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THROWING A STONE IN THE LAKE OF MARRIAGE: THE REBELLIOUS WIFE IN ELIF SHAFAK'S *THE FORTY RULES OF LOVE*

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Abstract

Marriage is considered as a sacred union in all the cultures and societies worldwide, the bond of the man and women is thought to be above all the relations people have. In all cultures, it is thought that the wife is expected to bear all the anguish and bad behavior of the male members, whether the husband or the sons, just to keep her family intact. The altruistic mother is the model mother because she endures everything for the well-being of her family. In her novel, *The Forty Rules of Love*, Elif Shafak tells the tale of Ella, a controversial mother, an unhappy American housewife and mother who leaves her husband, kids, and twenty years of marriage and walks away with a stranger. She leaves everything and cuts all the ties with her past and future. In this paper, Ella's departure and the reasons behind it are discussed in accordance with the theory of evolutionary psychology.

Keywords: infidelity, unhappy wife, *The Forty Rules of Love*, betrayal, marriage.

Introduction

As the fairy tales, like Cinderella, go: the beautiful and stress maid is rescued by a young man who takes her away from her griefs and makes her his wife then they live happily ever after, young girls around the world were and are told of this ending of marriage as the happy and ultimate

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ending of a love story. Here the sanctuary of marriage is the shield by which the maiden in stress faces the melancholies of life as a single person while by being a wife she is immune and safe.

Marriage was, and is, regarded by many young women as the final fate and perhaps the haven that some women seek to escape the oppression they might undergo in their families. Girls are brought up in many societies, especially the middle-eastern ones, to be a wife rather than an independent person who can take of herself or live by her own. Unmarried women, no matter how far they go in their education, careers, or business, remain in the eyes of people of their societies as incomplete. Consequently, some of them tend to fill the gap in their entity, which the society sees, by marriage. Women come to enter this institution with many hopes, expectations, and dreams. They expect to find what they were deprived from with the protection of a partner. In some cases, these exceptions and dreams will be shattered under the millstone of reality, the wrong choice, as well as when these women are crushed under the social codes of a society that ignores their rights, disrespects her being, and looks down upon their dreams.

It is well-thought-out that it is the wife's duty to endure, suffer, and undergo all the difficulties in order to keep the well-being of her family and children. In the Eastern society in particular, it is thought that a good wife should tolerate and be patient even if her husband is an abusive man or even if he has no responsibilities against his family as a father and a husband. The altruistic mother is the role model for women in such societies. Yet, some wives, especially with the advent of human rights movements, education, and the spread of media, do not obey any more the typical expectations of them as the sole parent who sacrifices for the sake of the family.

Since the creation of Nora, literature has come with many mutinies made by wives against their roles in the family and against the imposed social codes they are not satisfied with. This essay discusses what drives a wife to be rebellious against the institution of marriage. This is exhibited in accordance with the theory of evolution psychology and in the novel *The Forty Rules* by the Turkish author Elif Shafak.

A Happy Wife?

Shafak in her *The Forty Rules of Love* (March 2009) presents the character of Ella Rubinstein. She is a forty-year-old American wife whose life has been like still waters—a predictable series of routines, necessities, and preferences. She has all the requirements of a comfortable and a luxurious life. Regardless of the fact that her life was monotonous in many times, she had not grown tired of it. Every wish she had, every person she befriended, and every

action she took over the last two decades of her life has been reflected in the mirror of her marriage. According to the standards of many people, David, her husband, is a epitome of the perfect spouse; a successful dentist who puts in long hours and earns a lot of money. On the other hand, deep inside her mind, she knows that what she has for David is not real love, because she thinks love is not the most important emotion in the life of a couple who has been married for two decades.

In his book *The Evolution of Desire*, David Buss asserts: “To maximize the chances of preserving a long-term bond, couples would do well to remain faithful; produce children together; secure ample economic resources; act kind, generous, and understanding; and attend to their mate’s sexual and emotional desires. These actions do not guarantee a successful relationship, but they increase the odds substantially” (p.181). In the novel, David is the ideal husband most women dream of. The idea of the rich, handsome and wealthy husband is implanted in girls’ heads in their early years by the fairy tales, movies, and social media. The fairy tales like Cinderella represents the lives of those few lucky (and beautiful) women who transform from rags to wealth when the prince for their dreams comes along (Lindsey, p.207). Hence, the rich spouse is a fundamental factor for the success of marriage according to the myth. Ella, according to so many people, is a lucky Cinderella to have the man most women dream to be married to, her life with her husband is the actual renovation of a fairy tale. Thus, on the surface Ella and David act as a perfect example of the ideal couple and parents. Yet, she leaves the comfortable life, the ideal husband, her beautiful house, social life, and her lovely kids all behind her back and follows a stranger whom she believes is her true love.

