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ALTERNATIVE KINSHIP AND CULTURAL RESISTANCE: A
CRITICAL STUDY OF ELIF SHAFK'S *HONOR* THROUGH
DONNA HARAWAY'S THEORY OF KINSHIP



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Abstract

Elif Shafak's *Honor* (2012) offers a subtle narrative that questions notions of family, gender, and cultural identity within a transnational context of Turkey and London. The current study aims to explore how Shafak's novel portrays alternative kinship as a form of cultural resilience against patriarchal norms, honor-based violence and rigid communal structures. Through the analyses of the central characters of the novels like Pembe, Jamila, Adam and Iskender and their relationships, the study focuses on highlighting how these alternative structures challenges traditional definitions of family, honour and redefines the notion of belonging beyond blood ties. Anchored in Donna Haraway's theory of kinship (2011), the paper argues that Shafak's narrative constructs a counter-discursive space where choice, empathy and agency undermine oppressive cultural practices. In doing so, Shafak's *Honor* (2012) contributes to broader discussions on identity formation, agency and resistance in the contemporary migratory fiction. The study employs a qualitative methodology with a close textual analysis of the novel to highlight instances of resistance and transformation. The paper contributes to feminist and diaspora literature by offering new insights into how *Honor* (2012) redefines kinship beyond patriarchal constraints. The researchers emphasises the novel's significance in reimagining kinship as a site for cultural resistance and the redefinition of familial belonging in the contemporary migrant fiction. The study point out that these redefined kinship structures function as a form of cultural resistance that empowers characters like Pembe to disrupt established oppressive cultural norms. Eventually, the paper demonstrates how Shafak's *Honor* (2012) offers a novel perspective on kinship and skilfully highlights emotional and chosen relationships as alternative as well as transformative forces that reimagines the concept of family, identity and belonging .

Keywords: Alternative kinship, Cultural Resistance, *Honor*, culture, Donna Haraway

Introduction

The concept of family has long been intertwined with social and cultural expectations that command the behaviour of its members, particularly women (Smith, 1987). Honour, a cultural construct closely tied to familial reputation, has historically placed women's bodies at the centre of social control mechanisms. In patriarchal societies, women's honor is seen as a reflection of male authority and pride, reinforcing gendered hierarchies. Honor-based violence, often endorsed against women, serves as both a punitive and corrective measure to maintain the integrity of familial honour. In this context, women's autonomy is severely restricted and their identities are often defined by the honour they either uphold or betray.

Elif Shafak's *Honor* (2012) takes these cultural dynamics as a central theme, exploring how honour, violence and gender norms operate within the Turkish and British diaspora. Through the lives of its central characters—Pembe, Iskender and Jamila/Penguen— Shafak critically examines the ways in which honour cultures shape individual destinies and familial relationships. However, rather than

reinforcing conventional narratives about honour and family, Shafak's *Honor* (2012) challenges these traditional structures by presenting alternative kinship models that resist patriarchal control. Through her characters' struggles, Shafak provides a complex and multifaceted portrayal of family, identity and belonging, urging readers to reconsider the limitations of conventional kinship.

This study argues that *Honor* (2012) uses alternative kinship—networks of chosen familial relations built on empathy, shared history and resistance—as a crucial strategy of cultural resistance. These alternative bonds challenge dominant patriarchal structures that equate honour with female chastity and male authority. By offering relationships based on empathy, choice and solidarity, Shafak reimagines the family as a space that can transcend traditional cultural and patriarchal boundaries. This study draws on Donna Haraway's theory of kinship (2011) to explore how kinship structures in the novel function not as fixed, biologically determined entities but as dynamic, relational practices grounded in care and collective agency. Haraway's conceptualisation of kinship challenges traditional family forms and suggests that kinship is a process of becoming—an evolving network of connections that can provide refuge from oppressive structures. (Haraway, 2011)

In addition, this research also integrates Cohen's (2008) diaspora theory, feminist cultural criticism and Butler's (2004) queer kinship studies to analyse the ways in which alternative kinship in *Honor* (2012) acts as a site of resistance against both cultural and familial constraints. By examining how characters negotiate their identities across different cultural settings, this paper investigates how the novel reconfigures the notion of family in ways that allow for greater agency and empowerment, especially for women. Moreover, the study reveals how *Honor* (2012) critiques traditional kinship structures and how these critiques contribute to broader dialogues about migration, identity and resistance in contemporary migrant and feminist literature, especially Turkish/British.

Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative research methodology based on close textual analysis of *Honor* (2012) to explore the themes of alternative kinship and cultural resistance. The research focuses on understanding how Shafak uses character development, narrative structures and thematic exploration to represent kinship as a dynamic and resistance-based practice. The analysis is guided by frameworks from feminist cultural criticism, diaspora theory, and queer kinship studies, with particular emphasis on Donna Haraway's theory of kinship (2011).

This section of the study provides a detailed discussion and explanation of the research framework and research methodology that help in data collection and its procedures as well as in research tools. Research means using certain established methods for enquiry and study of a problem or to answer a question in detail or to add more to the existing pool of knowledge about it by applying the already tested tools and methods that are involved in it. The basic purpose of a qualitative research is to analyse non-quantitative data found while studying human behaviours, actions, events, ethics and norms, etc. The qualitative approach represents data from the people's viewpoint, taken as the major source of data collection who is the witness of different circumstances in daily life (Bryman, 2004). Therefore, qualitative research is also based on a naturalistic approach to data generation and data collection.

Theoretical Framework

The research is grounded in Donna Haraway's theory of kinship (2011). Haraway's conceptualisation of kinship challenges traditional family forms and suggests that kinship is a

process of becoming—an evolving network of connections that can provide refuge from oppressive structures. Furthermore, this research also integrates Cohen (2008) diaspora theory, feminist cultural criticism and Butler's (2004) queer kinship studies to analyse the ways in which alternative kinship in *Honor* (2012) acts as a site of resistance against both cultural and familial constraints

The paper employs a thematic analysis model, a qualitative approach that identifies and examines recurring motifs in the text related to kinship, honor, violence and resistance.

The methodology allows for an in-depth exploration of how Shafak's narrative subverts traditional kinship structures and offers alternative forms of familial connections. This analysis focuses on the relational dynamics between characters, their evolving identities, and the cultural contexts in which they negotiate belonging.

Literature Review

Honor Culture and Patriarchy

Honour culture, as analysed in anthropology and feminist studies, involves the regulation of individual behaviour through communal concepts of reputation, particularly concerning women's sexuality and public conduct (Abu-Lughod, L., 1993). In such societies, a woman's honour is often seen as the responsibility of male relatives and her actions—especially those related to her sexuality—are considered to reflect on the entire family's honor (Anderson, 2004; Kandiyoti, 1988). In Shafak's *Honor* (2012), this patriarchal structure is portrayed as oppressive and limiting, dictating the lives of women and forcing them into roles that reinforce male authority. Honor-based violence becomes a tool for maintaining these social norms, often leading to tragic consequences for those who transgress established boundaries (Gill, 2009).

In *Honor* (2012), Shafak brings these themes to life through the character of Pembe, who is subjected to rigid honor-based expectations. Her life is shaped by the belief that her worth is bound to her family's reputation. Early in the novel, Pembe is introduced as a character who, despite her yearning for freedom, feels compelled to adhere to the expectations imposed by her husband and the broader societal norm of protecting familial honour. She is repeatedly forced into difficult situations that question her autonomy, such as when she becomes complicit in hiding her husband's violent behaviour due to the shame that would fall upon their family (Shafak, 2012, p. 15).

