



## RESEARCH PAPER

### Existential Threads in Shafak's *Three Daughters of Eve*: A Critical Reading

<sup>1</sup>Rabieah Tahir\*, <sup>2</sup>Iqra Jabeen and <sup>3</sup>Ayesha Izhar Chaudhri

1. MPhil Scholar, Department of English, University of Sargodha, Punjab, Pakistan
2. Assistant Professor, Department of English, University of Sargodha, Punjab, Pakistan
3. Lecturer, Department of English, University of Sargodha, Punjab, Pakistan

\*Corresponding Author | rabieahrtahir248@gmail.com

## ABSTRACT

This research undertakes a critical analysis of Shafak's *Three Daughters of Eve*, adopting an existentialist lens to delve into the existential experiences of the characters. This analytical inquiry is confined to the portrayal of Peri, a Turkish woman marked by intellectual pursuits and tumultuous relationships. Peri's proclivity towards freedom, moderate religious observance, and her adolescent years dedicated to the pursuit of meaning are the key focal points of this exploration. The analysis uncovers not only her fragile and susceptible nature but also discerns the multitude of catalysts that ultimately lead Peri to contemplate suicide. This enduring sense of isolation, inner restlessness, distressing nightmares, and vivid imaginative experiences persist even during her academic tenure in England. The research methodology centers on a meticulous textual analysis, emphasizing a close examination of the novel to identify existential themes and experiences, particularly as embodied by Peri. Through this methodological framework, the study seeks to furnish a comprehensive comprehension of the existentialist elements prevalent in the narrative and their profound influence on the character's psyche and consequential decisions.

**KEYWORDS** Existentialism, *Three Daughters of Eve*, Textual Analysis, Sense of Isolation

## Introduction

Shafak's literary work, *Three Daughters of Eve*, intricately examines the protagonist Peri's complex relationship with God, portraying her as the youngest offspring in Selma and Mensur's family. Peri, the central character, is depicted as an intellectual daughter highly revered by her father, defying the conventional familial dynamics that typically dictate strong maternal bonds with sons and paternal connections with daughters. The narrative unfolds through distinct phases or layers, set against the backdrop of Istanbul and Oxford during the 1980s, 2000, and 2016, offering a glimpse into Peri's formative years and her later life as the spouse of Adnan, a businessman. The novel challenges the prevalent belief that existential crises are not experienced by women, illustrating that these profound existential struggles can affect individuals presumed to be emotionally stable at certain junctures in life. Peri grapples with existential dilemmas stemming from an array of conflicts, encompassing both religious and societal dimensions. Residing in the Middle East exposes her to prevalent societal issues such as patriarchy, gender exploitation, class disparities, religious fanaticism, conservatism, and poverty, significantly impacting her psychological well-being. Peri's unceasing quest for meaning manifests in various forms, seeking solace in literature, solitude, relationships, and religion; however, she ultimately succumbs to a pervasive sense of solitude and restlessness. Her life is perpetually torn between opposing forces, reflecting broader conflicts including faith versus doubt, religion

versus atheism, and conservatism versus secularism. The intricate conflicts within her family significantly shape her fragmented identity and influence her behavioral patterns. Peri grapples with the delicate equilibrium between obeying and playing the role of God, mirroring the societal norms she negotiates. In the subsequent phase of her life, Professor Azur, a compelling figure conducting seminars on God, becomes central in Peri's quest for meaning and satisfaction. Nevertheless, disillusionment sets in as her enthusiasm wanes, prompting her departure from Oxford and causing a rupture in the triangular bond formed by the 'three daughters of Eve'. The resolution at the conclusion of the novel, while bringing closure to the characters' agonies, does not completely resolve Peri's internal conflicts. Instead, she embraces the role of a mediator between faith and doubt, embodying the archetype of the modern Muslim. This study delves into Existentialism, a philosophical perspective that questions abstract reasoning and scientific philosophy, asserting that life lacks inherent meaning or purpose. Existentialism underscores individual existence, choice, responsibility, authenticity, and the essence of being in the world. Albert Camus' existential philosophy, as exemplified through the plight of Sisyphus, grapples with the inherent absurdity and suffering in human life. Camus delineates three possible responses to life's meaninglessness: suicide, religious belief, and revolt. He advocates for the third option - revolt - wherein individuals acknowledge the absurdity of life but continue to resist cosmic injustice, thereby deriving meaning through the act of revolt against life's inherent meaninglessness (More, 2016; Lewis, 2009; Panza & Gregory Gale, 2008).