The Unhappy Wife

The image of this happy family is not as good as it seems. Ella is not able to identify what is wrong with her. Ella wants sustain her children’s well-being although she is neither completely satisfied with the life she is leading nor with her husband. Later on, she tells her daughter “Jeannette, I’m sorry for the things I do. I know I shouldn’t complain when I’m so blessed. But it’s just that I’m so … unhappy” (Shafak, p.44). As years pass on, she feels that unhappiness sneaks into her life leaving her desperate and indecisive about the real meaning of her life with David. She known her since her years in college, after marriage, she becomes a housewife and a mother, leaving all dreams of a career behind.

For ages, marriage has been associated with love. There are romantic ideals concerning the man as the head of the family, as the bread giver, and the protector of it. With the advent of the

industrial revolution things began to take another corner. “Social change combined with economic assets enhanced choices for both genders, but particularly for women... Responsibilities that had formerly been under the control of one or the other spouse began to be shared” (Lindsey, p.209). When Ella finished her college, she was satisfied to be a housewife though “none of her feminist friends from Smith College approved of her choice, she was satisfied to be a stay-at-home mom and grateful that she and her husband could afford it” (Shafak, p.6). Thus, what triggers the changes in Ella’s life is her notion of taking a job and through this job she comes across Aziz and his mystic world. For Ella, the notion of working was at first a distraction from the monotony of her life as a devoted housewife, but gradually all in the life of this, seemingly peaceful, housewife begins to be upside-down.

Although Ella fell in love with David and their marriage was the fruit of that love, yet, when her daughter, Jeannette, announces her plans to be married to her boyfriend because they love each other, Ella rejects their union. “I love him, Mom. Does that mean anything to you? Do you remember that word from somewhere? He makes my heart beat faster. I can’t live without him” (Shafak, p.9). Ella’s disapproval is clear, she does not approve marriage as an outcome of love; she bursts at her daughter “Come on, honey. Which century are you living in? Just get it in your head, women don’t marry the men they fall in love with. When push comes to shove, they choose the guy who’ll be a good father and a reliable husband. Love is only a sweet feeling bound to come and quickly go away” (Shafak, p.10). In her younger years, Ella believed in the power of love and this power makes her a wife to the man she fell in love with. After twenty years of marriage, deep in Ella’s mind she does not believe in love any more, instead she sees her relationship with David as an investment not an emotion, her notion of him are a number of traits that are necessary for a well-balanced family.

All these cues-economic resources, social status, and older age- add up to one thing: the ability of a man to acquire and control resources that women can use for themselves and for their children. A long history of evolution by selection has fashioned the way in which women look at men as success objects. But the possession of resources is not enough. Women also need men who possess traits that are likely to lead to the sustained acquisition of resources over time (Buss, b p.30)

After twenty years she discovered that David is not the good husband and the caring father she thought. He is only a man that provides for the family and a good source of money. He is no longer the man with whom she fell in love.

What was for Ella as an everlasting love becomes uncertain and vague. It is well believed, globally, that love is eternal, and everyone has only one soul-mate that is meant to last forever and this is what Ella used to believe. This idea is clearly debunked by the cycle of love-breakup-love-breakup. Couples are more inclined to accept the "one, unique soul mate" notion when they are in the early stages of a relationship, but as the relationship progresses, the belief fades (Lindsey, p.213). Ella believes now after so many years of love and marriage that love is not "magic wand that could fix everything with one miraculous touch" (Shafak ,35).

Hence, love cannot be a good reason for marriage, according to Ella, because what remains after the couple used to each other is not love. Thus her thoughts go hand in hand with the theory of parental investment which states that women prefer men with resources rather than who have looks or they share feelings with. As a result, it is thought that women have evolved mate preferences for males who are both competent and willing to offer resources to them and their children—resources that will help them survive (Buss a, p.41). She believes that people who believe in the power of love are quite immature, she wonders: "How could people be naïve enough to expect love to open every door for them?" (Shafak, p.35)

She has so many thoughts considering her husband's loyalty for the knot of matrimony, "Ella wondered if, deep inside, her husband felt guilty about keeping her away from a career, or else about cheating on her—these being the only two explanations she could think of as to why he was now going overboard in his enthusiasm" (Shafak, p 6). Moreover, she suspects that the job he offered for her was: "through one of his clients—or perhaps through one of his mistresses" (Shafak, p.6). After knowing David for twenty years, his wife is well acquainted with all his behaviors. The shock of Ella's husband being unfaithful has not been an actual one, there were suspicions rooted in her mind concerning this matter. It is universally acknowledged that women's instinct for deception is very high and their sense concerning this matter governs their senses. It is also well-known that for "every incremental gain in men's ability to deceive women, women evolve comparable incremental gains in their ability to detect deception" (Buss b p.167). Ella

keeps her suspensions for herself, her only concern is how her husband hides his affairs. She didn't know how he managed it, "given the frequency of his couplings with other women, particularly with his young assistants, but her husband handled things deftly and quietly. However, infidelity had a smell. That much Ella knew" (Shafak ,63). She was keen to keep calm and thought about her kids rather taking any action against her unfaithful spouse. According to the theories of evolution psychology, revenge may come in Ella's mind, but she prefers to keep silent and mute, but her respect for her husband as well as her eagerness of keeping her family begin to shake in favor of her doubts about love, family, and sacrifice.

