted her memoir, examining the definitions and history of autobiographical writing is helpful. In *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, Abrams (2011) defines this genre as follows:

Autobiography is a biography written by the subject about himself or herself. It is to be distinguished from the memoir, in which the emphasis is not on the author's developing self but on the people and events that the author has known or witnessed, and also from the private diary or journal, which is a day-to-day record of the events in one's life, written for personal use and satisfaction, with little or no thought of publication. (p. 27)

Abrams (2011) also mentions that “the distinction between autobiography and fiction has become more and more blurred” in recent years (p. 28), with significant changes in self-writing topics. Abrams brings examples of early autobiographical writings calling them “spiritual histories of the self” mentioning that a discovery of a person’s Christian identity was one of the first topics in writing an autobiographical text while later on the topics changed to a discovery of some one’s artistic and philosophical selves, and autobiography has even become a text that mingles facts and fiction (2011, p. 28). However, in the 1980s, feminist critics also noticed that women did not have enough share of texts in the autobiography canon (Bose, 2020, p. 26), and that is why they claimed their territory in genres that were considered less significant, “like the memoirs, journals, diaries and other modes of private writings” (Bose, 2020, p. 30). Even though the conventional memoir is supposed to be about “the people and events that the author has known and witnessed” (Abrams, 2011, p. 27), in recent theories, memoir writing is no longer concerned merely with the past; instead, it is a way to shape the self (Bose, 2020, p. 11) and in my opinion *Black Milk* goes beyond this definition by reshaping not only the feminine self in the memoir but also the genre of memoir writing into an inclusive space.

Shafak has transformed the form of memoir writing by blending various forms of self-writing and interweaving fictional voices with her genuine feelings during her pregnancy and postpartum depression. She challenges Western and Turkish cultures by juxtaposing them to find her own approach to mothering, blending Eastern and Western ideas. Meaning that she uses experimental writing and literary form to express her view of the world. Moreover, by creating a fictional writer and referencing the life stories of other female writers, Shafak shifts the viewpoint and continually moves between different cultures and ideas. On the other hand, Kow employs some well-established narrative tools of novel writing, such as shifting the viewpoint and blending cultural and historical facts with fiction. However, these tools are localised so that she can depict different layers of Malaysian life in a small town and the destiny of men and women living in it.

In this article , I argue that *Black Milk* is a fictional memoir about pregnancy that presents diverse perspectives on the subject through both its form and context. This way of writing, I believe, is how Asian writers take ownership of some Western literary theories by using them to demonstrate, criticise, and even appreciate their own culture.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this article, I aim to explore how experimental writing can transform literary genres and create new spaces within literary forms for diverse voices and cultures. Since experimental writing can be defined in many different ways, I have chosen Cixous’s ‘L’écriture Féminine, which translates as ‘Writing the Feminine’ or ‘Feminine Writing’ and is defined as an experimental way of writing which resists the predefined rules. To Cixous (1991), the predefined fixed literary forms are the “capitalist-realist Superuncle”, who is in favour of repetition and only by following him can one get the license to become a writer (p. 33). On the contrary, she claims the only way to write is by disobeying this “capitalist-realist Superuncle” and finding a way to personalise literature and avoid repetition. Critics such as Barbara Bachner and Pamela A. Turner have examined various texts written by Cixous, demonstrating that she employs a similar approach by blending literary theory with fiction and utilising language to transform writing into a performative act on paper.

