

Trauma and Human existence in Elif Shafak's 10 minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World
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Abstract

The paper examines the trauma and human existence in Elif Shafak's novel *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World*, analyzing how personal and collective trauma shapes identity, memory, and social marginalization. The novel follows the postmortem consciousness of Tequila Leila, a murdered sex worker in Istanbul, as she recalls pivotal moments of her life. Through her fragmented memories, Shafak portrays the long-lasting effects of childhood abuse, gender-based violence, and societal exclusion. The paper also examines the psychological and existential dimensions of trauma in the novel, focusing on Leila's resilience and her deep connections with a chosen family of outcasts. By situating Leila's experiences within a broader socio-political context, the paper highlights the intersections of gender, oppression, and memory. The paper underscores how Shafak challenges the dominant narratives of suffering and survival. The paper explores that *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World* is not just a story of trauma but also a testament to resilience, friendship, and the enduring search for dignity in an unjust world.

Keywords: Identity, Memory, Marginalization, Resilience, Gender-based violence, Societal exclusion, Oppression, Dignity, Survival.

Elif Shafak's eleventh novel *10 minutes 38 seconds in This Strange world* (2019), it is a psychological fiction that mainly discusses the interior characterization and motivation through the emotional and mental states of the characters. Shafak's main idea to write this novel was related to a place, an actual place that exists in Istanbul, a graveyard, which has no surnames, mostly just numbers, called Companionless Cemetery. The buried people are the ones who are shunned, rejected, by their families. Shafak is curious to know their stories, their actual individualistic traits, so she took a specific number and named her in her fiction and created her own story of that person. The people among them are mostly AIDs patients, sex workers, abandoned babies, LGBTQ members, and refugees.

Shafak paid attention to that specific societal issue, because she felt that the novelist should be equally interested in science, silenced people, whose stories have been erased, forgotten, or pushed to the margins, she also felt that their untold stories should be told. This book relates to the recollections of an Iranian sex worker Tequila Leila after her brutal death. She was killed and tossed in a dumpster, Leila's heart stops but her mind continues for 10 minutes and 38 seconds. Oscar Wilde states that, memory is the diary that we all carry about with us.

The novel *10 minutes 38 seconds in This Strange world* compiles the dying memories of Tequila Leila as a predominant part and traces the impact of her death on a group of friends introduced in the first section. As she lies in the bin, she knows that she is dead, her brain experiences a last paroxysm of activities like episodes from her past flooding back to her expiring consciousness on the back of startlingly vivid sense memories. Leila experiences dilation of time in this state, with memories that span long periods of life.

The initial chapters of the novel talk about the upbringings of her childhood. Life was always hard for her even from her childhood. She was born to her father's second wife, but raised by his first wife. Her father was a typical religious man with a sworn opposition to anything he considered to be western. He increasingly restricts the women of his family by enforcing the life of pious severity. The worst of all is that Leila begins to be sexually abused by her uncle when she is just six years old. He chooses her of all the girls of the family he tells her that "You have always been my favourite" (65). But her family's horrific response is to betroth her to the son of the uncle who abused her. To escape this situation, Leila, the young woman runs off to Istanbul. And there Leila ends up being sold into prostitution at one of the government-sanctioned brothels of 1960s in Turkey. She ended up as a prostitute unwillingly.

Hermann Hesse states that, if I know what love is, it is because of you. The only man who saw Leila as a human and the only one who didn't want her body but he made her to feel herself is D/Ali. The whole worth of Leila was brought to light by D/Ali. From the brothel she was released by D/Ali, who has sincere love towards Leila. D/Ali was a socialist and he was shot dead in the riot and this leads Leila to become a prostitute again. But Leila's life was the happiest when she was with her only love D/Ali.

After Leila's death, she was buried in the Companionless Cemetery in Turkey. It will be a deposition in to an unnamed and just numbered, It is a grave used for the bodies of social cast-offs, and then the novel moves the readers to follow the misadventures of "the five" they are Nalan, Sinan, Jameelah , Zaynab, Humeyra. The people over there refused to give Leila's body to her friends saying that they are supposed to give the body only to her family. So one of Leila friend's Sinan says in a trembled voice that "we are closer to her than family" (195). The deep friendship was expressed by Shafak as emotionally and comically in the last part of the novel. Her friends conspire to retrieve her body from its ignominious resting place in order to give her a proper burial. They encounter several obstacles in their quest for Leila's body.

