

The assertion of power play in the gaze by dictionary of gazes

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The Gaze by Elif Shafak chronicles the experience of the narrator in late 20th century Istanbul as an obese woman navigating her existence as a spectacle for the gaze those around her. Throughout the text, Shafak asserts to the reader that the narrator's tribulations are a legacy of the timeless human affair of assuming power through gazing upon others or manipulating the gaze of others. The most prominent motif of the gaze in the text is the 'Dictionary of Gazes' (DG), a series of epigraphic entries that documents how the gaze and its associated power play pervade factions of human existence. These entries appear scattered throughout the narrative, taking the structure of a word followed by its definition as related to the idea of sight and gazing.

This essay will explore how Shafak employs the DG to assert the notion of power play. She depicts it as a lexicon of gazing, a tool of suppression, and finally an entity with volition to undermine and aid the narrative. The DG is introduced as an effort by B-C, the narrator's romantic partner to prove that 'everything, has to do with seeing and being seen' (91). Over the course of the text, the entries form a lexicon of gazes, asserting that the gaze is incessant to power play. Shafak notably does this through cultural and intertextual allusions within the entries. This establishes the universality of gazing and affirms the notion that the gaze and power play are strongly associated. For example, the entry 'Zahir'(76) names God 'he who cannot be seen'(76). It is based on Islamic tradition where 'there is no image of God' (Green, 2015). The entry expounds the idea that the power is attributed an inability to be gazed upon. While the entry, 'armour'(86) proposes greater safety when the body is concealed from the external gaze.

Despite the former being an allusion to supreme knowledge and the latter a reference to an everyday entity, both entries to present the idea that power is relegated upon being made visible the gaze of others. This recurring technique of relating a melange of allusions presents the universal relationship between power and the gaze. Furthermore, the entries possess a disembodied tone, heightening a sense of authority within its knowledge. The tone of the entries are all told from a third perspective. This presents the reader with an understanding that the body behind the entries is omniscient and objective. This is accomplished through profound phrases that are often ambiguous in their interpretation. They indicate a higher form of understanding that links the entries, which at times is out of reach to the reader.

An example of this is the end of the entry on the god of hunger who eats himself. The last line of the entry is ' it wasn't their stomachs that could not be filled, but their eyes' (108). Despite there being no mention of sight within the entry, the final line draws in the idea, creating ambiguity on what the entry was trying to propose. While it allows the reader to interpret the entry, Shafak employs this technique to create a sense of incomprehension within the the reader. In doing so, she demonstrates that the DG possesses knowledge beyond the reader. Thus, allowing their message of power and the gaze to be considered and accepted by the reader to greater extents. Thus, Shafak presents the DG as a lexicon of gazes that proves the universality of the relationship between the gaze and power, reaffirming this idea through giving the entries an all-knowing tone.

Next, the DG is revealed to be employed by B-C as a tool of suppression over others who have gazed upon him. B-C is a dwarf and like the narrator, is 'trapped in a state of invisibility; just like many people who are put on display' (233). This line reveals his position in society where over-visualisation has silenced him. It is revealed that B-C's writing of the DG is an exploitative process wherein he 'collected material from every possible source' implying a sense of insatiability to method of his collection.

Moreover, his means of relating the material was to 'take bits and pieces of my stories and other people's stories and mix them all together' this depicts the reckless attitude B-C embodies to those he gazes upon the material. The word 'fatty' holds significant emotional burden for the narrator, yet he entitles an entry with that word, depicting his emotional insensitivity to her. The entry is superficial and the title is an offensive slur which violates 'an unspoken pledge' (186) between the narrator and B-C to not mention each other's appearance. Furthermore, his ability to condense and summarise her in an entry gives him directive power over her narrative.

Therefore, he uses dictionary to subjugate the narrator and have her serve her purpose as material. His reluctance to understand her complexities divulges that B-C is using the DG as a record of his gaze, manifesting it as a tool of suppression. This character of his gaze reflects the way he has been gazed upon by mainstream society. Thus, implying that B-C has internalised his society's exploitative gaze, and is subjecting the narrator to it.

Therefore the DG divulges the power play between characters, depicting B-C's writing of the DG as a means to assert power through his gaze, suppressing the narrator. However, Shafak does not let the the abuse of the

DG as a tool of suppression to negate its authority. She does this by showing that the DG escapes the control of B-C. This is seen when instead of merely suppressing the narrator, the entries possess volition both to aid her narrative and distract from it. The DG aids the narrator by expanding the textual understanding of the reader in order to fortify her narrative. An example of this is the entry, 'Elsa's eyes' (107) which is defined as 'the residue of sadness'(107). When the narrator is physically assaulted and made to perform fellatio, a cat by the name of Elsa watches. In connoting a deeper meaning to the cat's name, the DG creates a sense of intimacy between the reader and the narrator, through providing us with background knowledge that further contextualises the act. This results in a deliberate appeal to the reader's sense of empathy for the character. The sadness in the cat's eyes is presented as a model for the reader to follow upon witnessing the assault. By doing so, Shafak releases the DG from B-Cs use of it as a tool of suppression as it is shown to aid the narrator's story and create empathy for her tribulations.

However, Shafak affirms that the DG is objective by presenting it with volition to undermine the narrator. This is done through portraying the entries and the main narrative to be at odds with one another, presenting the entries as an interruptions to the linearity and tone of the narrative. This is noted when the narrator is attempting suicide and her narrative is building towards her declaration of freedom, 'Because I...have finally become a floating balloon' (257) but she is cut off by a dictionary entry entitled 'alien'. These entries fragment the linear structure of the narrative and create an emotionally alienating effect for the reader as it was a constant reminder

that they were reading a constructed work of fiction. As such, the reader could never be fully engaged in either narrative, ensuring the idea of power is exemplified in its physical structuring. The entries interrupt the narrative tone. During the attempted suicide, there is building victorious tone. This occurs as the narrator begins to see the world from above, her society becoming 'millions of newborn chicks' in her eyes. The use of the word newborn suggests a recognition of the jejune quality of the individuals who make up her society.

The comparison to animals is key in implying that the rising, is symbolic of the narrator attaining enlightenment, mankind appearing less civilised. This is telling of the narrator's evolution as previously mainstream society was a source of fear which has now been diminished. The interruption negates the climatic value of the moment and undermines the narrator's emotional journey. By presenting the main narrative and the entries at to be at times aid each other and at time be at odds, a higher level of power play is presented to the reader. In conclusion, the Dictionary of Gazes is presented as, a lexicon of gazes which presents the universally consistent relationship between power and the gaze, a tool of suppression used by characters to assert power over each other, and finally as an objective entity that can both aid and undermine the main narrative through fluid stances on power. Shafak therefore employs it as a major tool to assert the notion of power play in The Gaze.