Shafak’s pregnancy memoir, titled *Black Milk*, explores her uncertainties about motherhood and the challenges she faced in becoming a mother, including her sufferings from postpartum depression. Therefore, this study challenges Clanchy’s (2013) interpretation of *Black Milk* as a simplistic portrayal of motherhood, as Shafak’s memoir offers a complex

exploration of diverse perspectives on the subject, which were successfully brought together in an alternative method of memoir writing. As a result of her unique perspective on the genre, Shafak is able to reference other women writers and thinkers, making a narrative that encompasses the experiences of creative women in general (Benenhaley, 2014, p. 30). By presenting a range of ideas about marriage and motherhood while striving to maintain a neutral tone (Maughan, 2013, p. 42), *Black Milk* has the ability to resonate with a wide range of readers and exemplifies Cixous's notion that the personal history of a female writer is intertwined with public history (Cixous, 1976, p. 882), thus rendering it both essential and impactful. Moreover, in an effort to counteract the "alienation of women from literary history and literary canon," Shafak introduces an imaginary female poet named Firooze, whose story resembles that of Shakespeare's sister described by Woolf (Malak, 2016, p. 1948). Shafak blends fact and fiction in her narrative, embracing a pluralistic understanding of womanhood and mothering.

The scholarship on Shih-Li Kow focuses on her depiction of small towns and their cultural heritage as identity makers (Hung Chuang, 2021, p. 170), while they struggle to survive in the modern global context (Leon, 2014, p. 226). There are also readings of how she uses food as an indicator of different aspects of a society (Jaafar, 2022, p. 308). Furthermore, in agreement with our idea that Asian writers like Kow take ownership of Western philosophies through cultural adjustments, Khoshsaifa (2021) believes that Kow has written her novel practising the newly blossomed Western theories of 'power Feminism' (p. 32). Kow also discusses her approach to writing the novel in an interview with Daphnee Lee, noting that it "sits mid-way between a collection of short stories and a novel." Although the focus of scholarship on the way Kow writes about personal and public Malaysian identity is noticeable, it is also evident that she employs narrative tools to overcome the shortcomings of a genre in discussing East Asian culture.

In *Black Milk*, Shafak offers a personal account of her experience with pregnancy, adapting the conventional memoir writing format to better serve her own ideas and reflections. In a comparable way, Shih-Li Kow makes similar adjustments when writing her novel, creating an alternative form that can carry the layered realities of Malaysian culture. The focus, then, is not on deciding which of these authors writes in a manner more closely aligned with Cixous, but on recognising how three writers from three distinct cultural backgrounds draw on related strategies to express their own understandings of literary form.

METHOD

Writing experimental texts instead of following the Western traditions of writing in certain genres is how Asian women personalise literature. In order to show that women from different Asian countries use rather similar techniques to form their experimental texts, I will read Shafak's *Black Milk* and also bring the example of Shih-Li Kow's novel *The Sum of Our Follies*, since the scholarship on both writers indicates the novelties they have created in the genre they have chosen to write their texts. Moreover, Shafak and Kow's approach shares much with the texts Cixous most admires—works that break away from the rules imposed by what she calls the Capitalist-realist superuncle, who insists that every writer must conform. In shaping their chosen genres, both Shafak and Kow seem to echo Cixous's advice that women who write should recognise they "owe nothing to the past" or to the law (Cixous, 1991, p. 40). This idea can be further illuminated through Cixous et.al (1976) well-known essay "The Laugh of the Medusa," where she explores the possibility of reshaping literary space and structure in ways that defy convention.

... fly the coop, take pleasure in jumbling the order of space, in disorienting it, in changing around the furniture, dislocating things and values, breaking them all up, emptying structures, and turning propriety upside down. (p. 887)

That is to say irrespective of how novels or memoirs have been traditionally defined within long-standing literary canons, women writers are urged to develop and trust their own methods of crafts(wo)manship in order to realise their creative intentions. Such an approach does not merely challenge convention for the sake of rebellion; rather, it allows the work to emerge from a place that is rooted in the writer's own cultural memory, personal history, and instinctive sense of form. In her interview, Kow remarks that Malaysian—and, by extension, Asian—writers and readers should strive to “unlearn” the literary education that has shaped their approach to reading, admiring, and measuring literature mainly through the lens of European and American traditions. Instead, she argues, they ought to concentrate on “real experiences, emotional responses and certain preferences, which have developed over time and less by things like structure.” What she proposes is a recalibration of priorities: the emphasis shifts away from adherence to imported structural expectations and towards the subtler truths that emerge from one's own lived experiences.

