

War and No Peace: Economics of Unemployment in Elif Shafak's The Flea Palace

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Abstract

The world has witnessed a couple of wars, many civil wars, a row of destructions and a continuing lust for power and positions. The ones at the crest of governance fight a war to exercise their power mongering and leave their subjects at lurch. The paper looks at the way the subjects suffer during the war, the crisis which they have to confront by being without food and water for days. They must escape their home lands and lose their long possessed identity. Shafak's novel "The Flea Palace" looks at the way the Russian war immigrants came to Istanbul with a hope that the new nation would provide them with life and support to aid their existence.

Key Words : War, Displacement, Identity Crisis, Hunger, Poverty

Elif Shafak belongs to the post modern period but still holds a traditional bent of mind in her writings, her thoughts and sensibilities. As a writer and as a person she believed in the old school philosophy which runs through the Victorian times that spells, art for life's sake. She believes that her writings must reflect the social, political, marital, and personal conflicts that surround an individual. Mikhail Bakhtin believes in the voice of the milieu in every novel a writer would write. There are two facets of meaning according to Bakhtin, the first is the foreground which every reader would sit up to read, analyze the author's intentions to write a creative art piece. The other side to every creative endeavor is the background, a voice which is muffled when heard patiently and silently. This is the voice of the society, the social background which says less but has more to offer when read between the lines.

Shafak wants to give a story line, mostly a complex plot with complicated narrations and the characters who are difficult to understand and interpret. She mostly writes in Turkish, she then uses professional translators to encode her knots and finally revamp the translated text into a complete form which is readable with a rigid stream of consciousness technique infused and

yoked into it. Shafak wants to bring changes, both social and political through her writings. In one of her interviews she tells the importance of reading, and the need for every writer to be a constant reader because it is through avid reading one becomes an ardent writer. She is also against the ones who tell her that fictional reading is a waste of time because it is not a kind of serious reading. To her, every fiction is a journey of emotion, it is the way the world works, humaneness harnesses and the manner by which one gets to understand the pain and suffering of the other person, he or she becomes more empathetic and begins to have a heart for the apathy which surrounds every corner of the world. As long as a neuroscientist reads a novel, an engineer reads a piece of poetry, there would certainly be a place which would demand to keep all the hearts in the right places and live life with the most appropriate emotions which are needed to be inherited. Shafak in her novel, “The Flea Palace” has attempted to understand absurd theater, the most complicated philosophy which she has tried to extend it to her fictional writings. The following is an excerpt from one of her interviews given to the online newspaper, *Thought Economics* on the 19th of October 2023. She answers the question on the role of philosophy in understanding life posed by the interviewer Dr. Vikas Shah.

I feel it very important to think carefully about the way we think, the way we know. The Sufi mystics used to talk about the importance of unlearning, the letting go of your truths, your certainties to accept and understand being a bit confused, a bit lost, a bit perplexed. That is fine. It is better than totalitarianism of certainty. So for me, confusion is not necessarily a bad thing. We have forgotten to say, “ I don’t know”. We don’t say that anymore. If there is anything we don’t know, we can Google it, and that is the ignorance of our age. (www.thoughteconomics.com)

The Flea Palace, a place which was once glorious and had a beautiful and a dainty ambiance has now fallen to rubles and debris. The novel looks at how Istanbul was once as grand as the Bonbon Palace, now gone to dogs. Shafak tries her best to relate herself, her novels with the city but finds that Istanbul is getting hostile every day and she finds it increasingly difficult to love it as she had done it before. The chasm between being in love and not being loved in return gives her a sense of nostalgic numbness which is presented through a series of oddities and absurdities through the novel “The Flea Palace”, the one which used to be Bonbon Palace. The name bonbon comes from the French which means, a candy. This is one famous chocolate which has had a very interesting and a profound history. To begin with the Mayan Civilization which had been the forerunner of coming out with a script and were the ones who had began farming and were the ones to first have cocoa to be planted and grown. Following this, Columbus was the first to introduce cocoa to Spain and they subsequently used it in their beverages. The French adapted the practice and used cocoa to exploit it into candies. The name Bonbon is from the candy which

Agripina loved to eat when she was too young as a child and the only memory she had after she had been drained of all her memory due to old age and ill health.