Shafak's portrayal of Iskender's tragic spiral into violence reveals the destructive power of the strict honour culture. Iskender, raised with the belief that male aggression is justified in defence of family honour, becomes both the victim and perpetrator of violence. His internalized sense of honour (through his meetings with the Orator) leads to destructive actions that isolate him from his family and reinforce patriarchal cycles. As the Orator tells Iskender about women in patriarchal context:

'It's harder for women, that's the thing. There are too many distractions to divert them from the right path. All the glitter of the fashion world, then there's the search for rich husbands, smart furniture. It never ends.' (Shafak, 2012, p. 218)

Diaspora, Identity and Hybridity

Diaspora studies emphasise the challenges faced by individuals who occupy liminal spaces between cultures, navigating the complexities of belonging in both their home country and their new, often Western, environments (Clifford, 1994; Hall, 1990). For many migrants, identity becomes an ongoing negotiation, caught between the inherited values of their cultural origin and the freedom (or alienation) they experience in the diaspora. Shafak's *Honor* (2012) situates the novel's characters in

a complex intersection of cultural, gendered and generational identity crises, with each character negotiating their place within Turkish, British and diasporic contexts. In Nevin Faden Gürbüz's (2019) words, the novel is considered as a multicultural novel and it defines "multicultural identity in an extended transnational viewpoint" (GÜRBÜZ, 2019; Hanieh Vahabi, 2021).

Shafak starts the story by introducing her male protagonist, Iskender, in prison, and continues to describe him to the reader through the letters Iskender writes while he is in prison. One can say that Iskender has always been in a prison cell either in its material or other social/cultural forms and he has been experiencing the otherness of an immigrant in British society where he has never been integrated properly. (Hanieh Vahabi, 2021).

The experiences of Iskender, Jamila and Penguen reflect the difficulties of balancing these competing traditional cultural expectations. For instance, Jamila's transformation into Penguen upon moving to London exhibits how migration can allow for personal reinvention, offering her the freedom to escape the boundaries of the familial honour system. However, her dual identity also reflects the inner conflict faced by those trying to reconcile conflicting cultural expectations. As Penguen navigates the complexities of being both Turkish and British, she embodies the hybridity that characterizes the diasporic experience.

Donna Haraway and Kinship

Donna Haraway's theory of kinship (2011) provides a critical framework for understanding the forms of alternative family structures in *Honor* (2012). Haraway's work challenges the traditional, biological concept of kinship, proposing instead that kinship is a relational and evolving practice. In her other seminal work *The Companion Species Manifesto* (2003), Haraway argues that kinship is not merely a static bond defined by biology or legal contracts but rather a dynamic process of becoming, defined by care, cooperation and collective action. Kinship, according to Haraway (2003), extends beyond human relations and encompasses the interconnectedness of all species.

In *Honor* (2012), Haraway's conceptualisation of kinship as a process rather than a fixed state can be applied to the novel's alternative kinship structures. The relationships formed by characters like Iskender and Aisha, or Pembe and her children, are based on mutual care, empathy, and choice rather than on traditional patriarchal or biological imperatives. These kinship networks resist the rigid honour-based structures that prioritise blood and lineage over personal agency and emotional connections.

Kinship beyond Blood: Chosen Families

Queer kinship studies emphasize the formation of chosen families—relationships based on care and mutual support rather than biological ties (Weston, 1991). This theoretical approach challenges heteronormative and patriarchal structures of family by asserting that kinship can be formed through emotional bonds and shared experiences. In *Honor* (2012), Shafak's characters repeatedly choose their own familial networks, rejecting the oppressive norms imposed by their biological families. Hanieh Vahabi (2021) discusses Iskender's choice of familial networks as his *post-migration identity* is shaped his regular struggle for integration. He is constantly resilient to the existing system of identity formation and refused to be part or victim of it. Vahabi (2021) argues that he (Iskender) calls the house belongs to them and vows with his gang that "their (the society or family) plan is to throw us out. And our plan is to fight back 'coz if you don't fight the system, you are the system" (Shafak, 212). Vahabi (2021) considers "the house" as a symbol for the country

where Iskender and his gang consider themselves as misfit immigrant and thinks that [*“They wanna kick us out of this bloody country [...]*

You, me, him ... Arabs, Turks, Italians, Jamaicans, Lebanese, Pakistanis ... Are we just gonna sit and joke about it? Like fuckin' ducks at the funfair] (Hanieh Vahabi, 2021)

These chosen relationships allow for the creation of spaces in which individuals can assert their agency and negotiate their identities outside the constraints of patriarchal honour systems.