Paraphrasing Shafak's idea and applying it to literary form, Shafak's statement becomes an explicit call to dismantle the inherited architecture of genres—whether in structure, tone, or narrative expectation—in order to create space for one's authentic voice to be heard. The underlying principle in these reflections is strikingly similar: whether the issue at stake is political discourse, the formal qualities of a novel, or the memory-work of a memoir, the writer's task is to resist passively accepting rules and traditions that originate outside their own cultural, historical, or personal experiences. In bringing together the insights of these Asian writers and scholars, what emerges is a shared commitment to redefining literature on terms that belong to them, and not to anyone else.

Therefore, through what Cixous defines as experiencing “lack of structure” (Cixous, 1991, p. 76), Shafak and Know create new spaces for different genres. The narrative tools they use to alternate genres share many similarities with Cixous' demands in her article. Shafak and Kow's way of disorienting and changing around the furniture is by mixing fact and fiction; to dislocate values, they narrate the story from different viewpoints, giving voice to a variety of characters with different backgrounds and including public culture along with personal experiences, which is how they turn the propriety upside down. As a result, Shafak's memoir is no longer a traditionally correct memoir, as it also includes biographies of other writers, excerpts from her pregnancy journal, and the fictitious character of a female poet from the Middle East. Similarly, Kow's novel is set in Malaysia but is about an imaginary city, and the two narrators are from different races and not even from the city they describe.

Hence, women writers like Kow and Shafak not only contributed to achievements in literature but also established their own literary and political achievements in a more impactful and insightful manner that reflects their life experiences.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Personalising or localising Western literary and philosophical theories is the only way to make them accessible and understandable to people from diverse cultural and social backgrounds. However, these kinds of adjustments need to be done in the form of literary texts as well as their content, since structural alterations can open up certain spaces in different genres that enable writers to create dialogues between East and West, criticising or showing appreciation for different parts of the cultural settings. The aim of this article is to draw the readers' attention to the tools Shafak uses to write her pregnancy memoir by creating a dialogue

between different genres and viewpoints. Acknowledging that women's life experiences influence their writing, I intentionally focus on the form of writing for two different reasons. Firstly, I have already published an article on Elif Shafak and Jeanette Winterson's memoirs, "Representing M(other): A Cixousian Reading of Memoirs Written by Jeanette Winterson and Elif Shafak," which focuses on the content of these books and how the writers represent the mother. Secondly, I aim to demonstrate that Cixous's feminist ideas on literature are applicable both formally and contextually and to different genres written by different writers. On another note, since Kow is also trying to write a novel that incorporates Malaysian culture into its fabric and in an interview, she points out that *The Sum of Our Follies* is neither a collection of short stories nor a novel in its traditional sense, I believe that female Asian writers, like Shafak and Kow, are in favour of taking ownership of different genres by adapting literary theory to their own benefit.

Cixous (2005) believes we "need two for point of view to function," (p. 32) since with only one viewpoint, truth will be lost. This idea affects the form of memoir writing greatly since Cixous (1993) also believes the author and the person who writes the book are immensely different and upon meeting that person, we will notice that we are meeting someone else (p. 20). Hence, we can interpret that even the writer's memories are not entirely hers but it is mostly a blur of fact and fiction since the writer is not necessarily her real self while writing her memoir. Playing with different viewpoints and writing a mixture of fact and fiction is one of the prominent elements in Shafak's memoir.

