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Mechanics of Oppression: The Transition of Suppression, Repression, and Trauma in Elif Shafak's *The Island of Missing Trees*

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Abstract: Elif Shafak constructs the novel *The Island of Missing Trees* (2021) as a powerful voice for the voiceless subjects. It uncovers the struggles endured by the characters within the context of oppression. The novel delineates the domineering and destructive properties of psychic oppression and its pervasive influence on nearly all of its characters. This paper intends to examine the profound psychological impact of oppression through its mechanics such as gender stereotypes and ethnic conflicts by adopting the lens of psychoanalytic theory and trauma studies. Firstly, the paper focusses on revealing the manifestation of these mechanics through rigid societal norms and violence in the novel. Secondly, this analysis intends to expose how these mechanics evoke the dual natured coping mechanism of the human psyche: conscious suppression and unconscious repression of emotions and feelings. Thirdly, it aims to elaborate on the traumatic impact of instigated psychological change in the characters' mind. This study clearly reveals how psychological oppression inflict profound psychic trauma that drives the subjects into the disastrous cycle of conscious suppression and unconscious repression which not only hold them inaudible but also drive them to store the pain as archives instead of erasing the distress.

Keywords: *Oppression, Gender Stereotypes, Ethic Violence, Suppression, Repression, Silence, Stored Trauma*

Psychological oppression refers to a form of subjugation which functions by inflicting harm on the mental state of the subjects, thereby restricting their autonomy. It manifests through various channels like legal, cultural, and many other social channels. It subjugates people's mind by imposing regulations, disciplinary practices, ideologies, stereotypes and violence. Elif Shafak is a distinguished Turkish-British author and is widely recognised for her contribution to literature. *The Island of Missing Trees* stands as one of her distinguished novels. Psychological oppression in Elif Shafak's *The Island of Missing Trees* primarily operates through gender stereotypical norms and ethnic violence. These mechanics exert complete control over the psyche of the characters. They trigger serious internalised trauma in the psyche of the victims. The article *Understanding the Psychological Impact of Oppression Using the Trauma Symptoms of Discrimination Scale* states that "oppression in all its forms is traumatising" (Williams and et. al. 9). *The Island of Missing Trees* illustrates how psychological oppression torments the characters' lives by infusing trauma. The characters like Kostas Kazantzakis, Defne, Meryem, Panagiota, Ada Kazantzakis, Yiorgos and Yusuf endure this inner turmoil. They are either the victims of an individual mechanism of oppression or both. The psychological oppression of these characters results in conscious suppression of emotions, traumatic experience and expression of their desires. Monnica Williams and et.al remark that, "As chronic experiences, oppression can even be traumatising" (1). The prolonged suppression of emotional injury and depressive incidents unconsciously represses the memory of those experiences.

Sigmund Freud, in his *Repression* mentions that, "The essence of repression lies simply in turning something away, and keeping it at a distance from the conscious" (147). The characters unconsciously inhibit their desires and traumatic experiences deep in their mind to avoid further anguish. This unconscious repression of memory results in storing trauma in the mind rather than erasing the pain. Silence develops as an initial response to this internalised trauma of psychic oppression. The unvoiced thoughts are also stored as archives in the characters' memory. The residual trauma is apparent through the character's fear, anxiety, sorrow and guilt. This stored trauma further shapes the life of the characters by employing these symptoms of trauma. By employing qualitative analytical method, this paper argues that in Elif Shafak's *The Island of Missing Trees*, psychological oppression results in conscious suppression of feelings which subsequently leads to unconscious repression with stored serious trauma in silence that shapes the individual's behaviour.