### Literature Review

Within their scholarly exploration of existentialism presented in the book *Existentialism for Dummies*, Panza and Gregory Gale (2008) offer an in-depth comprehension of this philosophical doctrine. They underscore existentialism as a philosophical outlook fundamentally engrossed in probing the quintessence of human existence, deeply examining its intrinsic value and grappling with essential inquiries about life's meaning. The authors emphasize that existentialists, irrespective of their religious inclinations, depart from established religious paradigms that tend to provide clear-cut and systematic answers to the fundamental questions of life. Instead, they advocate for a critical evaluation of how individuals should conduct their lives and ponder the very purpose of their being, even in the context of concepts like God and an afterlife.

The philosophical perspective advocated by Albert Camus (2000), places significant importance on the question of suicide as a paramount inquiry within philosophical discourse. This notion signifies a departure from the traditional approaches of religion and ethics, which often focus on prescribing how one should live. Existentialists, in contrast, underscore a more fundamental and introspective query - "How can I live?" This question challenges the conventional understanding of seeking guidance on how to live when life may be perceived as devoid of inherent meaning.

Similarly, the literary corpus of Kafka echoes existentialist themes, particularly in conveying a sense of entrapment and hopelessness experienced by individuals. Death, as symbolized in Kafka's works, emerges as a metaphorical escape from this entrapment. Notably, in his renowned work *Metamorphosis* (2016), the protagonist's transformation from human to insect serves as a metaphorical exploration of the complexities of human existence. Kafka's analysis further underscores this perspective, emphasizing how he, as a modern writer, effectively illuminates the intricacies of the human condition within an industrialized world. Central to this understanding is the concept that human alienation and the inherent absurdity of life significantly contribute to the experience of guilt, a recurring theme in Kafka's narratives.

Chiusaroli (2007) formulated an existentialist interpretation of four novels authored by Alberto Moravia. In 1929, Moravia, an Italian writer, made historical strides as the inaugural existentialist novelist in European literary annals with his inaugural work, *The Times of Indifference*. The analysis meticulously delineates existentialist attributes scrutinized within four seminal Moravian novels: *The Times of Indifference*, *The Woman of Rome*, *The Conformist*, and *Boredom*. Moravia's literary composition pioneers the exploration of humanity's endeavor to grapple with existence, thereby serving as a foundational cornerstone in the trajectory of existentialist literature across Europe. It notably accentuates the arduous struggle between individuals and the alienation they confront when endeavoring to establish connections within the irrational and modern societal milieu.

Hossain (2015) contended that Hamlet harbored a belief in setting right the disarrayed world, acknowledging the inescapability of one's destiny. Consequently, Hamlet's existential nature is prominently observed. Dewi (2008) provided a comprehensive exploration of existentialist ideologies concerning the principal protagonist in Albert Camus' *The Stranger*. The study artfully incorporated theoretical underpinnings from Nietzsche's existentialism (1986, 1889), Sartre's existentialist theory (1957, 2007), and Camus' stance on existentialism (2000). It culminated by deliberating Meursault's character traits, illuminating Camus's interpretation of existentialism as an existence premised on absolute freedom devoid of constraints, accompanied by unwavering responsibility. Phillips (2004) and Dewi (2008) also deliberated on the notion of detachment from God's existence and sternly condemned suicide as an expedient solution, urging individuals instead to grapple with life's absurdities.

In the realm of contemporary existentialist literature, Elif Shafak, a modern-day novelist, ventured into the existentialist realm with her opus *Three Daughters of Eve* in 2016. Walter (2017) lauded Shafak for her astute engagement with pertinent political and personal themes, considering her a writer straddling the intersections of Western and Eastern influences. In addition to contemplating divinity, Shafak probed diverse themes including feminism, patriarchy, capitalism, class disparities, materialism, religion, secularism, religious fanaticism, and existentialism within her novel.

