

THE QUEST OF ONE OF THE THREE DAUGHTERS OF EVE

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Abstract

The aim of the paper is to read and analyze the the story of the protagonist of the novel *The Three Daughters of Eve* by Elif Shafak as a “quest” and trace her life as a child of seven in İstanbul, her life as a young girl studying In Oxford and her life in İstanbul as a young woman back from her experience of living in Oxford.

Keywords: The Three Daughters of Eve, experience, living in Oxford.

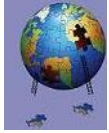
INTRODUCTION

The dictionary definition of a quest is an act or instance of seeking or a chivalrous enterprise in medieval romance usually involving an adventurous journey. What about the pattern of a quest in a story or a novel? According to Thomas C Foster all great narratives take the reader on a quest. “The quest consists of five things: (a) quester, (b) a place to go, (c) a stated reason to go there, (d) challenges and trials en route, and (e) real reason to go there” (Kindle edition of *How to Read Literature Like a Professor*, p.42). The paper reads and analyzes the story of the protagonist, Nazperi (Peri) Nalbantoğlu, of Elif Shafak’s novel, *The Three Daughters of of Eve* as a “quest”. The quest of Peri will be traced in three periods of her life which are in İstanbul as one of seven children, in Oxford as a young girl studying there and finally, again in İstanbul, as a young woman with three children.

The first stage of our quester is her ordinary world where she is uneasy and uncomfortable and where she is shown against a background of environment, heredity and personal history. We meet her in İstanbul in the 1980s when she is a seven year-old child, An incident when she was four which is revealed much later in the story has a profound and an indelible effect on her character. She had a twin brother. While her mother was making plum jam, she bit a plum and found it too sour. So, she gave it to her twin brother, Poyraz, who choked on it. Peri was paralyzed. She just watched him. Her mother called her an evil child because she did not call for help. Thus a feeling of guilt remains with Peri. Another incident from her childhood is from the Turkish hamam when she asks her mother about the thing she saw dangling between a boy’s legs. Her mother’ storming off to the boy’s mother mortifies Peri and makes her feel guilty.

“Guilt” as a feeling is a constituent part of being a woman since Christianity. God created Adam and Eve, the first man and woman in the chronology of the Bible. God places them in the Garden of Eden and forbids them to eat fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. The serpent tempts Eve who gives the fruit to Adam. As a result, God banishes Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. Therefore, it is the woman who is guilty although Adam also eats the forbidden fruit. That is why Peri, being a woman, is, as stated in the title of the paper, one of *The Three Daughters of Eve*.

When we meet Peri Nalbantoğlu, she is living in Istanbul with her two elder brothers and parents. It is after the coup d’etat of September the twelfth, (the third coup after the foundation of the Turkish Republic in 1923) to stop the political violence between far-left and far-right Islamist groups. In the microcosmos of the Nalbantoğlu family is the parallel division of world weltanschauung. The mother,



Selma, is a devout Muslim who covers her head, prays five times a day, and won't drink alcohol. She even avoids junk food for fear that they might contain collagen, which in turn, might contain pork. She goes to Mecca, Saudi Arabia on a pilgrimage and becomes a hadji. She comes back with a mosque-shaped wall -clock that shows the prayer times. The father, Mensur, on the other hand, is secular to the point of being a materialist. He drinks alcohol every day. Hence, they can be said to be as incompatible as tavern and mosque. The younger brother, Hakan, is on the mother's side and the other, brother, Umut, is a Marxist. The police raid the house in search of forbidden books and guns. They find a gun hidden among Peri's toys. They take Umut away. Following a trial, he is imprisoned for a period of eight years and four months. The father begins to drink more heavily after Umut is arrested. He fights with Hakan who drops out of university and joins an ultra nationalist group. The mother devotes herself to cleaning.

