

'SEEN' VERSUS 'UNSEEN' IN ELIF SHAFAK'S "THE GAZE"

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Abstract: This article focuses on the two worlds which determine and ultimately destroy a couple's love relationship in Elif Shafak's third novel, "The Gaze". The two protagonists, an obese woman and a dwarf, have to cope with the world's gazes and, at the same time, with their own inner torments, caused by an 'unseen' world. Ultimately, the 'seen' wins over the hidden world of feelings and thoughts.

Keywords: seen, unseen, obesity, dwarf, strangeness

"The Gaze" by the Turkish novelist, Elif Shafak, contains four separate intertwined narrative threads, coherent and interrelated, but which create confusion in the beginning. Each independent story occurs in a different time and place. Thus, the story unfolds in Istanbul in 1999, in Pera in 1885, in Siberia in 1648 but also in France in 1868. The switch between distant places and long past or modern times bewilders the reader who has not yet figured out the author's overall design. The novelist easily shifts the plot from a modern apartment in Istanbul, to a stately mansion in France, then to a freak show in Pera, and, surprisingly, even to fur hunts in Siberia. This article, though, will only focus on the central tale: that of an overweight young woman and her diminutive lover, a dwarf.

At a closer look, Shafak's third novel, published in 1999, is about what the characters see and how much the others can see, but it is also about what can't be seen, the unseen beneath appearances. "Our lives are based on seeing and being seen." (Shafak, 2010: 91) Nonetheless, the characters of the novel are tragically torn between the seen and the unseen, between what the others see and what is concealed inside, the part which they never reveal. The tension between the two realms, of the seen vs. the unseen, is the cause of the protagonists' inner conflicts and disappointments, even ruin.

Within the rich and complex structure of the novel the story of an obese woman, the narrator of the tale, and a dwarf is the red thread. In the early parts of the novel the reader has the rather difficult task to link the pieces together in order to 'see' the whole picture. While the female protagonist hides away to avoid the watching eyes, B-C uses his "Dictionary of Gazes", a collection of strange entries, obsessively connected to eyes seeing, watching, spying, staring, or not seeing beyond appearances, to counteract inquisitive looks.

Additionally, B-C's dictionary is a melting pot of the writer's musings and experiences, traditional Turkish stories, mythological characters, and fantastic goings on kept together by a leitmotif: watching eyes, judging gazes. Not only do eyes look different, but they also see in a different way. Thus, when the relationship between the two main characters was about to break, B-C watched his girlfriend with eyes she had never noticed before: "His eyes were like a dim curtain that had been drawn between us. And this curtain allowed me neither to see him or to see how he saw me." (Shafak, 2010: 184)

The narrator of this multi-layered story is an obese woman who lived with her lover, a dwarf, in Istanbul, in the Hayalifener Apartments building. They met while crossing the Bosphorus on a ferry, and instantly took to each other, attracted and united by each other's otherness. The overweight woman was constantly aware of and had to confront the reproving eyes of the passers-by. While contemplating her own body she compared it to "a rowboat that

had been stranded, rolled up in its nets, in a sea from which the water had been drained away.” (Shafak, 2010: 10)

When riding the minibus to work she had to face atrocious humiliations. People eyed her contemptuously. During one such bus trip an “ugly bug-eyed” little girl (Shafak, 2010: 22) and her mother resented her occupying more than a seat, and treated her with arrogance. Although she did not make eye-contact with the passengers crowding the bus, she felt that she was stared at, and that people pointed her to one another.

Because of her weight she often got stuck while passing through double doors when just one side was left open. Even if she went in sideways, she did not fit in: “My motionlessness was like a memory that resembled a consumptive spitting out his unforgettable memories into a handkerchief; spending each day in quarantine infecting his sickness with loneliness.” (Shafak, 2010: 76) Likewise, sharing an elevator with other people made her feel their eyes on her body, judging her, and wondering whether the elevator could carry them all. Their stares and remarks were insulting and painful. Oftentimes her anxiety at being mocked at and demeaned caused her to bite her cuticles making her fingers hurt and bleed. In “the world of appearances”. (Shafak, 2010: 94) she would have liked to be invisible, to disappear into thin air like the floating balloon in the dream she had in the beginning and the hallucination in the end of the novel.