According to Shafak (2012), Honour puts a man in his high horse. Adem did not marry Jamila not because of the knowledge that she may have been sexually assaulted, that she is tainted. This perceived shame was enough for him to call off the wedding and married her twin instead, despite the fact that he loved Jamila and not Pembe. Culture takes precedence over passion. Pembe talks about honour/shame binary when she recalls her childhood:

So it was that in the land where Pink Destiny and Enough Beauty were born, ‘honour’ was more than a word. It was also a name. You could call your child ‘Honour’, as long as it was a boy. Men had honour. [......] Women did not have honour. Instead, they had shame.

And, as everyone knew, Shame would be a rather poor name to bear. (Shafak, 2012, p-21)

In a letter to her sister Jamila, Pembe calls her marriage with Adem the biggest mistake of her life as [*Adem is no husband*] to her as [*he has found himself another woman.....*]. This had saddened her heart as she is sad and her heart is always [*full of words unsaid, tears unshed*] for what she [*don't blame him*] but herself. For her [*He is a man who has many regrets and no courage*] and that makes her to even [*feel sorry for him.*] (Shafak, 2012, p-90)

However, this highlights the real issue that Shafak (2012) wants to address — does a woman have the right to follow her passions? Does she have the right to be happy? Pembe was happiest when she was watching movies with Elias, that he offered her kindness and attention.

Pembe's husband, Adem is a wayward gambler who left his family for a Bulgarian gold digger, leaving the family worse off. Does he have the right to claim his honour? Adem, as loathsome as he was, is starkly convincing.

Internal struggle of adaptation

Shafak addresses the internal conflict in Pembe and her relationship with Elias, but these internal struggles are somewhat more apparent in Iskender.

Even Iskender's name is a battlefield. In England, he is Alex until he met the Orator who advised him to use his original name. His gang is a bunch of misfits from other countries of origin, his girlfriend Katie is English and despite all this, he cares about the Honour of the family as the Orator brainwashed his mind like that. Being the man of the house and the eldest Son as his father Adem had left them, he struggles to conciliate between the duties of his religion to the laws of the country. His arc goes a full circle of the story, regretting his action his only wish was conciliation with Pembe. (Teguh, 2021)

Jamila/Penguen's relationships with her friends and mentors in London represent a chosen family, where the emotional bonds are rooted in mutual respect and understanding rather than obligations tied to familial honour. Jamila/Penguen's relationships with her friends and mentors in London exemplify the concept of a chosen family, wherein connections are established through voluntary emotional commitment rather than traditional familial obligations. In contrast to relationships grounded in familial honour, which often entail expectations linked to cultural or social duties, these bonds emphasise mutual respect, understanding, and support. This chosen family creates an

environment that allows individuals to express themselves authentically, receive guidance and cultivate trust without the limitations imposed by inherited roles or responsibilities. The emotional profoundness of these relationships stems from shared experiences, empathy and a deliberate commitment to fostering each other's well-being, thereby underscoring the significance of relational autonomy over prescribed social conventions. Shafak contrasts these chosen kinship relationships with the cold, violent interactions dictated by blood ties, thus highlighting the empowering potential of alternative kinship structures.

Discussion and analysis

Iskender's alternative kinship

Iskender's character embodies the tension between traditional cultural expectations and personal autonomy. Born in London and caught between Turkish honour norms and British liberal values, Iskender forges relationships that defy normative kinship.

In Britain the dislike of foreigners always catches me off guard. They don't always call you spic or greasy wop to your face, although there is that from time to time. Racism is not part of daily life, as it is in some other countries I hear about. It is subtle and always polished. It is not about your skin colour or your religion, really. It is about how civilized you are. (Shafak, 2012, p-136)

According to Vahabi (2021), Iskender sees himself as the other in Britain where "the dislike of foreigners always catches [him] off guard. [British] don't always call [him] spic or greasy wop to [the] face, although there is that from time to time" (Shafak, 2012, p. 136). This may justify Iskender's social relation to England and the reason he confines himself to kinship and limits his friends to Kurdish, Turkish, and Arab and to the boxing club members.

