

# Inferiority Complex: A Character Analysis of Elif Shafak's Honour

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**Abstract-** Western Media has always propagated incidents of honour-killings in order to tarnish the image of Muslim communities in the West without taking into account the actual social and psychological aspects that instigate the crimes. The present research will study the socio-psychological factors that motivate the perpetrators. This qualitative research work will employ the psychoanalytic literary criticism of the characters of Elif Shafak's novel Honour, especially Iskender, the matricide. The research aims at exploring the psyche of the character involved in order to determine the root-cause of his actions and behavior. The methodology adopted in this research work is analytical-cum-critical for psychoanalysis of characters with conceptual framework of theories of inferiority complex proposed by Alfred Adler. The research will be significant, as it will shed new light on Iskender's character, from the unique perspective of the matricide.

**Index Terms-** Pampering, Inferiority Complex, Adler, Shafak, Honour killing, Iskender

## I. INTRODUCTION

Honour killing is the murder of a person, in most cases a female, by a close relative. The perpetrator usually believes that the victim has dishonoured the family and brought shame upon it by violating the laws of the community, or by not adhering to the moral and ethical code preached by a religion. The diasporic writers, who have taken up this theme in their books and have written about it, have not portrayed facts in support of their (fictional) crime. They have worked to propagate Western agenda by wrongly attributing honour killing with Islam and Muslim countries. *Honour* takes a different stance on the subject. Instead of stereotyping British Muslims and supporting the propaganda of Western Media by tarnishing Muslim communities, Elif Shafak has tried to show the other side of the coin.

It is imperative that perpetrators and their social, psychological, financial and biological history be taken into account, especially in case of incidents of honour killing in immigrant families of Muslim faith. Alfred Adler, the celebrated psychiatrist and philosopher, emphasized the importance of understanding individuals within the bounds of their social context. Adler addressed contemporary and crucial issues like social equality, birth order and its influence, parent education, holism and life style. According to Adler, we all have one

fundamental desire and ambition: to have a sense of belonging and to feel important.

Honour killing can be explained in cultural and psychological context. Steve Taylor, a senior lecturer in Psychology at Leeds Beckett University, and author of *Out of the Darkness* has discussed the phenomenon in his article "The Madness of Honor Killing" (2012). According to him, the crime is largely related to a form of "status anxiety" i.e. a phobia of losing the social status and the desire to protect it. It is a "pathological insecurity" in the society where such incidents occur because of a perpetual pressure to comply with the social conventions. It is also instigated by fear of being shunned by the community. The need to belong to the community is connected with the establishment of a normal social identity. An individual who refuses to conform to the social convention risks losing it. Taylor also refutes the connection between Islam and honour killing, stating, "I disagree that this practice is linked to religion. Islam does not condone honor killing at all. The practice is obviously a cultural one, as it's spread across peoples who have different faiths e.g. Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism" (The Madness of Honor Killing, 2012).

According to the Department of Justice, Canada (2015), the practice of honour killing is not associated with any specific religion. There has been recorded evidence of it across Jewish, Hindu, Sikh, Muslim and Christian communities. Generally, it is motivated by some personal agenda, hurt ego or programmed brainwashing. Studies have revealed that perpetrators sometimes have a case of mental illness that remains undiagnosed. Psychopathic tendencies are also a cause of this practice. Human rights activists have exposed cases and given coverage to this crime over the past decades. It has been reported throughout the world. It has occurred within various ethnic, religious and culturally diverse countries, including Israel, Afghanistan, Brazil, Bangladesh, Pakistan, India, Jordan, Turkey, Egypt, Iran, Lebanon, Nigeria, Palestine, Peru, the United States of America, the United Kingdom, Italy, Norway, Sweden, Germany and Canada (the Council of Europe, 2003).

The author writes about a son who is worshipped by the mother, and a father who is overthrown by his son. The book shows how a child can become lost if the structure of the family falls apart. Shafak does not condone the matricide; instead, she provides clues for the reader to understand cause and effect.

## II. ADLER AND INFERIORITY COMPLEX

Alfred Adler deviated from conventional language and psychoanalysis by introducing “Organ Inferiority” which subsequently led him to coin the term “Inferiority Complex”. *The General System of Individual Psychology* (2006), is an unpublished manuscript by Adler and discovered in the Library of Congress, which contains a series of undated thirteen lectures that he wrote in English language. In these lectures, he emphasizes the role of individual in the creation of a better society. He also emphasizes how inferiority complex can hinder in the evolutionary process of a person, and subsequently the society, by creating individuals who are psychologically crippled and unable to handle the pressures and demands of the society.