The structure of this novel is actually divided into three parts such as mind, body, and soul. The first part deals with her last minute memory which is associated with a particular taste or smell like lemon, cardamom, wedding cake, sulfuric acid which are deeply linked to a transformation in her life. Then the later part deals with her friends who try to free her soul like the blue betta fish in the ocean befitting Leila's wish.

Elif Shafak ends the novel with the new beginning by sending Leila's soul along with the blue betta fish. It conveys the readers that there is always a new beginning to start again. Istanbul was referred by Shafak as illusion, "Istanbul was an illusion" (202). In this novel Shafak weaves intricate details, juxtaposing the changes in Turkey's societal circumstances. Shafak leavens her story with wordplay that "If Paris was the city of love, Jerusalem the city of God, and Las Vegas is the city of sin, Istanbul was the city of multitasking"(249 -50).

Shafak highlights the multitasking throughout the novel. Ultimately the novel is not really about death, but the persistence of love. Without ever losing her grip on the tragedy of Leila's experience and the experiences of so many Turkish women like her Shafak also celebrates Leila's brave and compassionate life.

Shafak leavens a drastic importance for the women who face psychological violence due to the male domination of men, the gender discrimination. The memory is heightened throughout the novel. All the female characters, Leila's mother Binnaz, and even her friends are forced to suffer, deprived of their rights, prejudiced, discriminated

and oppressed by the male dominant norms of the society. Shafak in an interview says that:

We women sometimes play a role of continuity of patriarchy, because patriarchy is not a black and white system in which men oppress women. It's much more complicated. I think we need to go back to the basics. Remember the solidarity. The sisterhood. And expand it. (2021)

Simon de Beauvoir states in *The Second Sex* that humanity is male, define women, not in herself, but in relation to himself. The young woman named Binnaz was just nineteen years old when she got married to Haroun in a kind of religious ceremony. Her husband Haroun was a man of scintillating opposites. He wanted a son more than anything in the world. His long years of marriage with Susan, his first wife has yielded no offspring. But Binnaz was pregnant for the seventh time, she had six severe miscarriages. When she was pregnant with Leila, Binnaz was so careful and conscious and believed in a lot of superstitions and even followed it. Simon de Beauvoir's states that:

She had not touched a single peach so the baby wouldn't be covered in fuzz; she had not used to any spices and herbs in her cooking so the baby wouldn't have freckles or moles; she has not smelled roses so the baby wouldn't have port-wine birthmarks . . . and secretly after every summer, she had collected hairs from Suzan's hairbrush and burned them into fireplace so as to reduce the power of her husband's first wife. (14-15)

Shafak points out the strong male domination that happens after the childbirth. The baby was named as Leyla Afife Kamile, which means full of virtue and high in merit. Even motherhood was denied to Binnaz by her husband as he wanted his daughter to be known as the daughter of his first wife and asked her to accept that she will be rewarded again from Allah. Binnaz would have been felt, as the situation is out of her hands. She has only one option that is to give her own child to Suzan, the struggles she had gone through the six severe miscarriages and inspite of the birth of the child she has not been granted the status of the mother her husband who said "Susan can be Mummy. You'll be Auntie." (22)

Leyla's rights were just taken away from her. Even her motherhood was usurped from her as she has no other choice and the only choice that was left was to cry

and accept. Motherhood of a woman was not respected, her pain and sufferings were not heard by anyone even though it was so loud. The younger child in her was weeping and craving to get back her daughter in her arms to kiss and cuddle her. “Thus the subject was closed, then and there – though, in truth, it would always open, this wound in the mist of their lives that would never heal” (25). Binnaz state was 37 strongly reflecting all women in the male dominated society. Matriarchy was wounded and helpless.