In Shafak's memoir, *Black Milk*, she employs a variety of narrative tools, which introduce different viewpoints, to convey her experiences. The book begins with Elif's encounter with a woman, which inspires her to write "The Manifesto of the Single Woman," declaring her dedication to literature and her decision not to marry (Shafak, 2011, p. 23). However, despite her initial conviction, she later becomes pregnant, introducing a new element to her self-writing: her pregnancy diary (Shafak, 2011, p. 115), consisting of selectively chosen weekly entries that reflect time gaps in Shafak's pregnancy diary since women tend to narrate what seems important to them instead of following a chronological order of events (McLeay, 2004, p. 36). After giving birth, she personifies her experience of postpartum depression as a fantastic character called Lord Poton and creates a family tree for him, exploring the complex emotions women may face after childbirth in a chapter titled "Lord Poton and His Family" (Shafak, 2011, p. 145). Furthermore, in the chapter "Lord Poton and You," she presents a questionnaire designed for women who have recently given birth, assessing the likelihood of their encounters with Lord Poton (p. 146). The table of contents in *Black Milk* reflects the adjustments Shafak has made to the nature of the memoir, incorporating elements of biography, memoir, and manifesto, alongside the inclusion of a family tree and a questionnaire. Time gaps, references to other writers, and the fantasy of Elif's finger-women, who represent different versions of herself, further contribute to the memoir's rich and diverse narrative tapestry indicating that Elif's viewpoint of a single woman in the beginning of the book changes to the viewpoint of a mother struggling with postpartum depression.

Shafak also incorporates elements of fantasy into her memoir, providing a second viewpoint that complements the realistic aspects of memoir writing when Ms. Agaoglu asks, "Do you think a woman could manage motherhood and a career at the same time and equally well?" (Shafak, 2011, p. 30). This question prompts Shafak to delve into her internal Harem, a metaphorical space within herself, where she encounters various versions of her 'self'/ plural identity represented as finger-women. These characters, such as Little Miss Practical, Dame Dervish, Miss Highbrowed Cynic, Milady Ambitious Chekhovian, Mama Rice Pudding, Blue Belle Bovary, and Lord Poton (p. 39), reside within her and play significant roles in her pregnancy memoir. By intertwining her personal life story with the narrative of these fantastic characters, Shafak (2014) introduces complexity and challenges traditional memoir writing

conventions, and that is why Boşoiu classifies *Black Milk* as an auto-fictional novel (p. 112). The presence of the finger-women initiates a dialogue between the realms of fantasy and reality within Shafak's pregnancy memoir, illustrating the transformation of traditional memoir writing through questioning who the real Elif Shafak is, which one of these finger women is her true self or is it possible that she is even someone else and there are more of these finger women, she has yet to discover?

Even though Shafak's memoir is introduced as a memoir on "postpartum depression," Clanchy (2013) notes that most of the book delves into Elif's inner dilemma of becoming a mother, with only "a few pages, in one of the final chapters," actually addressing the illness. Meaning that she writes about everything that led to the specific event or theme instead of just elaborating on what she has achieved or how she has overcome the difficulties of that certain situation, which is another method of altering a memoir through introducing two completely different topics: First her struggles of accepting her motherly side, and then overcoming the depression that follows.

To elaborate on the idea of diversity of voices or what Cixous calls introducing different viewpoints replacing what Abrams defines as a memoir in its traditional sense, I can refer to how in *Black Milk*, Shafak explores the ideas of various female writers, including Virginia Woolf, Zelda Sayre Fitzgerald, and the Turkish writer Sevgi Soysal, among others, focusing on their perspectives on marriage, childbearing, and their relationships with partners and children. She takes a "neutral" stance towards their choices, respecting the different paths and lifestyles they have embraced (Maughan, 2013, p. 42). Through engagement with all these women's ideas, Shafak constructs a personal literary canon that incorporates the names of women from diverse backgrounds, highlighting their insights on marriage and motherhood as she seeks to define herself as a woman. Consequently, her memoir becomes intricately connected to the biographies and writings of these women, resulting in a division of the text into two parts, from two points of view: essays on different feminist voices (literary references) and the narrative of Elif's finger-women (fantasy) (Boşoiu, 2014, p. 114). This interplay of fantasy and literature enables Shafak's life story to exchange ideas with other texts and writers, further enriching the tapestry of her memoir.