The “Theory of Organ Inferiority” is discussed in the chapter three of the book. He has made some remarkable revelations regarding inferiority in children. The subsequent theories that originate from this organ inferiority highlight the beginning of neurosis and psychosis in children. He strengthens his diagnoses by giving examples from several case studies, pointing out the dangers of over indulgence and pampering, to the extent of calling it the greatest evil of humanity. The position of birth order and childhood recollections has also been discussed. The third section of the analysis employs these Alderian theories in order to unearth evidence of inferiority complex in Iskender and its origin.

Alfred Adler, with the “Theory of Organ Inferiority”, introduced the concept of Inferiority Complex in his monograph, “A Study of Organ Inferiority and its Physical Compensations”(1971). In *The Neurotic Character* (2002) and *The General System of Individual Psychology* (2006), Adler sheds light on his theory and its origin, how it affects the individual during childhood and its consequences in the later life. He clarifies that there exists a “relationship between organ inferiority and psychic compensation,” (Adler, 2002, p 1). These observations can be helpful in understanding behavioral patterns of neurotics. Since it has been established previously that Iskender’s character is psychotic, the term “psychotic” shall be referred to, instead of the term “neurotic”. This is done in order to remove any confusion that may arise in comprehension of the character analysis.

The two aspects of Adler’s theory that will prove fruitful in understanding Iskender’s character are

1. Inferiority Complex
2. Pampered Child and Adult

## III. INFERIORITY COMPLEX

Adler observed that in humans, disease attacked inferior organs, those body parts and organs that were inhibited in growth (genetic) or altered due to some disease or accident (Lundin, 2015). In his monograph “A Study of Organ Inferiority and Its Physical Compensation”(1971), Adler stated that this organ inferiority could affect the individual’s psyche as well. Other organs make compensations; In case a kidney fails, the other enlarges to make up for the removed kidney. This can be illustrated by the example of “blind seer”. Beethoven was deaf, yet he wrote phenomenal compositions. Other examples are of people like Helen Keller, who make up for the loss of one or two

organs or impaired senses by compensating with healthier or exaggerated senses. Men who have small stature can be very intelligent, skilled or dictatorial, like Bonaparte, all in order to make compensations for inferior stature. The organ inferiority can profoundly influence the psyche: it lowers an individual’s self-esteem. Besides, it also increases the individual’s insecurities.

The struggle to assert one’s self, termed as Self-assertion, originates from this sense of inferiority. Its impact is greater than anticipated. In case the inferior organ learns to protect itself from the rest of the organism and compensates by participating actively in quantitative and qualitative way, “... then the predisposed child, in his feeling of inferiority, will elicit from his psychic capabilities the often conspicuous means to increase his own value, among which we may note most prominently neurotic and psychotic means,” (Adler, 2002, p 2).

Adler attributes inferiority complex to some impairment in the physical body part or organ; Self-assertion is a way to compensate for it. Iskender has to face bullying as a child. The incident is described as being part of his journal entry, emphasizing its significance. One day, while roaming beside a canal, he is ambushed by three boys, a few years older than him. They taunt him for his cowardice in running away from the circumcision, and make insinuations. They tackle him on the ground and take off his trousers to see for themselves if he had been circumcised or not. The boys ridicule him and poke fun at his child-sized penis: “What is this? So small! Like an okra,” (Shafak, 2013, p 163).

Iskender is so traumatized during this bullying, especially as the boys threaten to circumcise him again that he urinates in front of them, causing further humiliation for himself. The stress and anxiety causes regression; he sits hugging his knees and rocking himself. Pembe finds him in this position. During his circumcision, he also becomes agitated while on top of the tree, distressed and frightened, and he urinates while the men watch from below. His “inferior” organ, which is “small” due to his age, is still significant, because it plays a central role in building the self-esteem of male species. By grounding in his mind the insignificance of his body, the boys instill inside him a sense of inferiority. Prior to that, the circumcision had left him shocked by his public humiliation. He has not completely recovered from it or “healed”, when the bullying occurs. He feels that the source of all his problems arise from his private parts: “... (he) held his willy, the cause of all his distress,” (Shafak, 2013, p 28). Adler observes that the individuals who suffer on account of this inferiority (which has origin in organ inferiority), suffer from uncertainty brought on by this feeling, and feel pressurized. This can be detected easily in these children and adults. Sometimes these feelings remain hidden under the veneer of charm. But the problem takes root in the early childhood: “His will and thought are invariably built on a foundation of a feeling of inferiority,” (Adler, 2002, p 6).