Similarly following his migration to London and the perceived loss of his father's authority, Iskender forms a gang with his friends Faarid, Arshad, Aziz and Alaadin. This group acts as an alternative kinship structure, providing him with a sense of brotherhood, belonging, and identity that replaces his fractured biological family. He forms a gang with people like him

[We had strict unwritten rules that everyone obeyed. No tolerance for paedophiles and rapists.] (Shafak, 2012, p-136)

His bond with Zeeshan reveals an alternative kinship based less on blood and more on mutual recognition and care. Their interactions rests on the dominant narrative that confines individuals to roles defined by mutual care and respect. Zeeshan's supportive presence in Iskender's life underscores an ethic of care that operates outside kinship based on blood relations, though there are times when he *[wanted to punch him in the face or just tell him to shut up]*, because he developed *[a high tolerance threshold for this bloke]* (Shafak, 2012, pp-292)

As Ahmed (2018) notes in her work on affect and family, emotional bonds often function as sites of resistance where individuals renegotiate belonging and selfhood. Shafak illustrates this through their connection, portraying it as a form of resistance to the oppressive family structures they each come from.

Pembe's Maternal Bonds

Pembe, the matriarch, initially appears as an agent of tradition—she subscribes to honour norms that govern her female behaviour. However, her maternal identity evolves as she confronts the consequences of rigid adherence to patriarchal values of honour and like. These values incorporated in her mind through her mother Naze, who had been victim of patriarchal suppression. In the scene

when she was showing her sister Jamila the dance steps she had seen in the film, their mother scolded them. It made Pembe [*felt a surge of resentment course through her – why couldn't her mother enjoy the songs as the passengers on the bus had done? Why were perfect strangers more tolerant than one's closest kin?*] (Shafak, 2012, p-20)

A central scene illustrating Pembe's internal conflict occurs when she recalls her own upbringing in a honour-conscious community in Turkey, juxtaposing her mental identity for her life in London. Through Pembe, Shafak reveals how oppressive cultural norms are internalised and how individuals can also become sites of transformation and resistance in a land where [*where Pink Destiny and Enough Beauty* [i.e. Pembe and Jamila] were born, 'honour' was more than a word]. Shafak, through Pembe, challenges the traditional binary of male and female and says that honour is [*also a name. You could call your child 'Honour', as long as it was a boy.*] Shafak says that the sense of honour is associated only with men of all ages. According to Shafak women don't have honour. Instead of honour, they have *shame*. And, as everyone knew, *Shame would be a rather poor name to bear*. (Shafak, 2012, p-21)

Pembe's alternative kinship bond with her son, Iskender, develops through mutual Pembe's alternative kinship bond with her son, Iskender, develops through mutual vulnerability. Distanced from her sister Jamila/Penguen's choices, Pembe gradually acknowledges the limits of patriarchal honour norms and embraces more empathic forms of familial attachment. In this way, kinship becomes a site of negotiation rather than enforcement

Jamila/Penguen's Dual Identity

Jamila, who adopts the name Penguen in London, is perhaps the most explicit embodiment of alternative kinship identity. Her double naming reflects the splintered self that emerges in diasporic contexts. The name change signifies both liberation from and entanglement with patriarchal expectations. In Turkey, Jamila carries the weight of honour and shame as [*Women did not have honour. Instead, they had shame. And, as everyone knew, Shame would be a rather poor name to bear*] (Shafak, 2012, p-21). In London, as Penguen, she experiments with identity beyond familial prescriptions.