The gender stereotypical norms contribute a significant role in infusing psychological oppression. It is obvious through Shafak's portrayal of societal and familial expectations. The gender stereotypical society imposes strict rules and duties for men and women that instigates

despair. The article *Gender Stereotyping and Social Norms: Exploring Theoretical Perspectives and Educational Implications* defines stereotypical norms. It observes that

Stereotypes usually perpetuate preconceived intentions of what it meant to either be a man or a woman, which occasions inequality, discrimination, and a lack of opportunities for people who don't fit the groups. The unspoken principle and expectations that direct behaviour within a society or individual group are known as social norms. They cover a wide range of actions, attitudes, and beliefs which deemed proper or acceptable by a specific society and provide direction for how people should behave in various social ideas. (Omojemite 78)

As defined, it normalises the inequality and lack of opportunities for the vulnerable subjects and sets disparate roles for men and women. Judith Butler's in her work *Gender Trouble* addresses the issue of gender. She argues that "The loss of gender norms would have the effect of proliferating gender configurations, destabilizing substantive identity, and depriving the naturalizing narratives of compulsory heterosexuality of their central protagonists: 'man' and 'woman'" (187). Gender stereotypes affect both men and women. The characters like Defne, Meryem, Yusuf and Kostas represent the victims of the gender stereotypical society. These characters are raised to satisfy their parents and society. Their mental health is disturbed as they are obliged to adhere inflexible guidelines of the society to fulfil its expectations.

The uncompromising norms for women as evidenced in the novel include, "Don't wear short skirts. Sit with your legs together. Don't laugh out loud. Girls don't do that. Girls don't do this. It's ayip" (Shafak 123). Girls are expected to marry at eighteen with a dowry and live a subjugated life. The two Turkish sisters, Meryem and Defne are raised under rigid rules of the society. Meryem, the elder daughter is determined to adhere to the rules laid for women unobtrusively. Consequently, she suppresses her desires and observes the norms as her responsibility. She states, "Everybody is always raving on about love-all the songs, movies. I get it, it's cute, but you don't build a life on cute. No, love wasn't my priority. My parents were my priority, my community was my priority. I had responsibility" (Shafak 138). The society labels adherence to the rules as discipline and responsibility and disregard to the norms as shame to hold them accountable. This act of infusing discipline as responsibility produces subservient people as observed by Foucault. In *Discipline and Punish* Foucault asserts, "Discipline produces subjugated and practiced bodies" (138) and this aligns with the Meryem's subservient act of following the disciplinary norms of gender without any questions. She is psychologically conditioned by the norms and she follows the norms reluctantly.

Conversation with her niece affirms her frustration of surviving under the patriarchal and stereotypical society. She states, “All my life I’ve tidied up after my sister, my husband, my parents. Even when I’d go to a restaurant, I’d clean up the table so the waiter wouldn’t think badly of us. Because it’s ayip . . . It’s the word of my life . . . I was always tidy and organised but lately something happened. I don’t want to clean up any more. I’m just not going to bother” (Shafak 123). Her inner feeling of resisting all the norms of the society ends only in failure as fear engulfs her. Eventually, suppression develops as the consequence of this constant societal pressure and fear. She mentions that “I was careful not to disappoint my parents always trying to do the right thing” (Shafak 139). Anxious to please her family, Meryem deliberately makes conscious efforts to hide her desire of wearing multi-coloured attires. Her mind conceives it as shame as it violates the societal norms. When Ada enquires about Meryem’s desire about wearing vibrant outfits, Meryem remarks, “‘I want to’ . . . glancing down at the dress she had out on today - charcoal, plain, loose- fitting. All my life I have worn blacks” (Shafak 125). Overtime the constant external polishing develops into unconscious internal polishing. To protect Meryem from the psychic anguish of shame, her mind represses her desire of wearing vibrant dresses. Her suppressed desire of wearing vibrant attires transforms as repressed memory. She states, “I’ve been buying them ever since I signed the divorce papers. But I’ve never worn them” (Shafak 125). The repressed memory of wanting to wear the dresses functions as her surviving mechanism. This compulsory and voluntary restraint of desires and automated repression inflicts trauma which is stored in the psyche.

The stored trauma unconsciously intensifies the fear which shapes Meryem’s behaviour. Regardless of her free will to dress according to her preference, the dread of being a disgrace restrains her. She remarks, “When I decided to come to London, I said to myself, ‘This is your chance, Meryem. No one knows you in England, no one is going to say it’s ayip. If you won’t do it now, when will you ever do it?’ So I brought them all with me” (Shafak 125). However, the fear of being an embarrassment haunts her. She declares, “I can’t. They are too over the top for my age . . . people would laugh at me. You know exactly what I say; eat according to your own taste, dress according to others” (Shafak 125). Her mind even begins to believe the opinions of others as fact. Positive shift in circumstances doesn’t influence her inner self. Her mind shields her from the danger it perceives as reality. Sigmund Freud, in his *Repression* mentions that, “The essence of repression lies simply in turning something away, and keeping it at a distance from the conscious” (147).

