

## CONFLICT BETWEEN THE 'REAL' AND 'SURREAL' - SHEKURE'S STANCE AGAINST THE COMMODIFICATION OF FEMININITY AND FEMININE DESIRE

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### Abstract

*Gender complementarities' and 'feminine desire' have often been contested by different theorists, but Judith Butler's Gender Trouble, in this regard is of great significance. Butler in her book, intensely states that women have been traditionally indiscernible as far as their political representation is concerned. Therefore the most important goal of feminist theory has been to develop a language which denotes women, especially as far as their visibility in political sphere is concerned. In this regard Butler talks about gender binaries and 'gender complementarities'. This paper takes a closer look at the character of Shekure from Orhan Pamuk's novel, My Name is Red and argues that Shekure emerges as a woman who has successfully transcended the redundant concept of 'feminine desire' and has actively subverted any expectations that the social milieu had from her.*

**Keywords:** Butler, Gender complementarities, Feminine Desire, Turkish Muslim women

Unlike many major novels related to women issues, Shekure is not 'the main' character of *My Name is Red* but 'one of' the mains. She provides some much needed perspective to the readers to understand the intricacies and complexities of the novel. Her presence is crucial for understanding the universe of the novel which is otherwise mired in miniatures, paintings, secret sexual liaisons and a crumbling Ottoman Empire.

The Ottoman era in the novel *My Name is Red* is presented as a time where changes in the political and social sphere are swiftly taking over. Modern day Turkey, as well as the Turkey that emerges from the Ottoman archives, is unfortunately mired in controversy with an implicit understanding on part of most historians, especially those with a Eurocentric bent of mind to consider the Turkish people as overwhelmingly supportive of patriarchy. Narratives of women that emerge from the Ottoman period, therefore are characterized as submissive, passive and regressive. The Eurocentric view of the era is that the Ottoman period was absolutely "silent on the subject of woman. It was even improper to talk about her" (Safarian 41). Slowly, changes did take place but mostly they went unnoticed. Apart from portraying Muslims as primitive, their tendency to repress women has been largely criticized by most historians, with the result that the subversive potential of women in shaping such a vibrant society has largely gone undocumented and unacknowledged. The character of Shekure, therefore, is an attempt on part of Pamuk to explore the dusty archives of Ottoman era and present an altogether different version of women in the Ottoman era, through the agency of an extraordinary woman, who like any other strong women would resist any attempts to compartmentalize her as submissive or passive.

Orhan Pamuk being a post-modernist deviates from the stereotypical ways of narrating a story as he wants to review the typical deep-rooted concepts associated to religious social, and gender structures or views of Turkey. He seems to be taking advice from Keith Jenkins, who in his book *Refiguring History*, argues that all knowledge consists of mere constructs because real knowledge, absolute truth, and objectivity are the fictional fabrications or impossible myths in the postmodern world. He advises all readers to stop striving for 'real historical knowledge' as "there is no way that any historical closure can ever be achieved" (3). He further explains the instability of subjects as "no hegemonic ordering is ever secure: it is always at the risk of being

transformed; refigured” (4). *My Name is Red* is at once a murder mystery and a philosophical discourse on Ottoman history, but it is the presence of Shekure’s character that gives another dimension to the novel. Her character not only points towards the gender inequalities simmering beneath the veneer of Ottoman culture but also serves as a deliberate strategy on part of the author to engage in some self-referential playing with forms, narratives, and tropes that have forever been associated with the Ottoman era. Whatever themes have been explored within the universe of the novel inevitably point towards the character of Shekure in some way and Shekure, in turn, acts as the answer to the mystery of the main plot. Shekure, therefore, is much more than a mimetic representation of the Ottoman woman. She is also the nucleus of the entire plot if there is such a thing in a postmodern novel.

As the novel is set in the Sixteenth century Turkey ruled by Sultan Murat III. The plot rotates around the murder mystery of a miniaturist that serves to expose the conflict among the Muslim style of Miniature painting and the Western art of portraits. The use of several narrators is one of the features that not only helps give a different perspective each time the readers think they have understood the plot thereby throwing them off balance. Each narrator describes his/her individual story. Even though most of the narration in the novel is done by men, the readers are introduced to two female characters, Shekure and Esther, who speak for themselves during the development of the novel. Likewise, the readers are given the chance to hear the story from both male and female point of view. The chapters narrated by female characters bring a new perspective to the novel. Shekure as ‘one of’ the main characters is given the right to speak about her mental state, sentiments and mostly her life as a widow. Pamuk’s concern for gender fluidity is mostly revealed through Shekure, a widow with three children, who like despite following her womanhood expresses her likes and dislikes like a man. Besides, Pamuk’s goal is to present Shekure as a symbol of the crumbling Ottoman Empire where rigid gender binaries are finally being shattered and exposed for what they are. Through Shekure, the readers are exposed to the endless efforts on part of women which to change the social status of their country.