Shafak has emerged as a formidable advocate for human rights, sharing her personal experiences and insights relating to depression while championing a more inclusive media landscape. Hailed as a 'gentle rebel with a cause', Shafak fervently advocated for a brighter future for Turkey. In her magnum opus *Black Milk* (2011), she shed light on clinical forms of depression and extolled self-care strategies. Shafak championed the acknowledgment of emotions and their transformation into constructive actions, emphasizing the imperative balance between information, knowledge, and wisdom in a world inundated with excessive information. Many other researchers have explored several themes in Shafak's *Three Daughters of Eve* including Chopan and Sumbria (2019), Bilal et al (2021), Al-Sammarraie (2019), Bilal and Khan (2023).

## Material and Methods

This study adopts an existentialist perspective as a methodological approach to analyze the literary work *Three Daughters of Eve* authored by Elif Shafak. Existentialism, operating as both a philosophical and literary framework, provides a robust methodology for delving into the intricate layers of character experiences and overarching themes in the novel. This analytical lens facilitates a comprehensive examination of the characters' existential dilemmas, their pursuit of meaning, and the philosophical inquiries interwoven into the narrative.

Existentialism emphasizes the detailed scrutiny of characters within their unique existential contexts. The primary character, Peri, serves as an intriguing subject for exploring existentialist themes, including personal identity, faith essence, freedom of choice, and the search for meaning in a seemingly disorderly world. Through the existentialist lens, we illuminate Peri's struggles in reconciling her personal beliefs, societal expectations, and intellectual pursuits – dilemmas that resonate deeply with existentialist concerns about an individual's genuine existence and the decisions one must navigate without clear-cut guidelines or absolute truths.

By applying the existentialist lens, this research seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the characters' existential struggles, their quest for meaning and self-identity, and the philosophical inquiries presented within the novel. This methodological choice enhances the interpretative framework by shedding light on the intricacies of existence, freedom, choice, and the inherent quest for purpose and genuineness threaded throughout the narrative.

### **The Story**

Elif Shafak, an accomplished British-Turkish novelist with a literary portfolio comprising famous works, has garnered widespread acclaim and commercial success. Within Shafak's diverse literary repertoire lies the 2016 novel *Three Daughters of Eve*, a narrative delving intricately into themes of religion, identity, politics, women, and spirituality. The central character, Peri, a young Turkish woman, is raised amidst an ideological clash between her secularist father and her mother's religious conservatism. As Peri advances into adulthood, a scholarship at Oxford University takes her to England, where she forms profound bonds with Shirin, a charismatic British-Iranian feminist and atheist, and Mona, an Egyptian-American girl embracing her cultural heritage by wearing a headscarf. Despite their common Muslim backgrounds, each woman holds distinct perspectives. Peri's life undergoes a transformative shift under the mentorship of Professor Azur, a charismatic yet controversial figure conducting seminars on the subject of God. Peri's burgeoning affection for Azur sets in motion unexpected events profoundly affecting her life, as well as those of Shirin, Mona, and Azur. Through a series of events in the novel, the author sheds light on the societal challenges prevalent in contemporary Turkish society.

### **Results and Discussion**

Peri, the youngest sibling in her family, contends with a complex familial milieu characterized by her parents' strained relationship and their divergent religious and secular convictions. The analysis delves into Peri's persistent existential inquiry, rooted in her early perplexity regarding matters of faith and the divine. An existentialist framework, particularly drawing from the philosophies of Albert Camus, serves as the analytical lens through which Peri's odyssey is scrutinized. At the core of her inner conflict lies the dichotomy between her mother's devout religiosity and her father's unwavering secularism, a schism that permeates the family dynamics. Peri's existential struggle extends beyond mere religious considerations to encompass societal norms, gender dynamics, and political exigencies. The narrative spans various temporal epochs, accentuating the enduring influence of past recollections on Peri's fragile psychological constitution and illuminating the lasting impact of her upbringing, notably shaped by her mother's demeanor.

