

A study of Gender Performativity in Elif Shafak's *Honour*

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Abstract:

This research paper critically examines Elif Shafak's novel *Honour* (2012) through the lens of Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity. It argues that masculinity and femininity are social performances that require constant repetition so they appear accurate. While previous research has explored themes of honour killing and gender roles in Shafak's work, this study extends that research by providing a comprehensive analysis of the novel within the framework of Butler's performativity theory. The study elucidates how the Kurdish-Turkish immigrant community perpetuates gendered behaviours, wherein men are compelled to perform "honour" through dominance and aggression, and women are expected to embody "shame" through modesty and silence. Through close textual analysis, the study demonstrates how characters who fail to fully perform their prescribed roles, reveals the constructed and vulnerable nature of gendered identity. It concentrates on pivotal scenes in the novel that illustrate how characters such as Iskender, Pembe, Esma, and Yunus are trapped in a cycle of gender performance, repeated in accordance with gender roles and expectations inherited from previous generations, and how these roles are ultimately impossible to sustain. Additionally, the research examines the novel's narrative structure, with its multiple time periods and perspectives, to understand the concepts of honour and shame that diverge from patriarchal notions. This study explores the production and potential subversion of gender norms and gender performance within the novel.

Keywords: Gender performativity, Judith Butler, Elif Shafak, Honour, masculinity, femininity, honour killing, immigrant identity, patriarchal culture.

Introduction

The initial chapter of the novel talks about the social reality where identity is predetermined before birth, even the name becomes destiny. Pembe and Jamila meaning “destiny” and “enough” are born into a world where they are already characterised by their mother’s hatred, born into a world where they have been seen as a disappointment, born into the world where the sons are valued more than daughters. This act asks the fundamental question of the novel, that gender for the Toprak family is not an expression of innate identity but rather an imposed performance, imposed by the regulatory structure of patriarchal society, as defined in Butler’s theoretical framework of “heterosexual matrix”.

Published in 2012, *Honour* explores the narrative of a Turkish-Kurdish Family across generations and different locations, from the village of on the bank of river Eupharates to 1970’s London. The central narrative focuses on a crime: sixteen-year-old protagonist Iskender Toprak murders his mother. The crime is termed as an “honour killing.” By intertwining multiple narratives and perspectives, the novel shows the complex psychological, cultural, and social dynamics converging in this murderous act.

The research paper argues that Shafak’s novel deals with gender as a performance. Drawing on Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity, it reveals that how the characters in the novel are trapped in a strict gender structure, and when the characters fail to fully perform their assigned roles, they reveal the created and fragile nature of these identities, which leads to the horrific consequences of their destruction.

The analysis has been classified into four parts. First, it outlines the theoretical framework for gender performativity, focusing on Butler’s core texts. Second, it examines previous research on Shafak’s work and gender in Turkish and diasporic literature. Third, it provides a thorough reading of important characters and their gendered performances, analysing how they navigate, adopt, resist, and ultimately transform. Finally, it discusses what the novel shows about the nature of gender and its possibilities for alternative performances.

Theoretical Framework: Judith Butler’s Theory of Gender Performativity

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, discussed in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) and *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (1993), questions the traditional notion of gender as an inherent identity that establishes the way it is expressed. According to Butler, gender is not an inherent trait but rather a repeated performance that forms the identity it claims to represent.

Butler writes that, "*gender is instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts.*" (1990, 179.) and "*gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body*" (1990, preface 15). This notion fundamentally challenges the traditional conceptions of gender. The standard understanding of gender follows a structure: first, there is a gendered subject (a "doer") who has specific inner qualities, which are expressed through acts. Butler completely changes the sequence. Butler states that, "*there need not be a "doer behind the deed,*" rather, the deed is everything, and the doer emerges because of performance.

This gender performance is termed as "heterosexual matrix". Butler refers to this gender performativity as "heterosexual matrix"- a cultural framework that demonstrates a balance between biological sex, gender identity, and heterosexual desire. That structure demands harmony: a "male" body must act "masculinity" and desire "females"; a "female" body must perform "femininity" and desire "males." Those who break this structure are culturally unintelligible, with their entire existence called into question. The performance must be performed indefinitely since gender has no ontological validity other than these repeated acts; it is always unstable and requires reaffirmation.