Shafak skilfully integrates other texts into *Black Milk* by crafting a parallel narrative inspired by Woolf's "Shakespeare's sister." Shafak begins the chapter "A Talented Sister" with a clear and direct reference to the question Woolf poses about women's destiny at the time of Shakespeare, if they chose to pursue a writing career. Then she concludes that "[f]rom the very beginning, the opportunities presented to Shakespeare will be barred from Judith" (Shafak, 2011, p. 31). Despite the conclusion, to initiate her textual conversation with Woolf, Shafak decides to localise Woolf's story by applying her "critical question to the Middle East" (Shafak, 2011, p. 31). In Shafak's story, set in Turkey, she introduces Firuze, a curious and talented girl who harbours a secret love for storytelling and poetry (p. 33). Despite her evident talent, Firuze is tragically forced into marriage, leaving her dreams and poems behind (p. 34). The tale of Firuze mirrors the tragic fate of Shakespeare's fictional sister, as in her old age, Firuze can no longer recall the words she once wrote (p. 34). Malak (2016) suggests that Shafak uses Firuze to highlight how women's talents have been squandered due to unfavourable social conditions (p. 1950) and the lack of "literary foremothers" (p. 1949). By incorporating Firuze into her memoir, Shafak not only references Woolf's work as a literary foremother but also introduces an imaginary character who embodies the poet she could never become in real life. In this way, Shafak's textual space resonates with Woolf's, featuring a female poet who exists within the realm of the text, if only fleetingly. Thus, Shafak's memoir on motherhood is crafted using the fictional story of 'Firuze' and references Woolf's ideas on women writers.

Another notable example of Shafak's engagement with other women is evident in her passionate portrayal of Sophia Andreevna Bers in the chapter titled "Moon Woman." Shafak vividly depicts the life of Tolstoy's often-forgotten wife, who bore him thirteen children.

She was like the moon in its phases, glowing against the starry skies. Her body changed every minute of the day, every week, and every month, filling out, rounding up to fullness, and then slimming down only to fill out again. Sophia was a moon woman. (Shafak, 2011, p. 47)

Sophia Andreevna Bers is skilfully represented in Shafak's memoir through the evocative simile of the moon's changing phases. This comparison captures the constant transformation of Sophia's body as it undergoes the physical changes of pregnancy, starting with a thin crescent and blooming into a round, full form. Not only is she depicted as a dedicated mother, repeatedly anticipating the arrival of a new baby, but she also takes on the challenging role of Tolstoy's secretary, diligently keeping notes on his literary works. However, history remembers Sophia primarily through the lens of Tolstoy's letters, often portraying her as an annoying wife. In contrast, Shafak presents a different side of Sophia, revealing her growing irritability and showcasing the complexities of her story. By doing so, Shafak disrupts the traditional hierarchy that focuses solely on Tolstoy's struggles while disregarding the challenges faced by his wife. In this way, Shafak's portrayal of Sophia contributes to her creation of a feminine space in the text, serving as a powerful reminder of the forgotten women whose stories deserve recognition.

Hence, I claim that *Black Milk* is a mixture of Shafak's pregnancy story, along with stories of many others, introducing motherhood from more than just her own viewpoint — whether real or fictitious — that are gathered together to challenge not only the patriarchal view of pregnancy but also the convention of memoir writing. This type of space corresponds to more contemporary notions of memoir writing in which the writer "delve[s] into the appropriation of their respective mediums while embracing the artistic freedom in its entirety" (Goswami, 2020, p. 101). It also aligns with Cixous' (1991) theory of writing with "No law. No grammar, Spelling once a month. No knowledge. Above all, no knowledge. Writing diplomas: none. Affiliations: none. Models: zero. The infinite" (p. 36). The space Shafak has created in her memoir is therefore nothing like how memoir is defined in literary theory, as defined by Abrams; instead, it has been transformed into a personal space ruled by Shafak and her perspective on culture and literary theory.