Patriarchy is a biased view against women, which objectifies them in all the domains of life, rendering men first and women last. Males are considered as superior,

intellectual, competent, thoughtful, decisive, eligible, and confident while women as inferior, ineligible, dumb, spineless, object of sexual gratification only. As a girl, many a time, Peri had to face male's direct and indirect suppression, even the time when she was little, and just had a hair breadth escape from getting kidnapped by a male under the ploy of seeing kittens with pink eyes. In another chapter, when Peri is a married woman, and is leaving for a party with her 12 year old daughter Deniz, she had to give up smoking in a way to succumb to male norm, when, in a traffic jam, she saw two men in another car, grinning towards her taking her pouring smoke as a sexual invitation. She had to pretend modest in order to keep things normal. Just a bit later, she saw a tramp walking down the road, and within no time, her purse from the backseat got robbed by a girl. Encountering the tramp, Peri just got a narrow escape from getting raped, but she could not save herself from the blows of that tramp on her chest. All this caused her hopelessness towards the male-dependent society, and made her feel belittle by the men of her own country. The use of power occurs where the abuser considers himself the legitimate trespasser, who is beyond all the laws implied in that situation.

Under the same theme, while at Oxford, Peri came across a charismatic yet controversial teacher, who considered himself the soul player of his game of chess, where he can take decisions about students taking his seminar. His unorthodox approach towards God and religion, lent him the favors of many enthusiasts as well as the enmity of many haters too. Sometimes, that favors and hate were intermingled with personal gains and loss of their propagators. Among them was Peri herself. That charming personality, stimulated intellectual as well as erotic awakening in Peri, at the same time, decided to keep Peri away from his personal indulgences that rendered Peri meaningless. Peri, who had always been keen to know the idea of God, and wanted to get the satisfactory answers, when arrived at Oxford, found a course of seminar on God, had blown another soul in her while giving her the hope of getting the accurate answers to her questions. But the faith and doubt approach of Azur, his unusual behave with Peri, made her feel giddy. She could see Azur as the long lost reward of all her tireless struggle. That person was taken as the metaphor of God, where he was playing God with his own rules of doubt and faith in different religions. Azur became the center of Peri's daily preoccupations, his omniscient, God-like presence in her thoughts, mind, and other life activities.

*He was an extraordinary teacher, a scholar of integrity. He had managed to shake her, motivate her, challenge her. She had worked harder in his seminar than in any other class. He had shown her the poetry in wisdom and the wisdom in poetry. In his seminars all were welcome and treated equally, regardless of their backgrounds or their views. If there was anything Azur held sacred, surely it was knowledge. She adored the way the last rays of sun tinted his hair gold and the way his eyes sparkled when his mind flew as he spoke about a favorite book or a beloved philosopher.*

She could see her long unanswered questions now going to be answered by the one and only Azur, who perceived to be the only gain of all her activities. Later on, when she could not see her love requited and found her friend Shirin on the place she deemed for herself with reference to Azur, in the spur of jealousy, she complained about Azur to the authorities and took the decision of committing suicide with overdose of paracetamol. In the resolution of the story, Peri talked to Azur,

*Peri shook her head. 'I admired you too much. Now I can see it clearly. When we fall in love we turn the other person into our god – how dangerous is that? And when he doesn't love us back, we respond with anger, resentment, hatred ...' She said, 'There's something about love that resembles faith. It's a kind of blind trust, isn't it? The sweetest euphoria. The magic of connecting with a being beyond our limited, familiar selves. But if we get carried away by love – or by faith – it*

*turns into a dogma, a fixation. The sweetness becomes sour. We suffer in the hands of the gods that we ourselves created.*

Camus do not consider it a nice option to respond to one's existential crisis. As described by Camus, there are three kinds of responses towards existential crisis, but he rejects the first two, one is that people succumb to religious beliefs and other is suicide, while the third is to carry on life activities, keep on struggling against the odds of evils, injustices and oppressions of the world. This is the most rational response to existential crisis, according to Camus. Just the myth of Sisyphus, the person should keep on struggling to make his or her own life worth living and meaningful, it is difficult, still it is the best option as considered by him. The worth noting point is Peri has consulted all three options in different phases of her life, whenever she found herself alienated from the world, and did not find her surrounding worthy of her socialization, she went to opt for any of these options, but in the end, she chose to struggle against the injustices in earth, and this made her able to spend her life satisfactory, at least to some extent.