Butler claims that performativity is not a matter of individual choice; one cannot simply choose to depict gender differently. Instead, Gender performances, are shaped by social standards that exist before and beyond the person. According to Butler's work *Bodies That Matter*, "*Performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalisation in the context of a body*" (1993,12). This naturalisation process is critical: effective performances are viewed as representations of an innate, pre-existing identity rather than acts themselves. Butler's critique aims to denaturalise these acts,

showing the manufactured underpinning of what is commonly viewed as natural and inevitable.

Butler's theory offers a persuasive framework for interpreting the text of *Honour* particularly in the context of the novel's societal involvement in gender regulation. The protagonist's challenges are not merely individual but are holistic, as they occur within a structure that demands specific performances and restricts deviations.

Literature Review

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity provides a powerful framework for understanding identity formation in the field of feminist literary criticism. In *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies That Matter* (1993), Butler contends that gender is not an essence but rather one "does" through repeated acts that cite and reinforce social norms. As Vicki Kirby (2006) states, these performances have their limitations, yet possibilities for subversion. Such a framework serves Elif Shafak's *Honour* (2013) well, which depicts the harrowing nexus between honour and shame emerging out of a Turkish-Kurdish migrant family. Shafak's novel follows the Toprak family throughout rural Anatolia and London, with a focus on Pembe and her son Iskender. The honour in the story comes to life on everyday acts, in which men are expected to demonstrate control and protection and women are expected to show obedience and chastity. Any violation of these duties leads to disgrace and violence. The book therefore dramatizes "honour" and "shame" as regulatory discourses that force gendered bodies to appear according to particular forms. There is plenty of scholarship on Shafak that is both engaged in and interested in gender dynamics in her work. Zacharia and Senthamarai (2023) analyse patriarchal bargaining and different masculinities in *Honour* and *The Forty Rules of Love*, and Mine Sevinc (2020) points out Shafak's storytelling as postcolonial feminist resistance. Reviews, including Anna Carey's (2012) and reader responses on The Story Graph, praise the novel's sensitive portrait of honour-based violence and generational trauma. Still, these studies are generally thematic and do not explore Butler's notion of performativity more fully. We have Turkish literary and sociological studies that come to complementary perspectives. Çimen Günay-Erkol (2016) discusses "broken masculinities" in post-1970 Turkish fiction that are manifest in Iskender's extreme displaying of violent honour. Deniz Kandiyoti's "Bargaining with Patriarchy" (1988) helps explain how female characters like Pembe and Esmâ act out traditional roles

for survival. Leslie Adelson (2005) and the phenomenon of migrant identities are critical to understanding how honour codes are re-performed and destabilised across cultures. Despite their worth in the discussion of gender roles, migration, and patriarchy in Shafak's fiction, these sources fall short. There is no significant study yet examining *Honour* through Butler's theory of gender performativity which examines the ways in which characters "do" honour and shame and in what way the novel reproduces/challenges these scripts and conventions. The paper attempts to fill this vacuum by providing a Butlerian reading of *Honour*. It seeks to show how Shafak reframes honour as a compulsory and cyclical performance that enforces patriarchal power whilst simultaneously revealing its vulnerability, opening up an Indian-English lens in the conversation about gender, migration and literature.

Research Gap

While previous research has addressed gender in Shafak's work, no research has yet applied Butler's theory of performativity to "Honour." Butler's framework provides unique insights into the novel's depiction of gender. Unlike other research depict gender as a stable identity influenced by society, performativity theory demonstrates how gender is created through the very actions that appear to describe it.

This perspective highlights the unstable nature of gender in the novel, emphasising how characters must constantly prove, defend, and reassert their gendered roles. Furthermore, current research has primarily focused on women's experiences, frequently dismissing masculinity as an unquestioned norm. This research paper fills that gap by paying equal attention to masculine performance and exploring how Iskender's tragedy arises from his unsuccessful attempt to express an unachievable ideal of gender. By examining both masculine and feminine performances, this study provides a broader view of gender in the novel.