Meryem develops a strong belief in superstitions and seeks comfort in cooking and praying to escape the psychological oppression and fear. This functions as her mind’s mechanism

of coping the pain. Ada witnesses Meryem's fragility and "the universe the woman had built for herself with her recipes, proverbs, prayers and superstitions" (Shafak 140). In spite of Meryem's attempts to get rid of the psychic pain, the stored trauma shapes her behaviour by constantly holding her in fear till the end of the narrative. On the contrary, Defne, the younger sister of Meryem stands firm against the gender stereotypes regardless of its influence. Being a Turk, she loves a Greek named Kostas which violates the societal stereotypes. She even experiences a premarital pregnancy and raises the infant. She violates all the norms of the gender stereotypes and this indicates her self-reliance. Meryem's remarks about Defne to Ada reveals her autonomy. She states, "I was scared out of my wits. But your mum . . . she was unstoppable. She'd put pillows under bedcovers and slip out of the house in the middle of the night. She was brave - and foolish . . . Your mum was a free spirit" (Shafak 139). Shafak portrays Defne as a force against gender stereotypical norms of the prejudiced society.

The gender stereotypical norms also stamp its authority on men in the society. Masculinity is socially constructed and it prohibit men from being sentimental and emotionally vulnerable. Men are expected to be fearless warriors and emotionally unyielding. These qualities align with masculine ideals of the patriarchal and gender stereotypical society and are considered as manly. Yusuf and Kostas are the victims of this psychological oppression. Yusuf is mocked for his behaviour since childhood. "Ever since he was a boy he had been repeatedly picked on and ridiculed for not being man enough, manly enough, first by his own family, then the students and teachers at school, even perfect strangers; taunts and barbs hurled in sudden fits of rage and contempt, though whence they arose, he never understood" (Shafak 160). This results in suppression of his feelings and concealment of his gay identity. His mind considers this concealment of his gay-self as an adaptive psychological mechanism. He conceals his interest for men from the society consciously as it violates the heterosexual ideology of the society. The fear of being slaughtered by the homophobic and prejudiced society haunts his mind. Resultantly, his mind represses his longing for being a gay man publicly. His mind refuses to trust even the people of his close circle. His inability to reveal his gay identity to the public till the end of the narrative indicates his internal repression. Fear conditions his psyche and behaviour.

By pairing Yusuf's pain with the struggle of Kostas, Shafak further illustrates the destructive capacity of gender stereotypes in the society. Kostas' sentimental and sympathetic behaviour and his profound reverence for nature deliberately defy the societal expectations of being a man. His attitude drives his mother insane and she fiercely exclaims, "You weep over a bunch of bats? Is this how I raised you?" (147). The lack of familial validation, even from his mother intensifies his psychic pain. To survive the psychological oppression, Kostas suppresses

his public expression of love for nature and conceals his bond with nature to his mother. His mother's fury enforces him to hide his real self and the line "After that day, he would no longer talk about fruit bats and how important they were for the trees of Cyprus and hence for its inhabitants" (147) exposes the silencing nature of suppression. The process of suppressing his true self in front of his mother forces Kostas to automatically repress his true self of showing empathy, grief and vulnerability to other human beings. He "slowly shut himself off, carving an island, retreating into silence" (148). His mind struggles between expressing his gentle nature and concealing his true self. All these instances disclose the impacts of gender stereotypical norms on the psyche of the victim by pressuring the victims into the cycle of suppression and repression which stores trauma and shapes the behaviour of the individuals.