Not only Peri, but every character in this novel is more or less divided between two poles religion vs atheism, faith vs doubt, and it would be too naive to say that they are stable. They are trembling at their marked spots, they are inclined to oscillate between the two poles still lurking on their supposed fixed position, they are wondering to get answered of their unanswered questions, and they are hollow and more prompted to fill that hole with some balanced weight they fail to procure. They seemed to be the freely-falling bodies yet tending to revolve in around God, still falling into the unknown clutches of fate. They are able to conceive only the fragmented view of God. Their anxiety crawled out of their routinely challenging moments. Accepting their rebellious natures towards religion, they were more or less still tied to that religious knot, seems like playing the role of cushions of some easy chair, buffering the bumps and jolts of people, now and then laying their back against it, search for some temporary at least an accommodating place.

With Umut's arrest by state police right from his house, late at night. The arrest happened due to his Communist-Marxist affiliations, therefore he had to face serious charges levelled against him. His arrest and the serious insult as offered to Mensur by one of the enraged policeman, drowned all the family in grieved silence. The family members could not see Umut till 7 weeks. In a torture cell, he was subjected to inhuman punishments which contributed to Umut's silence for good. The callous treatment to Umut, during which he was made to listen to the screams of other prisoners, national anthem blaring out of loudspeakers, was made to sit on coke bottle, given electric shocks, meanwhile he was sentenced eight year imprisonment without parole. All this rattled the whole family. This prolonged her mother's prostrations and increased her father's drinking. Umut's arrest, gave Peri the view that there were austere ties than she expected. The tensions inside home, the controlling inside the country have pressed her mind. The sense of insecurity rushed the deep panic into her. As the writer relates:

*No need to mention her fears, her migraines, her nightmares and the loneliness, which by now, she knew, was both a curse and a companion.*

This made her reframe her relationship with God. The world and the life and God became more meaningless to her. As she confessed before Azur ‘

*Apologize ...’ Azur said. ‘For what?’ ‘For all the injustice,’ replied Peri. ‘You mean the injustice done to you or to the world?’*

This mixed the emotions of anger, frustration, sorrow, weariness in her. The complicated introvert child, began searching God with intense passion. Finding her searches unrequited, she could not find stability in her view of God and God became the ambiguous maze without a map, an abstract jigsaw puzzle to her.

*She began to quarrel with God. Peri argued with Him about everything, asking questions to which she knew there were no easy answers, asking all the same, in a lowered voice, so that no one could hear. How irresponsible of Him to allow terrible things to happen to those who didn't deserve it. Could God see and hear through prison walls and across cell bars? If He could not, He was not all-powerful. If He could, and still did nothing to help those in need, He was not merciful. Either way, He was not what He claimed to be. He was an impostor.*

God remained an unsolved mystery to her, making her modern Muslim, who does not afford to lose on any front. Her mysterious experiences like baby in the mist, which at times appeared in front of her, giving her the strength to avoid the encountered plight. This question remained an enigma when she tried to discuss it with her father and her mother, both reacted and responded as per their extreme opposite approaches, and both of them failed to satisfied their mentally perplexed daughter. The extreme rationalism of her father and his arguments on science, and her mother's extreme religious conservatism failed to answer her unfulfilled endeavors.

*All of that put Peri, the youngest child, in an awkward position, with both parents striving to win her over; her very existence became a battleground between competing worldviews. The thought that she had to make a choice, once and for all, between her mother's defiant religiosity and her father's defiant materialism almost paralysed her.*

She was child more eager to please her parents, could not cross argue against them, promised to behave on their respective grounds. Her view related to God was divided into multiple pieces, of one goes right, the other tells a different story.

*The deluge of words and emotions coursing through the corridors of the house baffled Peri's innocent mind. She knew, from all that she had been taught, that Allah was the one and only. Yet she could not for a moment believe that the religious teachings her mother held sacred and her father railed against belonged to the same God. Surely they did not. And if they did, how could that God be seen in such diametrically opposite ways by two people who shared a wedding ring – if no longer a bed?*

While some people posed to be passionate believers and others as strict non-believers, she got stuck in between, this categorized her with the existential crisis of modern Muslims, as referred by one of her closest friend Shirin.