Gendered Performances in the Toprak Family

In the earliest pages, From the start, *Honour* emphasises that gender in this narrative is not a question of personal identification, but of societal governance. The novel's exploration of naming demonstrates how gender differentiation is embedded at the most fundamental level of identity formation. Esma, reflecting on her own name and those of others, observes:

"Male names embodied power, ability and authority, like Muzaffer, 'the Victorious One'; Faruq, 'One Who Distinguishes Truth from Falsehood'; or Husam al Din, 'the

Sword of Faith'. Female names, however, reflected a delicate daintiness, like a porcelain vase. With names such as Nilüfer, 'Lotus Flower', or Gülseren, 'Spreading Roses', or Binnaz, 'A Thousand Blandishments', women were decorations for this world, pretty trimmings on the side, but not too essential." (Shafak, 163)

This observation emphasises the performative nature of gender: names do not just describe but prescribe, positioning individuals within specific social roles. Male names evoke action, authority, and religious significance, they are names that effect change in the world. Female names, conversely, evoke beauty, delicacy, and decoration, they are names that designate bodies for display rather than agency. The novel directly articulates the honour/shame binary that structures this gendered world:

"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. Old men, middle-aged men, even schoolboys so young that they still smelled of their mothers' milk. Women did not have honour. Instead, they had shame." (Shafak, 20)

This sentence demonstrates the novel's gendered division: men possess honour, an active attribute that must be defended and displayed; women embody shame, a passive condition that must be concealed and protected. This imbalance is fundamental to the gender system depicted in the novel. Honour is an action performed by men, it requires action, defense, and sometimes violence. Shame is an inherent condition of women, it resides in their bodies, movements, and very existence. Naze's teachings to her daughters elaborate this gendered ontology through a striking metaphor:

"It was all because women were made of the lightest cambric, Naze continued, whereas men were cut of thick, dark fabric. That is how God had tailored the two: one superior to the other. As to why He had done that, it wasn't up to human beings to question. What mattered was that the colour black didn't show stains, unlike the colour white, which revealed even the tiniest speck of dirt. By the same token, women who were sullied would be instantly noticed and separated from the rest, like husks removed from grains." (Shafak, 19)

This statement normalises what is, in fact, a social construction, the “stain” on a woman’s honour is a social interpretation rather than a physical reality, yet it is presented as unavoidable as dirt on white fabric. The statement portrays contingent social arrangements as inevitable and natural, which is exactly how effective gender performativity works. As Butler claim, the recurrence of such naturalising discourses creates the reality they claim to represent.

Pembe: The Performance of Feminine Shame

Pembe Toprak embodies the contradictions of feminine gender performance in a patriarchal society. From childhood, she is caught between the roles assigned to her and her own desires and aspirations. Her early encounter with the cinema reveals this tension: after watching a romantic film, she dances with joy, only to be confronted by her mother’s harsh reprimand: “*And why would you do that? Unless you two have decided to turn yourselves into harlots*” (Shafak, 19). The spontaneous expression of joy is immediately coded as sexual impropriety, demonstrating how feminine behaviour is constantly policed and interpreted through the lens of honour and shame. This moment exemplifies what Butler calls the “stylized repetition of acts” that constitutes gender. Pembe’s dance is not inherently sexual, it is an innocent expression of pleasure. But within the interpretive framework of her culture, any female bodily expression risks being read as sexual display. The threat of being labelled a “*harlot*” enforces the repetition of modest, restrained behaviour. Pembe must learn to perform femininity as self-concealment rather than self-expression.

Yet Pembe is not merely a passive victim of these scripts. Her affair with Elias represents a form of resistance, a deviation from the script of wifely submission. However, this resistance comes at enormous cost. Her relationship with Elias must be conducted in secrecy, in the darkened space of the cinema, a liminal realm where the usual social rules are suspended. The cinema becomes what Sevinc might call a “*liberating space*” where alternative performances become possible, if only temporarily.

Pembe’s difficulty with the English language also figures her relationship to gender performance. Her broken English positions her as an outsider, but it also provides a kind of cover, she can claim not to understand when confronted with uncomfortable truths. When the racist bakery assistant berates her, she responds with confusion rather than confrontation. When Elias speaks of love, she can claim

linguistic limitation as a shield against full engagement. This linguistic performance mirrors her gender performance: both are required of her, both mark her as different, and both provide limited spaces for action within an oppressive system.

The tragic irony of Pembe's situation is that her son Iskender, charged with protecting family honour, becomes its most dangerous enforcer. When he forbids her to work and confines her to the house, he is attempting to enforce the very script that has structured her life, the script that says women's place is in the home, that women's visibility invites shame, that women's bodies must be controlled. Pembe's response to this confinement is telling: she does not openly rebel but continues her clandestine meetings with Elias, performing obedience while practicing transgression. This double performance, appearing to conform while actually deviating, reveals both the power of gender scripts and the impossibility of perfect conformity.