Jamila's life in Turkey reflects queer kinship. Her titles, the Virgin Midwife and the granddaughter of the prophet Suleiman due to her understanding birds' language, redefines her non-patriarchal nature of kinship. [*That, too, was one reason why she had managed to survive on her own in the wilderness. They respected, feared and despised her.*] (Shafak, 2012, p-169)

Penguen's chosen associations with her friends, mentors and creative communities in London demonstrate how kinship extends beyond traditional models. These relationships offer emotional support, creative expression and a sense of belonging otherwise denied by her family's honour politics. Queer kinship theory underscores these chosen relationships as essential to resisting normative constraints (Weston, 1991). Penguen's navigation between cultural contexts reveals how individuals can reconstruct identity through affective networks that challenge blood-based familial authority.

Findings and Conclusion

Elif Shafak's *Honor* (2012) provides a rich and complex examination of how honour, gender and kinship intersect within the lives of individuals caught between cultural traditions and the liberal ideals of diaspora. Through the lives of its protagonists—Pembe, Iskender, Jamila/Penguen—the

novel challenges the boundaries of family structures, exploring how cultural resistance can manifest through the creation of alternative kinship networks that exist beyond the constraints of patriarchal control. The characters in *Honor* (2012) demonstrate that kinship is not solely defined by biological ties but can be actively forged through emotional bonds, choice and solidarity.

At its core, *Honor* (2012) interrogates the deeply ingrained patriarchal system that dictates women's roles within the family, equating their worth with their adherence to honor codes. By presenting Pembe, Iskender and Jamila/Penguen as characters whose lives are shaped by the brutal weight of honor but also capable of breaking free from it, Shafak subverts the traditional notion of honor as a rigid, immutable construct. These characters' journeys exemplify how the rigidity of patriarchal norms, particularly those surrounding female sexuality and autonomy, can be contested through personal acts of resistance, whether it be through the creation of new identities, the forging of alternative kinship bonds, or the revaluation of familial roles.

The theory of alternative kinship, as explored through characters' bonds in *Honor* (2012) offers a compelling framework to understand resistance in both personal and collective forms. By moving away from traditional blood-based ties, the novel advocates for the idea that kinship is a fluid, dynamic process, one that is capable of evolving to meet the emotional and psychological needs of individuals. Donna Haraway's theory of kinship (2011) is particularly relevant in this context, as it challenges the notion that kinship must be biologically determined or governed by social norms. Haraway's work suggests that kinship is about relational practices—about who we choose to be connected to and how we care for one another. In *Honor* (2012), this concept is embodied in characters who choose to forge new relationships that prioritize care, empathy and solidarity over patriarchal mandates. Iskender's bond with Aisha and Jamila's new life in London as Penguen exemplify this idea of kinship as a space of choice and transformation, one that resists the dominant cultural and familial expectations that seek to control them.

The significance of alternative kinship in the context of *Honor* (2012) extends beyond the individual characters' transformations; it also represents a larger cultural critique of honour-based societies that perpetuate cycles of violence, shame and repression. By emphasising the importance of chosen families and communities of care, Shafak encourages a rethinking of what it means to belong and to be loved, particularly for women who are marginalized by traditional honour systems. The novel suggests that kinship and family need not be dictated by honor codes that serve to maintain patriarchal power but can instead be redefined through mutual respect, empathy and personal agency.

In conclusion, *Honor* (2012) provides a significant contribution to contemporary discussions on kinship, family and cultural resistance. By presenting characters who refuse to be confined by patriarchal norms and instead choose alternative kinship networks, Shafak underscores the possibility of reimagining family as a space of care, solidarity and resistance.

The novel's exploration of kinship as a dynamic, relational process, grounded in choice rather than biology, offers a fresh perspective on the potential for cultural transformation. In the end, *Honor* (2012) invites readers to rethink the boundaries of family, suggesting that kinship can be a space for resistance—against honor-based violence, patriarchal norms and the cultural forces that seek to control identity and belonging. By centring the idea of alternative kinship, Shafak's *Honor* (2012) not only critiques patriarchal structures but also offers a vision of family that is inclusive, flexible and empowering. The novel thus becomes not only a narrative of individual resistance but also a call for a broader societal reimagining of kinship and belonging in a world where traditional

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structures often fail to serve those who need them most.

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