Peri is caught between her mother's defiant religiosity and her father's defiant materialism. This makes her a docile child. After her father has a heart attack, she begins praying to God. She even goes to a mosque. All this confusion in her delicate nature makes her think her mother was going to end up in heaven and her father in hell, so her abode must be purgatory. This is the beginning of her nearly obsessive relationship with God. Meanwhile she sees the apparition of a baby with a purple stain on its face extending from one cheek down to his chin. It is a symbolic reference to Cain who has a mark on his face as a curse for killing his brother brother. She calls apparition the baby in the mist. The solution she finds to her quandary is to immerse herself in books, and thus she excels in school, which in turn, makes her father think she is fit for Oxford. For this he sells his car and a piece of land he owns to pay for the expenses.

This is her call to adventure. Her situation is taken up from an external agent, her father. Her mother would rather refuse the call for her, worried about the uncertainty and possible danger. Peri is ready to become a quester since she is not very happy in her life like all questers. She is unaware that she is a quester who will go on a quest. It is her father who decides where she will go and for what reason. According to Mensur, the father, education is the most important thing in life. "Peri ...would become idealistic, forward-thinking graduate who would rescue this country from backwardness" . (Shafak, Kindle edition of *The three Daughters of Eve*, p.72) Maybe he father is also trying to ensure that his daughter does not follow in her mother's footsteps.

Now, Peri's quest begins. She has crossed the threshold from the known world to the unknown. She is in terra incognita, ready to meet her challenges and trials or her metaphoric dragons en route. On her first day in Oxford the first person she meets is Shirin, her mentor, the second Daughter of Eve and a harbinger of what is going to happen to her before she leaves Oxford and goes back Türkiye. The third is Mona, an Egyptian who wears a headscarf. Shirin is the first to welcome Peri. Being a Muslim from Iran, a country that neighbors Türkiye, she was asked to show Peri around. Her family has left Iran when she was fourteen because of the Islamist regime. Extroverted, self-assured and audacious, Shirin puts herself in the group of students who arrive as one thing and then become something else. She says she has dated both guys and girls from each group of students. (Shafak, p.92) She is perfectly at ease with her sexuality. Shirin has become British Iranian by undergoing a transformation which she says she owes to Professor Azur. He helped her become calmer. According to her, "Azur is a walking legend there ... He teaches God. He's ridiculously handsome. No, not just handsome. He's hot" (Shafak, p. 130) This is a defining moment in Peri's life and a foreshadowing for "Peri, for no reason, feels something like envy creeping into her throat" (Shafak, p. 130)

Shirin, thus, not only makes Peri aware of the fact that she is her opposite but her mention of God brings to Peri's mind back to her complicated relationship with God and makes her wonder about Azur. Peri is unaware at this stage, that her main quest will be with him. Her first reaction is to search for his seminar which is called God. She finds that the syllabus is eclectic drawing on sources from antiquity to the present day, from philology to poetry, from mysticism to neuroscience, from Eastern



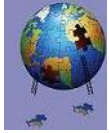
philosophers to their Western counterparts. This seminar explores what we talk about when we talk about God. Then, she sees a poster on a wall about THE GOD DEBATE with three professors one of whom is Azur. Without a ticket, she sneaks through the side door and is stopped by an attendant but after she has seen Azur who argues that both faith and doubt are necessary when God is concerned. To him uncertainty is a blessing. Having seen him and remembering Shirin mentioned his seminar called God, Peri decides to meet him. For this purpose she goes to the Divinity School on the campus. At the door she meets Troy, the attendant who had stopped her at the entrance to the GOD DEBATE. He says Azur is a wolf in professor's clothing and warns her to stay away from him. He is suing Azur. Thus Peri has been warned. However, instead of heeding the warning, she looks for a challenge and finds Professor Azur's room, where she unknowingly is about to meet the love of her life.