The protagonist of this novel, Leila was actually a girl baby born to a family on 6 January 1947, in the city of Van “the pearl of east” (27). She was named by her father as Leyla Afife Kamile. Her father named her like this so that she should be chaste, untainted and should always remain perfect. He remarks: “You’ll be modest, respectable, pure as water . . .” (26). But unfortunately it did not happen to be true in her future. She came out of her home and was forced to become a prostitute. She had undergone a lot of struggles in Istanbul and met her five loyal friends. The end was actually the beginning of the novel, she was found dead in the outskirts of Istanbul in a dumpster:

Tequila Leila would have given anything to be in her apartment now. Instead she was here, somewhere on the outskirts of Istanbul, across from the dark, damp football field, inside a metal rubbish bin with rusty handles and flaking paint. It was a wheelie bin; at least four feet high and half as wide. Leila herself was five foot seven – plus the eight inches of her purple slingback stilettos, still on her feet. (1-2)

Her father wants her to be like a woman who takes good care of her husband and her children. But even from her childhood she faced all kinds of abuse. Once when she was only six years old Leila’s uncle who was trim, tall and handsome, with hair shaved closed to the scalp and bluish-grey eyes with long lashes that curled at the ends, abused her. He was the prominent reason for Leila to move out of her home and end up as a prostitute. He chose her because she was innocent and selfless. “Because you are not selfish like the others. A smart, sweet girl. Don’t ever change. Promise me you won’t change” (65)

The femininity was not respected, because when Leila openly voiced about her uncle’s misbehaviour towards her at the age of six, nobody accepted if even though they all knew the cause of her pregnancy. They took a bad decision to marry her to the

uncle's son. Everyone noticed Leila's pregnancy by seeing her eating soil. "Are you eating soil? My God, why would you do such a thing?" (105). Later, after growing she asked herself several times. Here, the innocent small girl was facing these struggles and broken into pieces by her own family. And this made Leila open up about the abuse by her uncle, but the family members and her father were not bothered about that and they refused to believe in Leila. She sensed that they all have already known this. "I don't think so. I think you are trying to save Uncle" (109). But even though they all know the truth they wanted her to get married to that uncle's son to hide this situation from the society. Leila's father was accusing her close friend from the school and she shouted back not to involve him into this:

You mean Sabotage . . . Sinan? Leave him out of this. He's my friend. My only friend. He's a kind boy. Uncle is lying! And she was just informed that she'll get engaged. And Leila felt so unhappy and asked that why they are not ready to believe her even she is their own daughter. "Why don't you ever believe me – your own daughter?. (107-8)

That really shattered Leila and so she decided to move out from her home and her city Van. She went to Istanbul where everything was new and she was unaware of it. Two of them sold her to a brothel inspite of her unwillingness. This changed her life drastically. Society and even her own family blamed her, she was not the reason for the cruelty that was thrust on her.

So the woman, the girl child was not even considered by man in the family. Shafak reflects women's life through the mirror of Leila, the mental tortures she had undergone to prove her virginity even among her own family was intolerable. Leila felt that she was "like a trapped butterfly" (110). This disbelief of her father towards her leads her to suffer throughout her life.

Nalan was a friend of Leila in Istanbul. Nalan was called Osman, the youngest son of the farming family in Anatolia. Nalan was an assertive, bravest friend of Leila, one of the five. The mental tortures that she had been affected with through her surroundings made her move to Istanbul. She was bullied by the boys in his school. His feelings were not considered by her family.

In the stories he invented, he would always take the main role – a Persian poetess, Chinese princess or a Russian empress; the characters

wildly, but one thing remained the same; in his mind, he was always a girl never a boy. At school things have been more different. It wasn't a place for stories. (58)

Nalan always felt the femininity in him. He wished to be a girl not as a boy even once in his lifetime. Even though he went for the military training he returned to his home as the same person, always a girl. But his parents ignored his feelings and wanted him to marry a girl. He was not able to do it and his explanations were not heard by any single soul in his family. So he came out of his house and went to Istanbul. He felt "Yet he was not the same. He had always known he was a female inside, but the ordeal of the army had flattened his soul to such a degree that, strangely, he felt emboldened to live his own truth." (59)

He stayed in Istanbul, because only that he could outwardly transform himself in to the person he really was inside. "Osman was no more. There was only Nalan, and no going back" (60). Nalan leaves her home on her wedding night forcefully fixed by her mother and moves to Istanbul where she gets her gender changed; from a boy to a girl though it had never been accepted by the society. Everywhere she was insulted, abused, and humiliated by the people. The society never accepted her, it was not her mistake that she was shunned away and ill-treated by everyone. She never led a happy life.