Such is Iskender’s trauma after the circumcision, bullying and ram incident that he asserts himself by forming a gang of his own. Adler states that such children make a “keen estimation of themselves,” (Adler, 2002, p 6). These children, which he terms as the ugly child or the pampered child, will try to escape from the negativity within themselves. In order to escape further humiliation, Iskender forms a gang comprising of streetwise

gypsy boys who smoke cigarettes. Before his second confrontation with the bullying boys and his gang formation, the ram incident occurs. He does not show any submissiveness. His defiance is born out of his inferiority, which is subsequently a by-product of insecurity. His vulnerability as a child makes him suffer a "taste for (his) weakness," (Shafak, 2013, p 141). The retaliation on part of Iskender takes the shape of bullying as well. His gang beat the two kids out of the three, leaving the leader out, "to make him sweat" (Shafak, 2013, p 164). The gang makes the third boy drink his own urine, and throw him in the filthy canal.

The journey of such a child towards superiority is documented by Adler. Lundin explains the effect of such complexes on the individual's life. In order to feel adequate in the society and among other people, it is imperative that a person be able to overcome his deficiencies. In the external world, the demand posed by society is greater than the individual can imagine. His feeling of inferiority is enhanced by his inability to cope with life challenges, resulting in psychological, emotional and physical problems. The future does not hold any promise for such a child: "The child will need some expedient to do this, so that, in the insecurities of life, in his disoriented state of being, he will have a fixed image in his mind's eye," (Adler, 2002, p 6)

The child needs to create this tool; he will consider himself humiliated, inadequate, insecure and inferior through self-estimation. This child will find a fixed point and attribute all the power to this. Adler attributes this power to the father. In Iskender's case, Adam was not an ideal father (figure). Iskender's assertion of his own superiority is also a result of Adam's passivity.

#### IV. PAMPERED CHILD AND ADULT

In Chapter III of the book *The General System of Individual Psychology* (2006), entitled "Organ Inferiority & Pampering", Adler expounds on the adverse effects of pampering on a child, and the lasting impact of it on his adult life. Doctors who observed children born with organ impairment and go through suffering, explain how they do not thrive and easily turn away from life (Adler, 2006, p28). He asserts that his experience and statistics have shown that individuals who encounter hostility in life, forgo opportunities to grow and exist in a constant state of conflict with society, have a history of organ inferiority. The only way to understand the burdens of such individuals and the problems they encounter in life is by understanding "the relationship between the organs and the demands from outside," (Adler, 2006, p 30).

Adler asserts that such individuals develop, in relation to these organs, a fascination with that particular organ, explaining his view by exemplifying children with upset stomach. A child, as he grows, makes a relation between money and food. If that child suffers from a chronic case of upset stomach, he will develop a fascination with money and being rich. Often power drive in the rich is related to stomach problems. He gives the example of John Rockefeller (Adler, 2006, p 31). Another example is of a shortsighted man who was pampered as a child. This hindered his development and became burdensome for him. At thirty-six years of age, he got a job but could not settle there,

suffering from anxiety and bouts of weeping. Once he left the job and settled down at home quietly, he became contented.

There is enough evidence throughout the story to indicate that Pembe indeed pampered Iskender a lot as a child. Owing to her excessive fear and superstition, she never scolded or hit him, until he was seven years old. However, by then, he had become accustomed to being cosseted. During his confrontation with Adam over the ram meat, his father reveals: "Iskender, eat! ... I don't beat my children!" (Shafak, 2013, p 141). After the bullying and Iskender's revenge through his gang, Pembe does not scold or confront Iskender at all. He expects some kind of berating, but does not get any. Instead, his mother gives him enough proof of her approval through her silence: "She only looked at me long and hard, and I think I saw a trace of pride in her eyes," (Shafak, 2013, p 165).

This further makes him bold enough to carry on the bullying until it becomes a part of his personality. He even confesses to being a bully himself. In London, he becomes reputed to be a hard-boiled youth, in school and in neighbourhood, among his social circles: "That's the thing with bullies. Nobody says 'Enough' to them ... I should know, because I was, and still am, one of them," (Shafak, 2013, p 162).