Azur tells Peri his seminar has nothing to do with belief. He says, "We are seeking knowledge" (). To him, confusion, curiosity and complications are essential to an honest study of a possibility of a God. The seminar is for the seekers, those who are willing to be beginners every morning. This description fits Peri like a glove to the hand. She is interested. In the first week of the new term, Peri receives an invitation to Azur's God Seminar. There are a total of 10 students with five boys and five girls. Mona is also there. All students give reasons as to why they are there. Peri says she is not sure why she is there. To Azur they are there for a scientific inquiry into the nature of God, and personal beliefs should not get in the way (Shafak, p. 227) He also tells them to study Math, Physics, Music, Painting, Poetry, Art and Architecture, that is, to approach God through unlikely channels. What Azur really wants is to make God unite people by simply being an object of study. Peri thinks Azur's world is outside the rigid dichotomies of good and evil, God and Satan, light and dark, superstition and reason, theism and atheism. As a result, she is infatuated with him. Henceforth, she she will be experiencing the aftermath her infatuation. This will be her ordeal as a quester

Peri's first trial with Azur is when he asks the students what they would want to hear from God when God spoke to them. She says she would like Him to apologize for all the injustice. Azur says the greatest bigots in history committed the greatest injustices in the name of justice and he calls Peri a fanatic living in the past. Peri is terribly hurt. She decides to drop the course but changes her mind when she receives a note from Azur asking her not to drop the course. She remains in the course because the search for truth is enough of incentive to keep her going. Daring to know thyself means daring to destroy thyself. Then, with the same pieces a new self will be assembled just like the mythological Phoenix is born from its own ashes.

Peri's next encounter with Azur is during the semester break. It's Christmas. Peri goes to the bookstore and begins to read a book written by Azur when he comes in with his dog, a Collie named Spinoza. He invites Peri to his house for the New Year's Eve. They talk about certainty and doubt. As he leaves with the dog, Peri knows that that is the moment she falls in love with him. On New Year's Eve, she takes the bus to Azur's house. In the darkness she sees Troy who is suing Azur. He is there to find evidence. Peri meets another student of physics named Darren among the other guests. He is interested in her, but Peri is in love with the wrong man. She feels the change in her. She yearns to err. She tells Azur about the baby in the mist, and he tells her not to be afraid of being different and adds that she is very special. Then, he kisses her on both cheeks to celebrate the new year. He also tells Peri to come to his office to talk about this experience of hers. Peri misunderstands Azur's approach which is completely professional. However, Peri convinces herself that her professor has feeling for her. When the party is over, Peri and Darren are given a lift to Oxford. Darren asks her if he can go up with her. Her answer is in the affirmative. Yet, it is her professor she desires as they make love.

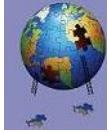
Upon Shirin's insistence that they share a house Peri feels she has to say yes. So, she moves in with Shirin. Mona also joins them. Now the three daughters of Eve begin living in the same house. Shirin calls each to them by a nickname: The Sinner, meaning herself, The Believer, meaning Mona and the Confused, meaning Peri. God, religion, faith, identity and sex are the topics of argument between



Shirin and Mona. While Mona defends her headscarf and says covering her head is her choice, Shirin says it's Mona's small piece of cloth that sent her family to exile. Peri understands that it was Azur's idea to bring them together under one roof for in one of his books he writes that people in bitter disagreement and mutual recrimination should be left alone together in a closed space and made to look each other in the eye. When Peri goes to Shirin's room she finds a book of Azur's signed by him calling her sweet Shirin. Could this be a sign that Shirin and Azur are in a romantic relationship? Peri does not do anything about what she sees until she meets Troy on the campus. Troy tells her Azur is having an affair with Shirin. He also adds that she was sleeping with him while she took his seminar. Now Peri feels she has to confront Shirin and asks her if she is having an affair with Azur. Shirin's answer to this is "If you are asking because you are paranoid, that's your problem, not mine. If because you are jealous, again, it's your problem not mine" (Shafak, 160). This is the last straw that breaks the camel's back. Shirin's answer makes Peri feel small and insignificant. She hates Azur whom she thought with his vision and knowledge would show her out of her quandary that had tormented her since her childhood. She turns her anger inside and hates herself. She wants to sleep and not wake. She sees the baby in the mist again who urges her to do something long overdue. He is telling her to kill herself. Peri agrees. She remembers the hedgehog she had buried as a child and wonders what became of it. Now she would learn, first hand, what happened to those who were refused entry to God's paradise.