When she met B-C, she felt that her huge body did not for once condemn her to loneliness and contempt, and the seen could be ‘unseen’. Consequently, she willingly opened her heart. While they lived together they did not say a word about their appearances. They both felt comfortable in the seclusion of their home: “And whatever the forms of our bodies, we were fluid and as mutable as water in each other’s eyes. For this reason I had never once troubled myself about how I looked to B-C.” (Shafak, 2010: 186) When in a fit of furious frustration, his eyes saw her immense body, watched and judged her, thus breaking the unspoken pledge of never considering the ‘seen’, he wounded her heart irreversibly: “The heart is a diamond eye. If it is scratched once, it will always look at the world through a mother-of-pearl-like crack.” (Shafak, 2010: 185)

B-C is not less watched and humbled because of his smallness. Seen through his obese lover’s eyes his hands were too big for a dwarf, the toes seemed to belong to different feet. The black hair on his chest, the freckles, the puffy nipples, and the red tongue all looked out of place. When he and his lover first met and entered a restaurant everyone turned their heads towards them and started whispering. The woman turned red and sweated profusely with embarrassment, whereas B-C was strolling at ease, undisturbed by the multitude of watching eyes, thus hiding from the crowd and defying the inquisitive gazes.

In order to counteract the watching eyes of the people around he even improved his strategy by modelling in an art studio. Sitting on a stool on the stage, naked, he looked like a slave waiting for the auctioneers to make their bids. Even stranger than his dwarfish body, B-C’s expressionless eyes looked like two short, thin lines which did not express anything. Unlike his obese lover, B-C chose to fight back the gazes of those watching him. When asked why he was willing to expose his oddness he answered: “That’s how it is, out of stubbornness.” (Shafak, 2010: 81)

After their first date, in spite of B-C’s apparent indifference to people’s reproving or mocking eyes, the couple never went out together. Even if they happened to meet by chance, they would only acknowledge one another’s presence from a distance: “Outside was forbidden for ‘us’. It was only ‘I’ after the point where our secrecy ended.” (Shafak, 2010: 86) When at the cinema during intermission they were discovered sitting side by side and holding hands, all the eyes were turned towards them making them want to disappear inside their seats. B-C would become even smaller and turn into a ball, whereas his companion was too fat to be able to escape the disdainful eyes.

A climactic moment in their relationship was B-C's decision to challenge their watchers and go out together in disguise. Just like Sultans in the past, when they wanted to see with their own eyes what their empires looked like, B-C wanted to find out what the crowd believed of their reversed personalities. Thus, B-C took the appearance of a woman, whereas his lover that of a man. The dwarf quickly grew into the new role, wore a floral dress, heavy make-up and a blond wig, fish-net stockings, high-heeled shoes, big earrings, bracelets, a necklace. He even moved and behaved in a coquettish way and played his new part in a surprisingly seemly manner. For his lover the transformation was more painful. She had to be squeezed inside a corset in order to conceal her obesity: "I was girded in to the north, south, east and west; there was no place for my fat to escape." (Shafak, 2010: 100) She also drew a moustache on her face, wore a cap, and took the semblance of a coarse young man. They walked the dark streets in their new disguise. Soon enough they found themselves in the middle of a crowd of people who were watching a fight, and the next moment they became part of the feud. In the end of this adventure B-C got drunk and attracted the attention of everyone: "He was provoking passers-by, talking nonstop about things I didn't understand at all, and laughing loudly at his own words. Everyone's eyes were on us. This wasn't my idea of going out in disguise." (Shafak, 2010: 104) It seemed that the frustrations he had bottled up were suddenly left loose.