Undoubtedly, in Western literature, a Muslim woman has been given the stereotypical, submissive and a quintessence of loyalty image during the course of its history. Shekure is given this liberty as a female who stands against such customs to express herself, her desires and particularly finds her position in the male dominate society. As mostly, it is depicted that in the Ottoman Era women had no liberty of body and mind. These women could not have a representation at social, economical and cultural platforms. Among such woman, the postmodern readers hear a voice that once has been forever relegated to the periphery. Her character pushes the boundaries drawn for her by the power structure. By deconstructing the gender binaries Shekure makes herself visible in the universe of the novel as she states:

Don’t be surprised that I’m talking to you. For years I’ve searched through the pictures in my father’s books looking for images of women and great beauties.

They do exist, if few and far between, and always look shy, embarrassed, gazing only at one another, as if apologetically. Never do they raise their heads, stand straight and face the people of the world as soldiers and sultans would. Only in cheap, hastily illustrated books by careless artists are the eyes of some women trained not on the ground or on something in the illustration- oh, I don’t know,

let's say a lover or a goblet - but straight at the reader. I've long wondered about that reader. (35)

Shekure ponders that unlike warriors and kings, the name of mostly women are not written in times gone by and they were not given proper space to express themselves. Not in arts, especially in paintings they are hardly portrayed or if they are portrayed they are always given a conventional weak and insignificant spot. As the gender norms never allowed a woman to express or write about her desires. Shekure is one such woman who defies the gender binaries and speaks to break this rigid gender governed philosophy. Shekure is a character who dares to transcend the social milieu in the Ottoman era by being conscious of her historical position.

Likewise, she is depicted to us in the very early parts of the novel as a woman who is more shrewd than Black. Revealing the adoration between Black herself and, Shekure boldly enlightens us that "he [Black] was twelve years my elder when I was twelve, I was more mature than he." (39) Furthermore, she describes how Black fell in love with her, speaking of the effects of her own beauty simply, as though explaining facts. It is apparent from the very beginning that she is a very self-aware character. For instance, Shekure describes herself as a: "maiden of striking beauty. Any man who caught sight of me even once, from afar, or from between parted curtains or yawning doors, or even though the layers of my modest head coverings, immediately became enamored of me" (39).

Similarly, she is depicted as a woman who is stuck in a place where she is treated no more than a mere painting, which is beautiful and elegant. Nonetheless, for Black, she is more of an inanimate object rather than a living woman. Black equates his love for Shekure with the mythological love story of Husrev and Shirin. For him, Shekure is a surreal reality. As Shekure says:

Black made exact copies of Shirin's look of adoration and bewilderment as she gazes upon the image of Husrev. But after falling in love with me in place of Husrev and Shirin, he portrayed himself and me, Black and Shekure [...], he'd depict us in the same manner and color. I all in blue, he all in red. And if this weren't indication enough, he'd also written our names beneath the figures (40).

Even though she gives us the details of all the paintings that her father and Black has made, but comparative to Black and other narrators in the novel, she has a less poetical tone. It is obvious that she wants to detach herself from that world of art. For her, it is much about forcing the world to see her as a living flesh and blood creature. As in Orhan Pamuk *Secularism and Blasphemy* Shekure is described as a woman who is "trying to negotiate her place within the traditional confines of a patriarchal society of her time" (Goknar, 141). She being a woman who is ahead of her times gives value to herself as a female and clearly rejects Black's fantasy of treating her a painting as she describes, "I was very well aware that I would not be able to love him like a Shirin, so I feigned ignorance" (40). Her rejection towards such kind of love where she is fanaticized to perform an inanimate role shows that she will not let herself come under the category of women who "fit into conventional, stereotypical categories of gender prearranged by a specific culture" (Butler, 9) On the other hand, Shekure's father Enishte Effendi was an orthodox father who wanted to control his daughter's fate. Once again Shekure expresses her feeling as she states:

If it were left to my father, my husband would not only be the greatest of scholars, he'd also have an appreciation for painting and art, be possessed of power and authority, and be as rich as Karun, the wealthiest of men in the Koran. The inkling of such a man couldn't even be found in the pages of my father's books, and so I would've been forced to pine away at home forever (43).