Pembe's survival and subsequent life as a ghost, legally dead but actually alive, represents a different kind of performance failure. She is declared dead, erased from official existence, yet continues to live, first in the squat, then back in her Kurdish village. This liminal existence, neither fully alive nor fully dead, mirrors the condition of women in patriarchal systems: present but invisible, necessary but denied, performing roles that simultaneously constitute and erase them. As Zacharia and Senthamarai note, "Women usually bear the brunt of this conditioning" (223), and Pembe's ghostly existence literalizes this burden.

Iskender: The Burden of Masculine Honour

If women in this world perform shame, men perform honour, and Iskender's tragedy is that he takes this performance more seriously than anyone. From early childhood, he is positioned as "*the sultan*," "*the lion*," the special son who will carry the family's honour. His mother's doting creates what psychoanalytic theory would recognize as a narcissistic bond: Pembe invests in Iskender all the aspirations denied to her as a woman. He becomes her phallus, the masculine extension through which she can vicariously experience power and agency.

This positioning is itself a form of performance. Iskender must constantly prove himself worthy of this investment, must demonstrate strength, control, and authority. His boxing becomes a literal performance of masculinity, a staged display of physical prowess. But the performance extends far beyond the ring. As Zacharia

and Senthamarai observe, “When women are found to diverge from accepted codes of conduct, the family members, usually the father or the brother, murder them to regain the lost honour of their family in society” (224). Iskender has internalized this script so completely that violence against his mother appears not as murder but as honour-restoration, a performance of masculine duty.

The Orator figures crucially in Iskender’s development, providing an ideological framework that justifies his violent impulses. When the Orator tells Iskender, “*If your parents slip up, you’ve got to stand up against them*” (Shafak 198), he is not advocating rebellion but enforcement, the son becomes the guardian of parental morality, the enforcer of the very codes the parents may have violated. This inverted dynamic positions Iskender as his mother’s judge and executioner, the ultimate performance of patriarchal authority.

Yet Iskender’s performance is deeply unstable. His sudden stammer, appearing without warning and disappearing just as mysteriously, reveals the psychic cost of maintaining this masculine facade. The stammer is what psychoanalysts would call a “symptom,” a bodily manifestation of repressed conflict. It appears precisely when Iskender’s internal world (the idealized mother) collides with external reality (the suspicion of her affair). Unable to articulate this conflict in language, his body speaks it through speech disruption.

The stammer also represents a failure of masculine performance. Masculinity in this culture demands linguistic authority, the ability to command, to assert, to control through words. Iskender’s stammer momentarily deprives him of this authority, rendering him speechless at the very moment when speech is most required. His friends’ reaction, they think he is joking, reveals how unexpected this failure is. The masculine performance has been so successful that its disruption appears as performance rather than breakdown.

One reviewer perceptively notes that “Iskender is not religious at all” (Carey), challenging any simple reading of his violence as religiously motivated. His performance of honour is cultural rather than theological, a matter of communal standing rather than divine commandment. This distinction matters because it locates the tragedy in social relations rather than religious belief, in the performance of

masculinity rather than the content of faith. The honour code Iskender enforces is not written in sacred texts but enacted in daily interactions, in the glances of neighbours, the whispers of uncles, the expectations of friends. Iskender's final letter to his mother, written in prison but never sent, represents an attempt at a different kind of masculine performance, one based on recognition of fault rather than assertion of authority:

"I'm not going to send this letter. I'll bring it myself, inshallah, and give it to you, because it's easier to write the contents than to say them... If I could be sixteen years old again, I'd never do the things that I did to cause so much pain" (Shafak 281).

This letter, composed under the guidance of his cellmate Zeeshan, gestures toward a masculinity that can acknowledge failure, express regret, and seek forgiveness. Whether this gesture can be sustained remains uncertain, but its possibility suggests that even the most rigid gender scripts contain room for revision.