The foreground of the novel rests on the Bolshevik Movement which had in its core , the kernel which would attempt to overthrow the autocratic Czars. Lenin succeeded this endeavor by overthrowing the Emperor following a coup and a couple of civil wars. The revolution aimed to bring about a change in Russia with the country being under the control of empires to nation states. There was a strong liking for the democracy which prevailed in the U.S then, which was a source of inspiration for the Russians to get out of autocracy to give way to autonomy. As time passed, the Bolsheviks who promised peace and prosperity had made the people feel that the Czars were much better than the communist governments. Be it Leninism or Stalinism which did nothing to favor the people and they had decided to look for a better form of governance which would make them free from the pangs of hunger, squalor and penury. Stewart Ross in his work, “The Russian Revolution” defines the innate problem which the preliterate had confronted that led to the outbreak of a tiff between the empire and its subjects.

The government was in the hands of an autocratic Czar, supposedly appointed by God. Before 1905, his power was in theory absolute. He had supreme and unlimited powers in all matters except the church ones. In practice the Czars had little impact on the day to day lives of the people. The sheer size of the empire coupled with the extremes of weather, the inefficiency of bureaucracy meant that most decisions were taken at province, district or even village level. (23)

Agripina , the most ignorant to be mother had to leave her homeland with an expecting baby, boarded on a freight ship to Istanbul as a refugee as her husband had lost his power and position as a general at the Czar’s army after the empire was abolished giving raise to nation states. Being too preoccupied with virginal expectation she had nothing to be perturbed about. Her husband, Anitpov on the other hand was a man of much weakness in mind and deed. This made him choose power and post which would rather aid him to get out of his own self, which he never wanted to be or even see. Antipov chose to be a part of the army and began to grow from strength to strength to be what he is now. A war, a revolution and a string of commotions had made him lose his job, his future which he thought was tied to the Czar army. Things began to leave him sooner than he ever thought and the moment he had to leave the land which had given him a sense of belonging and identity, he could not but bear to stand it or even stand up for himself. With a sense of uncertainty to handle such uncanny situation, he decided that he must smuggle the most from Russia and leave for Istanbul hoping to find greener pastures.

There are seemingly dissimilar comparisons which the novel tries to give about the sense of disillusionment and displacement which they have to undergo after having left everything back home not knowing what the future would have in store for them. The bag which Agripina carried the moment she stepped into the ship was huge but the lump on her stomach was small but as time passed the size of the bag began to shrink and the size of her tummy began to enlarge. She had to face two different problems, the problem of pregnancy and safe delivery along with the problem of survival. Being a roman catholic with a small picture of virgin Mary, she had come to live in an Islamic country. At first she thought that they had stored a lot of money which would initially be sufficient come to use for them for a period of two years. Once the time elapsed, they could get back home and live their lives in close proximity to their roots. Things did not work the way they thought and the money which they thought would be with them for two years could barely satiate their hunger for two months.

The woman on the ship who came with bread and water and sold them in exchange for a golden ring taken from her daughter's belt made Agripina understand the way she had to live the rest of the time she would live in Istanbul. The moment the ship reached the shores of Istanbul the cunning Jews, the Greeks and the Muslims had their eyes on these refugees so that they could extract the most of them by paying them less than its real worth. Antipov had two options to get out of the poverty they had been witnessing at the refugee camp, the first was to write to his brother in France and ask him some money. The other was to find a job somewhere. He found the second option more feasible because with the baby to be born soon, he needed money to take care of his family. Hena, he was reminded of the conditions into which the soldiers of Czar's army were forced into. He could not escape visualizing the present plight of those soldiers.

Conversely thousands of soldiers of all ranks from the Czar's army had long been scattered into the least expected and the most excreting jobs at hotels, concert halls, cabarets, gambling houses, restaurants, bars, cafes, beaches, movie theatres and night clubs and streets. They washed dishes and carried trays in restaurants, worked as croupiers in gambling houses, jam packed with lies, peddled dolls at street corners, provided piano accompaniment to cabaret dancers in boisterous entertainment halls. (43)

Antipov the general did not fit the bill in any of these new roles for two reasons, the first was, he could not come out of his past. He had been in a powerful and a more respectable position and could not forget his life back home. The other was that, he was too old to adapt to any change. During one of the conversations which he had with the owner of one of the cafes where he worked as a cloak attendant, he was told of how Russia which was a precursor to modernity and revolution to the countries around the world had now began to go to dogs. The other was, the shame which every Russian had to realize. In the name of finding settlement and employment

they come from their developed country to Istanbul which has nothing to boast of except the fact that it is one of the oldest civilizations and a place where arts and literature blossomed. Istanbul had proved to be the worst choice of solace to anyone from a county like Russia. After having listened to such comment from his owner, he decided not to work and stayed home not knowing what to do. Agripina slowly understood the change after a careful and a considerate inspection and decided to work so that she could not only take care of the girl which was born but also her husband.

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(www.thoughteconomics.com)