Jameelah, the death of her mother whom she adored died of cancer, her life has totally changed. Jameelah's family members forced her father to marry again and want him to live a happy life. So her father decided to marry a widow. Because of her step-mother Jameelah lost her education and she forced herself to move to Istanbul:

Jameelah's stepmother, a widow herself, was jealous of a ghost, determined to erase all traces of the woman she felt she was there to replace. Soon Jameelah – the eldest daughter – was clashing with her stepmother on nearly everything, from what she wore to what she ate and how she spoke. (118-19)

Jameelah failed to maintain her relationship with her stepmother which makes her skip her education. Her peaceful life was taken by her stepmother. So she decided to move to Istanbul just to have a peaceful life but she also ended up as a prostitute unknowingly, along with forty people mostly women she made a journey to Istanbul there she was later understood that it was a sham. "By the time she understood it was a

sham – a pretext to bring people in as cheap labour and for sexual exploitation – it was too late for her to escape” (120). A young woman was pulled in to a situation where no one wants to settle, because of her step mother she was undergoing all these peaceless situations. The girl moves to Istanbul only to have a peaceful life.

Zaynab, the friend of Leila, was physically unattractive short and uneducated because her physical stature restricted her position in the society. She was not responsible for her height, she was always avoided by the people in the society for the way she looked. But that does not define a person. The ignorance by the society leads her to face a lot of mental tortures because she was not allowed to study, she was not given a proper job, she was not respected equally as other human beings in the society. But she always got her father’s support at all time, he wants her to get married to a man who is similar to her, unfortunately it never happened.

Zaynab left her place and moved to Istanbul to seek a job for herself. “Finding a job in Istanbul, however, was not easy. No one wanted to hire her” (131). But she ended up as a cleaner in the brothel where Leila was working. The birth is something which one person cannot decide. The society treats people well or badly based on their appearance. So Zaynab who came from high mountain ended up in Istanbul. The depression she faces was miserable, these lines shows that:

Depression was common among the woman on this street, tearing into their souls as fire tears into wood. No one used the word though. Miserable, was what they said. Not about themselves, but about everyone and everything else. The food is miserable. The payment is miserable. My feet hurt, these shoes are miserable. (125)

Zaynab was the face given by Shafak for those kinds of people who don’t look physically attractive. She flashlights the way how society treats them. Shafak portrays the society’s inhuman ways of belittling such different people and how it affects them psychologically in a realistic way. Humeyra, was another friend of Leila, she turned fifteen, was instantly pulled out of the school and married to a man, whom her father has been doing business with.

Her husband was an unambitious man, taciturn and easily frightened. Humeyra knowing he had not wanted this marriage, suspected he had a sweetheart somewhere whom he could not forget. Time and again, she

caught him watching her with resentment, as though he blamed her for his own regrets. (158)

She was working in her in-law's house as a servant. She was treated like a servant without a name. Going back to her parents house was out of the question, so unwillingly she stayed in the place of misery. Even though she worked harder for everyone in that house she was beaten by her husband. The gender domination forced her to endure psychological violence:

Still she might have endured it all if it hadn't been for the beatings. Once her husband broke a wooden coat hanger on her back. Another time he hit her on the legs with a pair of iron tongs that left a claret- coloured mark on the side of her left knee. (158-59)

She escaped from her in-law's home to enjoy her freedom, and she lived near the streets of brothel where she met Leila. She was often afraid that she might become a victim of an honour killing. She always imagined about her murder. "Women accused of indecency weren't always killed, She knew; sometimes they were just persuaded to kill themselves" (159). Shafak strongly states that the education which was prohibited to her, the way she was treated as a servant in her in-law's house are the main factors that affected psychologically which leads her to develop suicidal thoughts and depressed life. He not only focuses on the physical tortures and beatings she had undergone but also the mental tortures that leads her to move out from her husband's home and the thoughts which always force her to kill herself. Shafak concludes:

Men have greater social and physical power than women and, relatedly, that women's beliefs and reactions are shaped by the constant threat of male violence with which women live . . . for instance, behaviour that men see as merely flirtatious may be experienced by women as offensive or even threatening. (Whisnant, 173)

In other words, power is an instrumental concept in Leila's society that never inspects the paradoxical nature of itself. This notion is reflected in each part of the story to provide a proper context of a protagonist who is searching for individual socialization.



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