The Male Gaze and Its Enforcers

Gender performativity in *Honor* is not a matter of individual choice but collective enforcement. Characters like Uncle Tariq and the Orator function as what Butler would call "the police", figures who patrol the boundaries of acceptable gender performance and punish deviation. Tariq's obsession with family reputation reveals how masculine honour depends on female conformity:

"They shared the same surname. If one of them was disgraced, shame would attach itself to him as the eldest Toprak. Their honour was his honour." (Shafak 139-40)

This formulation makes explicit the dependency of masculine honour on feminine conduct, a man's reputation rests on the performance of those he controls. Tariq's honour is not his own achievement but a reflection of his female relatives' behaviour. This dependency creates constant anxiety, constant surveillance, constant need for enforcement. The performance of masculine honour requires the performance of feminine shame as its necessary complement.

Tariq's own history illuminates the psychic investments behind this policing. His mother's abandonment of the family constitutes a primal wound, a failure of feminine performance that continues to haunt him decades later. His rigid enforcement of gender norms can be read as an attempt to repair this wound, to ensure that no woman under his purview repeats his mother's transgression. Yet this attempt is doomed to fail because gender performance can never be finally secured, it must be constantly reiterated precisely because it is always precarious. Tariq's mother's

abandonment demonstrates that feminine submission can never be guaranteed; women always retain the capacity to deviate from their assigned scripts.

The Orator represents a different kind of enforcer, one who provides ideological justification for gender policing. His critique of Western feminism as irrelevant to “*people like us*” (Shafak 189) performs the cultural work of positioning patriarchal control as authentic tradition, as resistance to Western corruption. This move is classic ideological operation: making contingent social arrangements appear as essential cultural identity, transforming gender policing into anti-colonial resistance. The Orator’s followers, young men navigating the challenges of immigrant life, find in this ideology a way to perform masculinity that promises dignity and meaning. Iskender’s tragedy is that he believes this performance too completely.

The Orator’s influence reveals how gender performance is always embedded in larger political and cultural narratives. The performance of masculine honour is not just about individual reputation but about collective identity, cultural authenticity, resistance to Western domination. This embedding makes deviation from gender scripts not just personally costly but politically suspect, to challenge gender norms is to betray one’s culture, to capitulate to Western influence. The Orator exploits this dynamic, using the language of cultural authenticity to enforce gender conformity.

Alternative Performances: Esma, Yunus, and the Squatters

If the Toprak family represents the reproduction of traditional gender scripts, the novel also offers glimpses of alternative performances. Esma’s intellectual aspirations and her desire to become a writer under the male pseudonym J. B. Ono represent a rejection of feminine domesticity. Her observation about naming, that female names are “decorations” while male names embody “power”, reveals her critical distance from the gender system that surrounds her. Her fantasy of drawing a moustache on her face literalizes her desire to access masculine privilege, to perform gender differently.

Esma’s narrative role is also significant. As the frame narrator, she is the one who pieces together the family story, who writes the account we are reading. This narrative authority represents a form of agency that her mother and aunt could not access. If Pembe’s life was shaped by scripts written by others, Esma writes her own

script and, in doing so, rewrites the family's history. Her act of storytelling is itself a performance, one that challenges the silencing that has structured women's lives.

Yunus provides an even more striking alternative. His gentle nature, his emotional openness, and his love for Tobiko all deviate from the masculine script that demands hardness and control. His friendship with the squatters exposes him to a world where gender performance is deliberately subverted where punks dye their hair and pierce their bodies, where Tobiko can transform from punk priestess to ABBA fan, where identities are fluid and chosen rather than fixed and imposed. Tobiko's revelation that she secretly loves ABBA, the most "un-punk" music imaginable, reveals that even those who appear most committed to alternative performances harbour desires that exceed their chosen scripts.

The squatters' collective living arrangement also challenges the nuclear family structure that underlies traditional gender performance. As Yunus reflects, "*he was convinced that squatting resulted in greater happiness*" (Shafak, 212). The squat represents a space where the usual rules are suspended, where alternative social arrangements become possible. Yet even this space is not utopian, it has its own hierarchies, its own performances required for belonging. The Captain's authority, the competitive authenticity among punks, the exclusion of Mrs. Powell, all these reveal that alternative communities produce their own norms, their own scripts.

Tobiko's character is particularly complex in this regard. She appears to embody punk rebellion against conventional femininity, yet her secret love for ABBA and her vulnerability in relationships reveal that she is not simply free of gender constraints. Her Electra complex confession, that she equates the men she loves with her father and competes with her mother, suggests that even those who reject conventional gender roles remain shaped by them. Alternative performances are possible, but they are never performances from nowhere, they always emerge in relation to the scripts they seek to escape.