These individuals have to struggle hard in order to achieve their goals. Everyone is affected by the external world in a different manner; their life and its style is determined by their perception and understanding of these external factors. However, these perceptions do not alter unless they acknowledge their blunders and try to change. Adler considers pampering to be "the greatest evil of mankind," (Adler, 2006, p 32). Individuals who are pampered lead a different life than other, less privileged people. Adler criticizes parents for this, blaming it on their "egotistical" tendency in pampering. Adler maintains that the mother and the child, who is pampered, do not have a strong connection; the mother dotes on the child and does everything for him. He only makes a connection with her because she meets his needs whenever required. It can also lead to resentment of others.

It has been discussed previously that Iskender, at one point, recalls the time when he used to be the only child, and wishes that it could happen again. Adler brings to lights another characteristic of these children. They are either very pleasant, or else have destructive fantasies about the father, simply because they do not wish to disrupt the comfortable situation with the mother: "The pampered child lives like a parasite in a symbiotic way," (Adler, 2006, p 32).

These children do not like being separated from their mother, and have a fear of being left alone. A child who is afraid of the dark or afraid of being left alone is a pampered child. The darkness disconnects the child with the mother. He sleeps beside the mother at night, wants the lights turned on at night (so that he can see the mother) and wants the door to the room open. Adler has his own interpretation of such behavior: "(This child's) goal of completion is to always be supported by and dependent on another person," (Adler, 2006, p33).

He does everything in his capacity to achieve this goal. He becomes attention-seeker, and in order to ensure the presence of the mother, keeps her busy with demands and behavior. This child, when enters the society as an adult, refuses to cooperate, believing that he is entitled to all, every favour and every opportunity. His only desire is "to receive, to accept, to expect,



(and) to take,” (Adler, 2006, p 33). He exploits other, finding it difficult to resist temptation; the demands of the society to become cooperative are met with disappointment. This child abhors new situations, because it deprives him of a “pampered” situation. They associate hostility with every new situation; they grow up to consider the world an extremely harsh and hostile place. They also become sensitive, shrinking for newness. This leads to a situation where we have a friendless child. The only people they eventually befriend are people these children can use, who meet their demands and pamper them. Pampered boys easily develop friendship with girls since they are not competitive, agreeable and friendly. These children would only take employment where they believe they will be appreciated, and where they can become leaders.

The Adlerian interpretation of pampered children is a befitting tool to dissect Iskender further. The aspects of his character that have not been touched upon previously, can be examined now. Once it is established that he is a “pampered child”, we see patterns of over-indulgence and its effects on his personality. He exhibits superiority, even before bullying event. The first glimpse of it is in the encounter with the old woman who names him. Iskender refuses to give her water, upon which she remarks that he desires only to be served, and not serve. He does not mingle with the children who are invited to be circumcised, considering them beneath him.

Adler makes distinction between the two types of pampered children: Active and Passive. A passive child manipulates the people around him through charm and good behavior. He seeks attention by drawing attention to himself through “passive” and socially acceptable ways: they vomit, the develop physical conditions like upset stomach, heart palpitations etc. These children lure adults to pamper them through good behavior, and win them. They also tend to become neurotics: “These passive children ... because of their desire for and attempt to retreat whenever confronted, tend to become neurotic later because neuroses and psychoses are retreats,” (Adler, 2006, p36).

Iskender is not a fussy child in the passive sense. He asserts himself through aggression later on. Turkey was place where he was cherished and beloved by all in the small village. He is friendly with his sister Esma, a girl. Adler gives examples of people, men and children alike, who has a fixation with looking at people on the streets. Iskender exhibits this fascination in the barrack-like basement flat, where he observes passer-bys through the ventilators (windows), not unlike a soldier. London is a hostile world for Iskender. His immigrant status does not help to alleviate his difficult situation. He deals the outside world in any way he can. He changes his name: Alex. These lines summarize an outsider’s view of his personality: “Alex. Alexander. Whatever ... Bloody full of himself. Always with his groupies, thinks he’s a gang leader,” (Shafak, 2013, p 125). Iskender does not speak Oxford English. His mode of communication is the London slang because he “had better luck with the slang: to me that had power, currency,” (Shafak, 2013, p 135).

His alteration of his name and adaptation of slang are ways to combat hostility by being one of the natives, and shedding his immigrant status. He unconsciously believes that by being “Alex” and remodeling his language with slang will make him less conspicuous. This instinct for survival collides with his desire for self-assertion and results in his chosen sport: “Boxing

was a one to one reflection of life ... (you are) on your own ... No team work ... No substitutes ... If you wanted to know a man ... watch him box ,” (Shafak, 2013, p 252).