Moreover, as Frantz Fanon in *A Dying Capitalism* states: "The birth of a boy in a family is greeted with greater enthusiasm than that of a girl. The father identifies in him a future working partner, a successor to the family plot and after his death a guardian for the mother and the sisters." (105) Where as "the girl has no opportunity [...] to develop her personality or to take any initiative." (106). All the important choices in her life are made by her father; for she is taught to accept all these behaviors without any complaints. Through this recurrent performance of the gender deeds, "the girl adopts automatically the behavior and the values of [...] feminine society." (106). This repetition of these passive gender norms set by the patriarchal culture is what Shekure strives to annihilate. As it is Shekure's will for not being trapped in the gender norms of her society. She never wanted to surrender towards the will of her father and did not want to be loved like a painting. Therefore, she rejected Black's love and married a man of her own choice. She explains that "My father dotes on me, though I married a man, not of his choosing." (41). She married a soldier, who in the Ottoman times was "looked upon as a penniless soldier," (42) but the reason Shekure marries him makes the reader believe that Shekure will be creating her own identity. In her words Shekure explains that the reason to fall in love with him was that there was a difference in him and men that were usually found in the culture, her partner was "innocent and quiet like a sleepy child [...] mild and quiet as a lady. (44)." Shekure clearly wants to liberate herself from limits of the gender of her era and the identity which is imposed on the women of the Ottoman Era.

Though her husband never returned from the war against the Safavid, leaving two children Orhan and Shevet behind. Shekure did not let this incident become her weakness. She states that "I slowly grew accustomed to his absence; [...]" (45)."As her character is born out of her historical period, for her clash against the conventional sexual attributes of the era sets her above the horizons of her particular time. She was left with a chauvinistic bachelor brother-in-law Hassan and an old father-in-law. In the name of protection both of these men wanted to label

Shekure as their slave. As she states, "They desired that I should do the kitchen work, wash the clothes and even go out to the bazaars to do the shopping in her stead." (48). Their male dominated attitude towards Shekure symbolizes that "[...] men determine what parts women shall or shall not play, and the female is everywhere subsumed by the male." (Rich 245). This affirms that Hassan wanted to treat her like an object. He considers Shekure an object of sexual pleasure. Shekure mentions that "he desirously looked at me as he was dying of thirst and I was a glass of cold sour-cherry sherbet." (48). However, Shekure with her tactics rejects this kind of love as she thought that this relationship will only be a master/slave relationship she states that

"If I were to do this without careful thought, I might find myself, God forbid, his slave instead of being his wife." (50) Though Shekure is an enigmatic and a complicated character, what is central to her characterization in the novel is the idea that she is never satisfied with the submissive and helpless role imposed upon her by society, especially by her family. Shekure continuously attempts to "renegotiate her performative role" (Butler, 24) by transforming the

rigid sexual rules and bonds of her time. So, after rejecting Hassan's love, Shekure with her own free will finally come back to her father's home with her two sons.

Likewise, Shekure proves that "gender is not a stable identity from which various acts proceed; rather it is an identity established through a stylized repetition of acts" (Butler, 45). Through her strong character, it is depicted that how essential is her presence to all the men in her life such as Black, Hasan and her own father Enishte. It is evident that without her presence it will not be possible for these two men to survive. After Shekure leaves her in laws home, the lovesick Hassan is the one who is sending her letters and confessing his one-sided love. Shekure states that Hassan represented his loneliness through the "love letters in whose corners he drew forlorn birds, teary eyed lions, and sad gazelles." (51) In one of the letter, he wrote "in my dreams I see myself chasing you over isolated hilltops. Every time when you leave one of my letters- that I know you read- unanswered, a three-feathered arrow stab in my heart." (149) Moreover, it is Enishte who needs her continuously needs her support. She says "My father does not want me to be declared a widow by the verdict of the judge either. If I am granted a divorce, he thinks I'll find myself a new husband and abandon him." (169) Thus, it is these two men who find themselves helpless and lonely in Shekure's absence.

Nevertheless, Shekure's free- will disprove the binary opposition of gender, as well as it hints that mostly men are more reliant and weaker than a female. In Butler's words "through such kind of a resistance or reinterpreting gender rules one comes to know that what is considered an ultimate reality or a natural fact is actually an instable state and thus it can be 'refigured'." (87) Readers through Shekure's character are presented with an idea to negate the illusion of a rigid gender principle.