The Tragedy of Mis performance

The novel's climax, Iskender's murder of his aunt Jamila, mistaken for his mother, represents the ultimate failure of gender performance. Iskender believes he is performing masculine honour, restoring family reputation through violent enforcement. But the performance misfires catastrophically: he kills the wrong

woman; his intended message goes disastrously awry. This tragic misrecognition reveals the fundamental instability of gender performance, the gap between intention and effect, between script and execution, that can never be fully closed.

The mistaken identity is deeply symbolic. Jamila and Pembe are twins, identical in appearance but different in their relationship to the gender system. Pembe is the wife and mother, the woman whose sexuality is supposed to be controlled. Jamila is the independent midwife, the woman who has opted out of the marriage system entirely. By killing Jamila, Iskender destroys the alternative, the woman who has refused to perform feminine submission. The irony is that he does so while believing he is punishing the woman who has performed femininity imperfectly.

This misrecognition also reveals the limits of the male gaze. Iskender cannot distinguish between his mother and her twin because he has never really seen either of them as individuals. He sees only “women”, interchangeable bodies that carry honour or shame. This failure of vision is the ultimate consequence of the gender system he serves: it renders women invisible as individuals, visible only as symbols. The aftermath of the murder compounds the tragic mis performance. Pembe becomes legally dead, erased from official existence, while Jamila is mourned as Pembe. The community's grief is directed at the wrong woman; the rituals of mourning are performed for the wrong body. This confusion reveals how thoroughly gender performance has overwritten individual identity. Who one “really is” matters less than who one is perceived to be, what role one is seen to perform.

Conclusion

Honour reveals that gender is not essence but enactment, not nature but performance. The Toprak family's tragedy unfolds not because individuals are inherently good or evil but because they are caught in a script that demands impossible things: that men control what cannot be controlled, that women embody what cannot be embodied, that honour and shame be performed despite their fundamental instability. The characters who survive, Esma, Yunus, Pembe, do so not by escaping performance altogether but by finding ways to perform differently, to cite the norms in ways that open new possibilities rather than foreclosing them.

Butler's theory of gender performativity illuminates this dynamic by revealing how gender is produced through the very acts that appear to express it. The

novel's characters are not simply victims of external oppression but active participants in their own subjectivation, they internalize the scripts, perform them, and in performing, reproduce them. This does not absolve the system of responsibility but complicates any simple opposition between victims and oppressors. Iskender is both perpetrator and victim, enforcer and enforced upon.

The novel's multiple narrative perspectives also enact a kind of performative politics. By giving voice to different characters, Pembe's letters, Iskender's prison journals, Esma's frame narrative, the omniscient third-person sections, Shafak refuses any single authoritative account of what happened. This polyvocality mirrors the multiplicity of gender performance itself: there is no true self behind the performances, only the performances themselves, layered and contradictory.

Shafak's novel thus performs its own kind of cultural work: making visible the constructed nature of gender arrangements that present themselves as natural and necessary. By showing how these arrangements produce violence and suffering, how they warp the lives of those who perform them and destroy those who deviate, *Honour* invites readers to imagine alternative scripts, different performances, other ways of being in the world. The novel does not offer easy solutions, Pembe's death, Iskender's imprisonment, the long years of separation and silence, but it does insist that these performances are not fate, that the script can be rewritten, that other roles are possible.

The final image of Iskender studying the book about Alaska, the fictional cover story that Esma has constructed for her daughters, suggests that new performances are always possible. Iskender will leave prison not as the "*honour killer*" of the newspaper headlines but as the "uncle who worked in Alaska." This performance, like all performances, is a fiction, but fictions have real effects. They shape how we are seen, how we see ourselves, how we relate to others. The question the novel leaves us with is not whether we can escape performance altogether, we cannot, but what kinds of performances we will choose, what scripts we will write for ourselves and those who come after us.

In this insistence on the possibility of revision, Shafak's novel aligns itself with Butler's feminist project of denaturalizing gender, of revealing the performative

ground of identities that mistake themselves for nature. Both writer and theorist invite us to recognize that what appears necessary might be done otherwise, that the scripts we have inherited might be rewritten, that other performances are always possible. This recognition is not utopian, it does not guarantee happiness or liberation, but it opens a space for critique, for resistance, for the slow work of creating new ways of being in the world. In a novel so saturated with tragedy, this opening toward possibility is itself a kind of hope.

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