Shafak's portrayal of ethnic conflict describes both physical and psychological impact of the ethnic conflict on the subjects. Violence acts as a tool of ethnic conflict in the novel. The heterosexual couple Kostas and Defne, the gay couple Yusuf and Yiorgos, Kostas mother Panagiota and his daughter Ada are the victims of the ethnic violence. Ethnic violence operates by pressuring the relationship of the couples and by infusing the psychic pain to Ada and Panagiota. Kostas and Defne belong to different ethnic groups. The violence between the groups disrupts their profound love. Neither their parents nor the society wishes them to be together. The statement "This he never told her, but he feared she might one day suggest that it had become too dangerous for them to see each other, this secret too heavy to hold, that they should break up before things go out of hand" (83) exposes the pressure it exerts on their relationship.

Judith Herman, in her *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence-From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* states that, "When neither resistance nor escape is possible, the human system of self-defense becomes overwhelmed and disorganized" (26). Trapped between violence and societal hatred, the couple can neither escape the violence nor resist the ethnic hatred. Their defence mechanism becomes disorganised. This overwhelming situation culminates suppression of love and desires. Violence enforces their separation and suppression of love. The couple exerts conscious efforts to accept reality by suppressing their desire for each other. However, repression emerges as the consequence of constant suppression. Unaware of Defne's pregnancy, Kostas migrates to London for survival. This uninformed flight enrages Defne and affects her psychologically leading to unconscious defensive detachment. Similarly, craving the affection of Defne unconsciously disturbs the mind of Kostas. This repression culminates unresolved emotional vacancy and trauma. According to Judith Herman, "Traumatic reactions occur when action is of no avail" (26). This aligns with the lasting influence of trauma on the couple, which manifested even decades after their relocation to London as a couple.

The article *Understanding the Psychological Impact of Oppression Using the Trauma Symptoms of Discrimination Scale* observes that “Subordinated groups experience fear, stress, and may develop negative views of themselves. As chronic stressor, oppression can lead to poor mental health” (Williams and et.al.1). The stored trauma of oppression in the memory of the characters shapes the behaviour of the couple by employing fear and guilt. Defne’s is haunted by guilt and she suffers from severe depression. She strives hard to find solace by involving in community work. Her mind employs silence as a mode of psychological survival to hide the internalised trauma. She also insists Kostas to be silent about their past to their daughter. She states, “If we want our child to have a good future, we have to cut her off from our past” (Shafak 317). However, all her efforts result in failure. She is devastated by the chronic repression even after decades. Judith Herman remarks that, “Each component of the ordinary response to danger, having lost its utility, tends to persist in an altered and exaggerated state long after the actual danger is over” (26). As observed by Judith Herman, the painful and stored past memory of guilt overwhelms her and she unconsciously commits suicide though the danger is over. Kostas’ remark “but underneath, something was strangling her- the past, memories” (Shafak 334) illustrates the internalised trauma of Defne.

Similarly fear consumes Kostas. The couple’s private meetings are stricken with extreme fear and whenever Kostas feels “this fear, he gently pushed it down into a place in the basement of his soul where he kept the uncontrolled and painful thoughts” (Shafak 83). According to Judith Herman, “The ordinary response to atrocities is to banish them from consciousness” (10). Concealing fear functions as his response to the psychic anguish. London aids him the second opportunity to express his love and desires. However, Defne’s death triggers his repressed pain again. Stored trauma shapes his psyche and his mind considers showing love as a dangerous act. This fear holds him inaudible. To ease the agony, he dives deep into scientific research in silence. This act serves as his coping strategy. Ignoring his daughter is another consequence of this repression and stored trauma. Conversation between them is less and “this awkward, painful silence had not lodged itself between them” (Shafak 41). His refusal to share his past with his daughter exposes his fear of transferring his pain of repression and stored trauma to her.

Ethnic violence also has its adverse impacts on the relationship between the gay couple Yusuf and Yiorgos from the different ethnic groups. The couple is entrapped between true love and their inability to oppose the societal bias. This contributes to suppression of desires. Chronic suppression of their love engenders unconscious repression. Yusuf’s repression of desire because of the gender stereotypes and persistent ethnic violence traumatise him. They maintain their relationship privately. Hiding their real emotions operates as an adaptive psychic strategy. Their

minds conceive revealing their true identity as perilous. The couple introduces them only as co-owners of the Happy Fig tavern rather than introducing themselves as a couple. The continuous lethal warning about killing his partner Yiorgos terrifies Yusuf. The words of the warning notes include “‘sodomites’, ‘homos’, ‘sinners’” (Shafak 160) and those notes are “stabbing him like knives’ cutting a vein close to the heart and opening a wound; not a new one, but an old wound that had never had the chance to fully heal” (Shafak 160). Fear and silence are the consequences of stored trauma and they shape Yusuf’s personality. Assassination of Yiorgos ends the relationship and inflicts profound internalised trauma in the mind of Yusuf.