Ella does not feel anger against her cheating husband. She keeps composed, yet women are believed to be irritated when they are cheated upon:

Anger toward cheaters likely evolved to punish those who violate social contracts. Anger toward cheaters motivates revenge, which in turn deters others from cheating in the future. And revenge might be an emotion that is sweetly savored. In an interesting series of studies, participants rated a variety of different endings to Hollywood film clips that portrayed a serious injustice" (Quoted in Buss a, p.396).

Her anger was directed towards love and the love affair of her elder daughter in particular. In her heart, the accumulation of disappointments was the straw that pushed her to forsake her heaven of marriage. Thus, she discovered that she was not satisfied of her life, but she was numbed as a reaction of her frustration.

She has a vague notion of eastern literature, thus, when she finds a manuscript of a novel about the East, she felt mesmerized. Aziz writes to her that "idea of a Knowing Self has generated not only false expectations but also disappointments in places where life does not match our expectations." (Shafak, 144), and this is exactly a reflection of what is going on in Ella's mind. She never imagined once that she is able to take a bold step like escaping from her family. Ella's character is calm and not a revolting one when Ella "looked back at her life, she realized that rebellion had never suited her. She had never smoked weed with boys behind closed doors, gotten kicked out of bars, used morning-after pills, thrown fits, or lied to her mother" (Shafak, 130). It has not been revenge over a cheating husband that pushes Ella to leave her family and ask for divorce. In her mind, Ella believes that the flame of love between her husband and herself has gone forever.

David said, ... “I thought you were in love with me when we got married.”

“I was in love with you,” Ella said, but couldn’t help adding, “back then.”

“So when did you stop loving me?” David asked, deadpan.

Ella looked at her husband in astonishment, like someone who had never seen her reflection before and who now held a mirror to her face. Had she stopped loving him? It was a question she had never asked herself before. She wanted to respond but lacked not so much the will as the words. Deep inside she knew it was the two of them they should be concerned about, not their children. But instead they were doing what they both were best at: letting the days go by, the routine take over, and time run its course of inevitable torpor. p.11

She trusts that with each passing day, her love for David declines a little bit because of many things and her doubts of infidelity is certainly the main one. The essential point regarding people’s evolved sensual techniques is not that men will always have more affairs than women or that infidelity will always manifest itself in men’s behavior. Men’s sexual psychology predisposes them to seek sexual variety, and when the costs and hazards are low, they seek extramarital sex (Buss b, p.193). David feels quite safe because he takes Ella for granted and he is not worried concerning Ella’s ignorance about his love affairs.

What makes her abandons everything is her feeling that she does not fit for the role of the devoted housewife anymore, she tries to find another dimension for her being. Furthermore, the man who appeared in her life is quite different from David and her ideas about men in general.

Her new interest in reading about new culture has initiated her rebellious feelings against the life she is leading. She learns about love from a person who belongs to a sect that glorifies love and puts it as an essential part for life. Thus, she decides to follow her feelings and forsakes what she considers as a dead love and a kids who do not need her any more. She knows that the step she is going to take is very serious because people “typically need a clear justification for leaving a long-term mate, one that explains the breakup to friends, to family, and even to themselves and one that preserves or minimizes the damage to their social reputation. Although some simply walk away from the relationship, this straightforward solution is rarely employed” (Buss b, p.172). Ella does walks away from her life as a wife and a mother. She follows a man who lives thousands miles from her, a man she knows through reading and who encounters through a spiritual tale of Rumi and Shams Tabrizi, a Sufi who believes in that he is “the child of the present moment” (Shafak, p.160) in contrast to her, who thinks about the past and the future, but never touches the present.

When she starts to read Aziz's novel *The Sweet Blasphemy*, she begins to be aware of new notion that the relationship between a man and a woman can take spiritual level also and they can be connected on the human side rather any other consideration. She discovers a new idea Aziz presents, the first thing that attracts her is his notion of love:

*For despite what some people say, love is not only a sweet feeling bound to come
and quickly go away.*

Her jaw dropped as she realized this was the contradiction of the exact sentence she had spoken to her daughter in the kitchen earlier in the day... Perhaps he had written this book knowing beforehand what kind of person was going to read it first. This writer had her in mind as his reader. For some reason unbeknownst to her, Ella found the idea both disturbing and exciting (18).