The second time the couple went out in disguise B-C played the part of an unemployed, anxious, irritable teenager, accompanying his tough, heartless brother. Wearing these new masks they chose to watch a lady who was eating fish in an expensive restaurant. Thus, from closely watched oddities they turn into watchers: "From where we stood we could see that the mouthful the woman had been chewing daintily somehow wouldn't go down her throat. She was right to be uneasy. It must have been unpleasant to eat with us watching." (Shafak, 2010: 166) After having been chased away the masked couple continued their nightly spying on people. They focused their attention on a family of four and symbolically undressed both the woman and her husband. Looking closely at his wife the man discovered not just an old, sagging body, but a malicious, secretive, constantly watching woman. Likewise, she discovered the horrifying truth about her perverse, violent and deeply corrupt husband. They both did not like what they saw: the outer and inner layers of their appearances had been peeled off, and both had unwillingly shown their true selves. It was B-C's and his obese partner's turn to watch their watching victims. The nocturnal masquerade ended in a grotesque show. An almost possessed B-C danced around the burning "orange peels", jumped on the flames, performed a witch's act, oblivious of his former identity: "B-C was a witch who had lost not only the recipe for poison but also the recipe for the antidote as the wind ruffled the pages of the book of spells." (Shafak, 2010: 170) In turn, the eyes of the orange-clad family were staring at this surreal performance and from watched ones they became 'gazers'- lacking the initial innocence, though.

Clearly their disguise was a powerful statement: don't let people see what they don't want to see; show them what they expect to see, deceive them, so that you can live in peace. In addition, the masquerade was their way of developing a voice to defend themselves from fiendish looks.

The story of the grotesque 'seen' is preceded by one of a horrifying 'unseen' and 'un-revealed'. Although this part of the novel is pre-history, in the book it comes after the events in the Hayalifener Apartment, and it is told in the third person by an unknown narrator. It goes back to the nameless narrator's childhood when she was raped. While playing hide-and-seek with the children of the neighbourhood she decided to hide in a coal shed where someone else was patiently waiting for a prey. As soon as the girl entered the shed she took in the dark derelict place where useless objects were lying around: "pieces of broken glass, pieces of wood, countless lost marbles, yellowed newspapers, a single lady's shoe with a

broken heel, a tattered tea-strainer, rusty fingernail-clippers with a piece of fingernail in them, broken razors, scattered chick-peas from a torn paper cone...” (Shafak,2010: 212), but she also clearly saw the green-eyed beardless well-dressed man who asked her to play a counting game with him. It proved to be a pretext for the atrocious abuse. All the while, in the darkness and silence of the shed the child felt a pair of eyes watching everything; she was being watched but did not know by what or who. They neither belonged to her nor to the stranger. The watching eyes would follow her incessantly and she would never forget the place where her life took another course.

The child’s behavior changed the very moment the man left the shed and she started vomiting. She became exceedingly cruel and hung the landlady’s cat from a tree branch and even almost killed the landlady by mixing crushed glass into meat dumplings. She developed a severe eating disorder, started being constantly hungry, and when taken to the doctor refused to speak. What she and the mysterious pair of watching eyes had ‘seen’ was concealed from the eyes of everyone else. What she had stared at would turn into the secretive world of the ‘unseen’.

B-C too lived two parallel lives. In the ‘seen’ world he played the role of an oddity, who did not care about the glances of the world, whereas in the ‘unseen’ realm he struggled with the “Dictionary of Gazes”, an antidote for his misery. It seemed to consume all his energy and make him drift away from his companion. The entries which circled around seeing, being seen, revealing oneself or hiding from people’s eyes mixed myth, stories, dreams, newspaper clippings encyclopedia articles forming an unusual jumble. He took refuge in this chaotic realm of words, and when he no longer found the words, he lost balance and forgot about his love. When the woman started reading the dictionary, the bond between them had already been shattered and they were doomed to live in their separate worlds of the ‘unseen’. In the end of the novel, when the hallucinating overweight is floating above the city like a balloon, she is again under the grip of the ‘unseen’ which she will never reveal to the on looking world.

Ultimately, Elif Shafak explores the theme of body image, of the ‘seen’ as opposed to what can’t be seen by the watchers. The novel also makes a powerful assertion: a mere look can cause an irreversible damage to the person stared at.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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