Panagiota’s suppression and repression are apparent through her survival mechanism. The loss of her father and sons in the violence and the conflict of ethnicity affect her psychological health. The anguish of her innocent father’s death engenders deep psychological distress that she “would never forget, never forgive” (Shafak 121). In her letter to her brother, she mentions that, “The island is not the right place for young men anymore. There is blood on the streets. Everyday. No time to even wash off yesterday’s blood” (Shafak 172). This clearly exposes the brutality of ethnic violence. Witnessing the horror of ethnic conflict intensifies her trauma. Kostas witnesses her suffering and he “would sometimes catch his mother staring with a pained expression” (Shafak 133). She suppresses her fear, anxiety and empathy by acting resilient and strong. Repression culminates as a result of constant suppression of anxiety, fear and empathy. Her inability to understand her own son’s empathetic feeling indicates her repressed self. Being resilient and strong, act as her mode of psychic survival. However, the trauma of repressed fear and anxiety is stored in her mind and controls her action. In spite of her strong and resilient behaviour, she enforces Kostas exile to London. She states, “I do not sleep properly anymore . . . the fear that something terrible is going to happen to him is crushing my spirit. I cannot breathe” (Shafak 173). This exposes the pain of stored trauma and the domination of fear and anxiety in the life of Panagiota.

The impact of ethnic violence and gender stereotypes sustain even after decades. Its influence exists even on the next generation. The narration of the fig tree discloses the transfer of past memories to the offsprings. It states, “Once it’s inside your head, whether it’s your own memory or your parents’, or your grandparents’, this fucking pain becomes parts of your flesh. It stays with you and marks you permanently. It messes up your psychology and shapes how you think of yourself and others” (Shafak 317). Ada, the daughter of Defne and Kostas carries the impression of this transferred psychological oppression. The repression of the past memories of Ada’s parents is transported to her unconsciously.

So many times in the past she had suspected that she carried within sadness that was not quite her own...All that genetic information passed from to offspring-survival, growth, reproduction, the colour of your hair, the shape of your nose, whether you had freckles or sneezed in sunlight-everything was in there. But none of that answered the one question burning in her mind: was it also possible to inherit something as intangible and immeasurable as sorrow? (Shafak 18)

This indicates her internalised psychological agony. She can neither escape nor resist the transferred psychological oppression. Silence, fear, sorrow and stored trauma shape her personality. Her house is “engulfed in a miasma of grief” (Shafak 11). Unexpected screams functions as her response and survival mechanism of the stored trauma. The line “As soon as they got home, she had retreated into her bedroom” describes her silence and loneliness. This illustrates that psychological oppression not only traumatises the people who experience it, but also affects the children of the victims.

This study highlights the disastrous effect of psychological oppression. It elucidates how psychic oppression tactfully manipulates the mental health of the victims by using its mechanics: gender stereotypical norms and violence of ethnic conflict. It illustrates the deliberate domination of these mechanics on people by imposing rules and violence which destabilises the mundane reality of the people. Suppression develops as the first response to the psychological oppression. Chronic and unorganised suppression culminates repression which unconsciously conceals the expectations, traumatic incidents and desires of the subjects. Overtime, these survival strategies unintentionally induce trauma which is stored in the mind and is also transferred to the next generation. Fear, anxiety, sorrow, silence and guilt of the characters uncover the internalised and stored trauma and shapes the personality of the characters. Thus, Elif Shafak’s *The Island of Missing Trees* elucidates the subversive property of psychological oppression and its serious impact on characters who are trapped in the destructive loop of suppression, repression and unprocessed residue of trauma that shapes their behaviour.

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