Kow has employed similar narrative tools in writing her novel, *The Sum of Our Follies*, thereby creating a more familiar space for a Malaysian story to unfold. Firstly, the confrontation of reality and fiction is used to clarify the depiction of Malaysian culture. This confrontation occurs as Kow sets her story in a fictitious small town called Lubok Sayong in Malaysia, utilising real Malaysian food, history, ethnicity, and social class to discuss national identity (Jafaar, 2022, p. 308). Her explanations of the small town are detailed and believable (Leon, 2014, p. 226). Meaning that even though the small town does not exist but the people and their behaviour and cultural background are realistic, or as Kow put it in her interview, *The Sum of Our Follies* then stands somewhere in between being a real or fictitious story.

The second interesting tool that Kow uses insightfully is the novel's point of view. Two very different characters are chosen as narrators: Auyong, an elderly Chinese man, and Mary Ann, a young Eurasian girl, who, as Leon (2014) correctly claims, creates "a layered and multiple perspective in the novel" (p. 227). I also believe that these two voices serve as representatives of the multilayered cultural and racial mixture in Malaysia, telling the story from the viewpoints of two different characters with diverse backgrounds, races, and genders. Kows also reflects her feminist views by giving a humorous tone to her female characters and even prioritising their voice (Khoshshafa, 2021, p. 32) at times. Thus, it is not difficult to claim that Kow's methods of adjusting novel writing not only affect the structure of her text but also create a suitable space within Malaysian culture for her feminist viewpoints.

Eventually, Cixous' (1991) ideas of feminine writing come to mind: "Listen: you owe nothing to the past, you owe nothing to the law. Gain your freedom: get rid of everything" (p. 40). Considering this quotation and all the above mentioned similarities in the way Shafak and Kow write their text, it can be concluded that even though there have been different adjustments in the way novels and memoirs are written during the years, it is noticeable that some female Asian writers like Shafak and Kow alter the traditions of writing to be able to mirror their own experiences, ideas and situation in order to embrace their individuality instead of following the predefined writing traditions.

CONCLUSION

Although most literary theories originated in the West, some Eastern writers have developed their own approaches to crafting literary genres, transforming their texts into spaces where literary theory is not entirely denied but rather adapted into a more flexible and potentially expansive entity. This is a reminder of Cixous' (1976) suggestion to feminine writers: "Write yourself. Your body must be heard" (p. 880). Hence, the only way to change the rules of the old game set by the capitalist-realist superuncle is through experimental writing, where texts are spaces for female bodies to be heard.

Examining Shafak's memoir *Black Milk*, it is evident that she is attempting to create a dialogue between different genres, narrative tools and viewpoints, as she has her own unique way of telling her pregnancy story by depicting various ideas about the topic and giving voice to many other women writers and fictional characters so that her text goes beyond being just her memories but an effort on experimental writing using different writing techniques that introduces an alternative form of memoir writing. Therefore, her way of writing herself down is through a variety of different textual spaces, including memoir, diary, questionnaires, family trees, and fictional stories. Kow has written herself and her criticism of modernisation, which has created issues for small towns, as well as her feminist approaches in the structure of a novel that is neither realistic nor fictional, with two very different characters as the narrators, which can be a very good representative of the multilayered culture in Malaysia.

Therefore, by examining the Cixousing elements on the form of writing, it is evident that some female Asian writers utilise traditional literary forms and genres, but modify them to create a welcoming space for difference and the acceptance of change. Therefore, the narrative structure of *Black Milk* and *The Sum of Our Follies* can be considered Cixousian, as they welcome difference and break the pore-defined rules of the genres.

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