When Peri comes to her senses, she is in a hospital. The dream child sent to Oxford to bring pride to the Nalbantoğlu family had brought humiliation and failure instead. She was planning to stay in the academia or to find a job at a top international institution when she first came to Oxford, but the challenges and trials Peri has met are too much for her sensitive and delicate nature. Her quest has not ended yet. She is told that when she is ready, she will be asked questions about a certain professor. She understands that they thought it was Azur who triggered her suicide attempt. The next morning she is expected to appear before the committee. Peri first thinks she will testify on Azur's behalf because he cannot be held responsible for her suicide attempt or for her unrequited love. Then, she could not tell which upset her more: that he had been secretly sleeping with Shirin or that he had refused to love her in the same way. He had burst in to her life and left destitution in its wake. She approaches the building where she will testify and sees Shirin and Troy there. Just as she had watched her twin brother choke to death and not cried for help, she simply walks away without testifying. She thinks she is not an actor but a spectator. This is their problem not hers. "To hurt and to be hurt; that was a human trait (Shafak, p.3). Thus, when she betrays Azur, she also betrays the truth. She goes back to Türkiye.

Sixteen years pass by and Peri is now, "a fine wife, a fine mother, a fine housewife, a fine citizen, a fine modern Muslim" (Shafak. p.4). On her way to a dinner at the seaside mansion of a businessman who had made a colossal fortune in the last few years, the traffic is congested and the doors to the car are unlocked. Her handbag is scooped out of the car by a child. She runs after the child only to meet a glue-addict tramp who has her bag. Peri is jarred, "Not his features but the intensity with which he carried himself reminded Peri of someone- someone she thought she had left locked in the past, so she had loved like she had loved no one else" (Shafak, p.24). The tramp empties her bag. The photograph of Azur, Peri, Shirin and Mona from the time in Oxford falls to the ground. The tramp slices Peri's right palm with a knife, and he attempts to rape her. Somehow Peri manages to kick him in the crotch and also to kick him in the nose which breaks his nose. "She is severely tested once more before the initial conflict, her experience in Oxford, is resolved. This incident brings up the past with all its memories and, with them, a sense of guilt. Now our quester has no other chance but to deal with her past, her unfinished business in Oxford or her quest to reach resurrection. To this end, she is going to call Shirin first. She remembers Shirin saying there are two kinds of men: the breakers and the fixers. We fall in love with the first, but marry the second. Her life has vindicated Shirin. Peri has a loving husband. She calls Shirin and leaves a message saying she must talk to Azur and hear from him if he has forgiven her for not testifying on his behalf. Shirin calls her back. Peri admits to Shirin that she



was young and jealous. She also tells Shirin that she has become a modern version of her mother. Next, she calls Azur and tells him that she owes him an apology. Azur tells her not to blame herself for she was in no state to make a sound judgement and that she was too young. More importantly, he adds that he felt for her but also felt angry at her for she reminded him of a woman he had known whom he had hurt. Peri explains it was the Azur in her mind that she had made in to a sort of God.

Thus Peri Nalbantoğlu is reconciled with Shirin, and Azur and hence her past. Her quest is over now. Responding to the call of adventure, she left her ordinary world, met with her mentor, was severely tested, and lived through the ordeal of suicide. Then, in İstanbul she is severely tested by the tramp whom she manages to overcome. Now Peri has returned with new power and knowledge of forgiveness and being forgiven. Relieved and fully confident, she is at the threshold of a new beginning.

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