*Half Muslim, half modern. Can't stand the sight of pork, but content with wine – or vodka or tequila ... you get the drift. Loosey-goosey when it comes to Ramadan, fasts here and there, yet eats on days in between. Won't abandon religion, for you never know if there's life after death, better to play it safe. Doesn't want to let go of freedoms either. A bit of this, a bit of that. The great fusion of the times: Muslimus modernus.*

The idea of loneliness became her unconditional friend every time, she got perturbed with prevailing meaninglessness, she had the severe feeling of loneliness, and the same feeling had been experienced by her father too. Before entering Oxford, literature became her only pivot. With unmet searches, she exerted all her efforts and redirected all her tendencies in achieving the top marks to earn herself Oxford's scholarship. With the break up with her boyfriend, she locked herself with books and to her father's happiness, she succeeded to get scholarship and got prepared to enter the next phase of life, whose

fate was still to be decided by her choices. According to existentialists, man is free to make choices in this world, he has to create his own meanings to pursue his life jobs in this meaningless absurd world. This causes people to have unknown feelings of fear, anxiety, angst, emptiness and hollowness. The disoriented ness direct them to get fixated with anything, they see as fulfilling enough as either to make their life meaningful and worthy to live, or make them forget their broken and brittle edges. Her loneliness intensified as got more emotionally closer to Azur. Indulgence in sex, smoking, and other life activities and habits as well as preoccupations provide temporary buffers to their unsatisfied people. Peri too involved in her sexual relations in her life, she too is seen doing smoking in her times of anxiety when she could not find anyone to share and calm her disillusionments. This loneliness that started in her childhood, did not leave her even when she got married and had a loyal husband who joined her broken pieces at Oxford. Despite her having three children, busy placid life, smothered relation with her mother, she is empty in her soul as if something is still there in the layers of the past. Though, the end of the story showed the resolution of her Oxford-conflict, it is seen they she is still ambivalent towards the idea of God, and she seemed to be okay with that mediated state. This identifies her option to rebel against the odd ends of life with Camus' suggested response id existentialists. It is her life, and she freely chooses to live on her choices and bear the consequences of her steps is the way familiar to existentialism.

*In the eyes of family and friends, Nazperi Nalbantoğlu – Peri as she was known to all – was a good person. She supported charities, raised awareness about Alzheimer's and money for families in need; volunteered at retirement homes where she competed in backgammon tournaments, losing intentionally; carried treats in her handbag for Istanbul's copious stray cats and, every so often, had them neutered at her own expense; kept a close eye on her children's performance in school; hosted elegant dinners for her husband's boss and co-workers; fasted on the first and last days of Ramadan, but tended to skip the ones in between; sacrificed a hennaed sheep every Eid. She never littered the streets, never jumped the queue at the supermarket, never raised her voice – even when she had been treated rudely. A fine wife, a fine mother, a fine housewife, a fine citizen, a finemodern Muslim she was.*

## Conclusion

This research provides a comprehensive analysis of Elif Shafak's novel *Three Daughters of Eve* through an existentialist lens, with a particular focus on the character of Peri. The study illuminates Peri's existential struggles, emphasizing her quest for intellectual freedom while navigating religious beliefs and societal expectations. Peri's profound inner conflicts, portrayed through distressing nightmares and a pervasive sense of isolation, underscore the psychological toll of her existential quandaries. Additionally, the analysis delves into the societal influences exacerbating Peri's struggle, including gender norms, class distinctions, and the impact of contemporary political and industrial landscapes. This exploration not only enriches our understanding of Peri's character but also sheds light on broader existential themes prevalent in contemporary society, contributing to a deeper comprehension of existentialism within modern literature.

The study holds significant implications for pedagogy. Utilizing Elif Shafak's novel "Three Daughters of Eve" as a tool to explore existentialist concepts offers educators an effective means to engage students with intricate philosophical and psychological ideas within a context that resonates with them. Peri's character and her existential struggles provide a fertile ground for classroom discussions, fostering critical thinking, empathic contemplation, and a more profound examination of philosophical themes. Educators can construct curricula that prompt students to analyze Peri's journey, encouraging them to draw connections between these existential elements and their own lives, beliefs, and



societal contexts. Additionally, this study advocates for the integration of diverse literary works, highlighting the importance of including contemporary fiction from various cultural and social backgrounds to enrich educational experiences and promote a broader understanding of human existence.

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