The Orator praises Iskender for his skill and approves the fact the he does not “dodge risky fights,” (Shafak, 2013, p 253), and his defense is strong. This reveals that despite being the ‘leader’ of his gang, Iskender likes being alone and does not consider his friends to be his equal, either physically or psychologically. Even in prison, he forms a new gang since the existing ones are not to his liking. He relates himself with the Orator because he feels that the latter reciprocates his aura of superior manly traits: restraint, maturity, solitude.

A failing of the pampered children is that they are easily tempted and manipulated (Adler, 2006, p 36). Flattery works wonders for them, coercing them into disadvantageous situations. They are willing victims of others, robbing, stealing and even murdering in order to please others. They are ready tools for schemers and manipulators alike. Tariq, Iskender’s uncle, prompts him to act on behalf of him and save the family’s honour. He manipulates Iskender initially though flattery, by praising his ability to control the family and manage the household in Adam’s absence. Iskender comes to trust him more in the absence of a father, and his need to adhere to an expedient, a fixed image, leads him to become dependent on his uncle. The Orator also uses him as a tool to act out his “ideology”. It can be evident in their contrasting physique, Iskender being the muscular and taller of the two. The Orator needed a bodyguard who could also be turned into a scapegoat, should the need arise. The school gang, which comprises of immigrant kids, also nurtures Iskender’s need to feel significant and be-all and end-all. He likes the fact that they all look up to him: “I’m like a big brother to the boys,” (Shafak, 2013, p 228).

He in turn does his own manipulating, by making them hang on to his words, and making them feel secure in a hostile, racist atmosphere. Adler observes that the actual culprits in a crime are mostly “behind the stage” and “experienced” (Adler, 2006, p 36). The perpetrators are mere tools used to commit the crime. Iskender goes to his uncle and the Orator, even to his own father, seeking help and support on how best to act in the face of his mother’s (supposed) promiscuity. Adam acts indifferent, Tariq eggs him on and the Orator reinforces that “it’s down to” him to save his family’s honour (Shafak, 2013, p 254).

Both the manipulating people that witnessed his demise from behind the curtain, abdicated their hold on him and abandoned Iskender once they achieved their goal. Iskender belatedly realized that he was the means to an end: “Uncle Tariq, the Orator, my old buddy Arshad ... I blame them all for making me the person I was. And yet they are all free, enjoying their life, while I am here burning,” (Shafak, 2013, p 305). Adler states that children who are pampered, tyrannize the family through temper outburst (ram incident). He further predicts that these children consequently and as a result of their habits “become the tyrant of the family,” (Adler, 2006, p 36).

Since Adlerian theories do not give much emphasis to innate superiority, this analysis will refrain from straying in that direction. By the time Iskender was five, he had developed the attributes of a pampered child. His superiority and solitary, friendless status is proof of that. Additionally, his sobriquet

“Sultan” helped to solidify his sense of superiority. The trauma experienced during the ram incident and the bullying, in correlation with organ inferiority created an individual, who became a bully suffering from inferiority complex and curbing that sense of degradation through self-assertion.

#### V. CONCLUSION

The discussion in this study is about Iskender’s inferiority complex and the pampering that he received how it shaped his personality and its effects on his life later on. Iskender’s position in the family as the first-born makes Pembe and Adam over-indulgent in spite themselves. This excessive pampering in the first six-seven years created problems in his adult life. The result of this indulgence is that he is shocked when his parents are strict and hit him. This results in psychosis, as he retreats from harsh treatment and is ultimately unable to come to terms with criticism and berating. London turns out to be a hostile city in terms of racism. The Asian and Muslim community suffers verbal and physical assault. Iskender’s need to feel accepted, born out of his sense of inferiority and degradation makes him change his name from Iskender to more acceptable English version, Alex. He projects hostility as a defense against the fear of being rejected or rebuffed by the society. They are tempted by flattery, which is why they fall victim to manipulation:

(Pampered) boys who submit so easily to temptation have great difficulties because they can be ruined as easily as they are tempted. On the one hand is seduction, on the other the lure to steal, rob and murder; often when a gang commits a crime, the instrument was a dependent person. While others, much more experienced, are behind the stage of the crime, the actual

perpetrator is usually a dependent person, the tool of others, (Adler, 2006, p 36).

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