As days move on, Ella discovers that love according to Aziz is so different from the one she has believed in all her life. She addresses Aziz: "First you meet someone—someone who is completely different from everyone around you. Someone who sees everything in a different light and forces you to shift, change your angle of vision, observe everything anew, within and without... much too suddenly, you are thrust out into the open and in fact you control nothing" (Shafak, 263). Aziz enters Ella's chaotic world and changes her beliefs in love, her thoughts about human relations, and her vision about her life and being. For her, Aziz is "like jigsaw puzzle she aimed to complete piece by piece. With every new e-mail from him, another piece of that puzzle fell into place. Ella had yet to see the entire picture" (Shafak, 159). Yet, he was able to make her see her being and life from a different corner.

Aziz tells her about his past, his love for his dead wife, the idea of her death that changed him to another man. This faithfulness in Aziz's feelings and his loyalty to the woman he loves stand in contrast to David's betrayal. Aziz belongs to a spiritual world, where her world with David is quite materialistic one that palpitates with materialism. In her last conversation with David, he asks her about her motivation to leave, is it to get even with him:

"So is this what this was about? Was it for revenge?"

"No," Ella said, shaking her head in disappointment. "This is not about revenge. It never was."

"Then what is it about?"

“It is about love,” she said at last. “I love Aziz.” (Shafak, 250).

...

She does not follow him because she wants to demonstrate a new life and a family or a life of a married couple, her idea is not to lead a new life that contrasts her past one. She follows a dying man without a future, she knows that her love is different from hers towards David. The idea that she will have short-term life with Aziz does not intimidate her from walking away, she remains with him until his last days. If she was thinking in a logic or reasonable way, she would not destroy her life for a dying man but for her Aziz is a notion, a concept that will never die. She will live her life according to his teachings.

The timing of Aziz appearance in her life was not arbitrary, according to him, everything “happens at the right time” (Shafak, 303). She throws all her past life with David behind her back. She comes to understand “if there was anything worse in the eyes of society than a woman abandoning her husband for another man, it was a woman abandoning her future for the present moment” (Shafak, 346). What she learns from Aziz is to live the present moment rather than worrying about future. When she returns to Boston, she tells her daughter that she decides to live in the same city that Aziz lived in and not to come to her old life and self again. It is love that makes a new life for Ella, her life has been transformed by the power of love. According to Julia Kristeva, love is capable of transforming one’s mistakes into remaking and revival of our life and mind: “Not of this state of crisis, collapse, madness capable of sweeping away all the dams of reason, as it is capable of transforming an error into a renewal – remodeling, remaking, reviving a body, a mentality, a life. Or even two” (Kristeva, 3-4).

As for David, Ella does not feel any emotion for him. Her disappointment in him goes far beyond forgiveness. In terms of evolutionary psychology, a partner's expectations for a mate being violated, to the point that the partner no longer desired to maintain the bond, would be an effective excuse for expelling that partner (Buss b, 172).

Ella feels that her love for Aziz strengthens her, makes her a different person. As Simon de Beauvoir asserted “On the day when it will be possible for woman to love not in her weakness but in strength, not to escape herself but to find herself, not to abase herself but to assert herself – on that day love will become for her, as for man, a source of life and not of mortal danger” (Norton, & Kille, p.63).

The departure of Ella from her infidel husband is explained in the terms of evolutionary psychology that people's “knowledge that infidelity causes conjugal dissolution may be the reason

that infidelity is sometimes used intentionally to get out of a bad marriage (Buss b ,174). Thus, the timing of Aziz in her life makes her see that her life is devoid of real love and the meaning of life is not tied to a family or marriage. David's disloyalty paves the way for her departure. "Conflicts erupt within couples, producing downward spirals of blame and despair. Despite their best intentions and vows of lifelong love, half of all married couples end up divorcing" (Buss b, p.1). At the end, it seems that Ella's love has rendered her with no clear identity, no roots and no ties to anybody rather than Aziz "in the rapture of love, the limits of one's own identity vanish, at the same time that the precision of reference and meaning becomes blurred in love's discourse" (Kristeva,2). Thus, even if Aziz is dead, she will remain faithful to the notion he implanted in her mind.

Ella used to see her life in the reflection as her marriage. The mirror of marriage is broken by her new concepts of life. She no longer sees other than herself and thinks of no time other than the present day. For Ella, Aziz was like a Sufi dervish who comes with his swirling dance, his dance has spun the events of her life and made her aware that she is not in love with herself so how she can love others. She starts to arrange her life in a new perspective, the swirling began and maybe it stops one day and she will be able to have another mirror according which she starts arranging her life once again.

The death of Aziz's wife has made him a new man, the same happened to Ella. The death of David's love as well as the birth of love for herself, her entity, and love for her present life, have created a new person of her.

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