Furthermore, the readers are introduced to a post-modern technique called metalepsis, which is defined in Postmodern Narrative Theory as a technique where "the boundary between the worlds of the author is merged with the world of the character." (Currie, 165) Pamuk has named one of Shekure's son as Orhan, which gives an impression that the author himself is expressing his desire towards Shekure. As after the death of his father when Shekure asks Orhan

"If the Sultan of the Jinns came and said he'd grant you a wish, what would you want most of all? [...] Would you want to have a father?" (87) Orhan very explicitly replies, "No when I grow up I'm going to marry you myself." (87). Orhan's desire can be compared with the classical

Freudianism but on the other hand, it can be taken as a case of metalapsis at work in Pamuk's work. Here the author figure expresses his possessiveness and admiration for his own female character. Also, it can be seen as an extension of the author's desire to 'liberate' his female characters. In *The Politics of the Performative*, Butler highlights the need to have a society which does not have such firm gender rules, so as to make life more meaningful and substantial for a human being. Gender has no ontological status. It is a concept that has been created by the strict patriarchal rules and can be 'undone'. The story of the novel primarily exists in the world of miniaturists. They described everything with great detail and treated every situation as if it was a piece of art. It is through Shekure's voice the readers are presented with a natural description.



Similarly like the Ottoman Era, in the world of paintings, the folklores are given much importance which depicted woman as creatures who are trained to exclude passion and sexual desires. The feminine desires of women in such times were confined only to getting married once and for reproduction. Shekure wants to shun these notions. After being a widow her old lover comes back once again in her life and wants to treat her like an inanimate object. Black states: “In our childhood, you remember how I use to discuss Husrev and Shirin, who fell in love after seeing images of each other don’t you?” (147) Shekure is desperate to get over with this unreasonable comparison of mythical Shirin. Black ones again refuse to see her as a woman with flesh and body. Shekure this time is even bolder enough to express her feelings as she delineates:

I embraced him. This so pleased me that I felt no guilt [...] I hugged him tighter. I let him kiss me, I kissed him back. And as we kissed, it was as if the entire world has entered a gentle twilight. I wished everybody could embrace each other the way we did. I faintly recorded that real love was supposed to be like this. He put his tongue into my mouth. I was so content with that I was doing, it was as if the whole world were engulfed in blissful light (150).

Shekure by implementing her feminine desires revolutionizes the perceived concept of a woman only exhibiting submissive feminine roles. Her sexual act describes that women can also make the impossible possible by exploring the domain of sex which is claimed by men to be exclusively theirs.

Furthermore, as the story progresses we witness Shekure’s character taking more control of her fate. After her father is murdered Shekure is seen as a cunning future planner, a detective and a director of her own actions. She is depicted as a woman who is ‘performing’ all such roles that are usually ascribed to men. Shekure is portrayed as a bold, courageous and a woman who is determined to define her own space. Shekure very elegantly deconstructs the false opinions that such traits are gender specific. Butler in *Gender Trouble* clarifies that “[...] what we take to be an internal essence of gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body.” (xv) Shekure like a master controlling Black is seen “masculine” in the performance and while at the same time portraying her feminine behavior or feminine desires she expresses that “Black took my large breast into his hands, [...] which felt good and forgetting all I longed for him to suck on my nipples.” (152) The switching in between explores the level of performance of gender roles which can be reversed and performed. Butler sees gender as a performance which can not only be upturned but also planned out according to a desire of an individual.

Similarly, she understands perfectly the script of gender power at play in the novel. She realizes that ‘typical’ man of honor in the Ottoman world can only be motivated to fulfill her desires if you play the traditional role of the passive/aggressive female. She uses her own sexuality as a mean to maneuver to get what she wants. Her high sexual feminine desire taught Shekure that her sexuality should not be used for her subjugation. It is actually a game-changer as it helps her to understand and make Black realize that who really has the ‘real power’ in this relationship. Other than love the real motif behind Black’s wish to marry Shekure was to come at equal footing with her father, as she was the daughter of his master. Being an intellectual woman, Shekure is well aware of this motif and with her ‘femininity’ knows how to control Black as she states:

[...] when I saw that he'd opened his pink mouth as a child would have. I unexpectedly felt, like putting my breast into it. With my fingers on his nape and tangled in his hair, Black would place his head between my breasts, and as my own children used to do, he'd roll his eyes back into his head with pleasure as he sucked on my nipple: After understanding that only through my compassion would he find peace, he'd become completely bound to me." (139)

Furthermore, Shekure expresses her sexual desires very boldly as she is very conscious of the power of her sexuality and enjoys her dominance over Black:

I could feel him beside me. Suddenly, I sensed that he'd come up from behind me, he was kissing the nape of my neck, the back of my ears and I could how strong it was. It was solid, large and hard [...]. My name tingled, my nipples were stifling. I could feel his enlarged member behind me, close to me. What was Black's like? [...] I notice that he has become erect [...] "Yes, it grows that large," then my husband's wasn't so big. If Black's is bigger, I'm sure I'll have great pleasure, as it will fit inside me at all. (145)

Likewise, subverting the usual historical notions about Ottoman Era's women she wants to create opportunities for her own self by becoming the master of her destiny. As after her father's murder she marries Black on her own terms as she says:

First, you must swear before two witnesses that if you behave badly towards me in our marriage, to a degree that I find unbearable, or if you take a second wife, you will grant me a divorce with alimony. Second, you must swear before two witnesses that if for whatever reason you are absent from the house for more than a six-month period without a visit, I will also be granted a divorce with alimony. Thirdly after we are married, you will, of course, move into my home [...] and until our Sultan's book, completed under the guidance of your talents and efforts, has been honorably presented to Him, [...] and until the villain who has murdered my father has been caught, you will not share my bed. Fourth, you will love my sons, who do share my bed with me, as if they were you own children. (191)

Despite all these terms and conditions, Black agrees to marry her. Shekure, with this agreement, rejects the stereotypical notion of the female as dependent and passive. Shekure as Pamuk presents her, is a perfect example of a woman who through her character exercises her own agency of power. It is through her assertion of gender power that she overshadows all the male characters in the novel.

Subsequently, we witness Shekure never compromising on her motto of finding her father's murderer. As on the first night of their marriage instead of being an ultra-feminine woman, Shekure like a leader commands Black that "we have a lot to do in fighting our enemies, those who would obstruct the completion of my father's book and those who could contest my divorce and our marriage ceremony [...]." (192). With this notion, Shekure actively subverts and interrupts the so-called continuity and coherence of gender identity and defies the concept of true

womanhood. Shekure's desire to explore another dimension of her sexuality is also reflected in the following words:

I can't say I completely understood why Persian poets, who for centuries had likened that male tool to a reed pen, also compared the mouths of us women to inkwells, or what lay behind such comparisons whose origins had been forgotten through rote repetition--was it the smallness of the mouth? The arcane silence of the inkwell? Was it that God Himself was an illuminator? (408)

She ponders why Persian poets have linked the mouths of women to ink wells symbolized by the alphabet 'nun'- while a man's penis 'alif' has been likened to a reed pen. Is it, because of the inherent passivity of the inkwell and by extension of women in general, or is it because God Himself is an illuminator and is like a reed pen who finds His expression in an inkwell. A man's sexuality, as Shekure would put it, can only gain impetus from a woman's sexuality. She mentions "[...] my mouth was thus occupied, my eyes could make out Black looking at me in a completely different way. He said he'd never again forget my face and my mouth." (409)

Likewise, Shekure's consciousness of her sexuality also makes her aware of another ironic aspect that society in general views any hint of women's sexuality as a suspect. This leads her to proclaim in a mock serious tone that, "Love, however, must be understood, not through the logic of a woman like me who continually racks her brain to protect herself but through it illogic." (410). It means she is aware of the spiritual/erotic binaries that people associate with the concept of love and is aware that spiritual love is strictly considered the domain of passive submissive woman who mostly leaves their own selves at the mercy of others. Unlike, Shekure herself who actively seeks to protect herself and therefore is incapable of experiencing submissiveness. Additionally, Shekure towards the end muses about having her own youthful self-painted not in the typical Ottoman mode but in modern Venetian mode that reflects her personality. She states:

My own portrait; but I knew however hard the Sultan's miniaturist tried they'd fail because even if they could see my beauty, woefully, none of them would believe a woman's face was beautiful without depicting her eyes and lips like a Chinese woman's. Had they represented me as a Chinese beauty, the way the old masters of Herat would've, perhaps those who saw it and recognized me could discern my face behind the face of that Chinese beauty. But later generations, even if they realized my eyes weren't really slanted, could never determine what my face truly looked like. How happy I'd be today, in my old age--which I live out through the comfort of my children-- if I had a youthful portrait of myself! (482)

Thus, the new Turkish woman sketched in the novel is bold enough to voice her wishes and counter the shackles of traditionalism and submission. This powerful tool has enabled her to realize her full potential and gain the confidence to 'undo' her prescribed gender roles. It is nothing less than a remarkable feat that Pamuk manages to make a 'minor' character like Shekure the pivot of his narrative about a mystery set in sixteenth century. Shekure by her presence not only brings about a somewhat grudging sense of resolution to the plot towards the





end but also highlights the contemporary concerns regarding Muslim women in a novel set in the sixteenth century. However, it is primarily her character's motivation to redefine her sexuality and the very notion of femininity that helps her leave her imprint on the mind of the reader as a truly remarkable woman-albeit fictional.

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