

MAPPING THE LIVES OF THE MARGINALIZED: A SUBALTERN INTERPRETATION OF ELIF SHAFAK'S 10 MINUTES 38 SECONDS IN THIS STRANGE WORLD

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Abstract

The article examines the representation of marginalized identities in 10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World through the Subaltern Studies tradition. The novel narrates the life and afterlife memories of the protagonist Tequila Leila, a murdered sex worker in Istanbul, whose consciousness remains active for ten minutes and thirty-eight seconds after her death. Through fragmented memories of Leila and the stories of her companions, Shafak exposes the lives of individuals who exist at the margins of society, including women, sex workers, migrants, ethnic minorities, and gender non-conforming individuals. The paper examines how these characters reflect subaltern experiences of exclusion, silencing and social invisibility. It argues that Shafak reclaims the voices of marginalized subjects by transforming their personal histories into narratives of resistance and remembrance.

The novel interrogates the hegemonic social, cultural and patriarchal systems that deny recognition to those who exist outside accepted norms. It highlights the intersection of gender, class, ethnicity, and sexuality in shaping subaltern identities within contemporary Turkish society. By foregrounding the experiences of the socially excluded, Shafak creates an alternative historical and cultural archive that contests official narratives and exposes systemic inequalities. The novel serves as a powerful literary intervention that renders visible the lives of those relegated to the peripheries of society. Through its emphasis on memory, friendship, and collective resistance, the novel not only documents subaltern suffering but also affirms the agency and humanity of marginalized individuals. Shafak's work contributes significantly to contemporary discussions of subalternity, identity, and social justice in Turkish literature.

Key-words: Subaltern Studies; Marginality; Identity; Memory and Resistance; Turkish Literature; Social Exclusion.

Introduction

Contemporary literature became a significant site for individuals for recovering the experiences who remain excluded from political, dominant social and cultural narratives. By highlighting voices that have historically been marginalized, literary texts challenge structures of power and provide alternative perspectives on history, identity, and belonging. These narratives are especially important in societies where social hierarchies based on gender, sexuality, class and ethnicity continue to shape the lives of individuals. Literature functions not only as a reflection of society but also as a medium through which silenced histories and suppressed identities can be articulated and preserved.

Elif Shafak occupies a distinctive position among contemporary writers for her engagement with questions of memory, cultural plurality, identity, and marginalization. She focuses on individuals and communities that exist at the peripheries of society, exposing the mechanisms through which dominant institutions produce exclusion and silence. Through her exploration of gender discrimination, cultural conflict, migration, and social stigma, Shafak creates narrative spaces where marginalized subjects can assert their presence and challenge the narratives imposed upon them. Her novels consistently demonstrate a concern for those who remain invisible within official histories and dominant cultural discourses.

Published in 2019, the novel *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World* is one of Shafak's most compelling explorations of social marginality. It revolves around Tequila Leila, a sex worker whose consciousness continues for ten minutes and thirty-eight seconds after her death. During these final moments, Leila recalls significant events from her life through a series of memories associated

with sensory experiences. Those memories reveal a life marked by gender oppression, social exclusion, sexual violence, and continuous struggles for survival. Simultaneously, the narrative introduces a diverse group of friends who, like Leila, occupy marginalized positions within society. Through their collective experiences, the novel presents an alternative social history that foregrounds those who are often denied recognition and dignity.

Although existing works on *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World* have primarily focused on themes such as trauma, memory, death, and feminism, relatively limited attention has been given to the novel's representation of marginalized communities through the lens of Subaltern Studies. Such a perspective is particularly productive because the narrative consistently emphasizes characters who remain outside dominant social, political, and cultural frameworks. By examining these characters as subaltern subjects, it becomes possible to explore how the novel interrogates systems of exclusion and simultaneously creates narrative spaces for resistance and self-representation.

The paper seeks to examine how Shafak constructs a literary map of marginalized identities through the experiences of Leila and her companions. It investigates the mechanisms of social exclusion that shape their lives, the role of memory in recovering erased histories, and the forms of solidarity that emerge among individuals occupying peripheral social positions. The novel functions as a counter-history of Turkish society, documenting lives that are frequently ignored by dominant narratives.

Leila and the Construction of the Subaltern Female Subject

The character of Tequila Leila occupies a central position and serves as the primary lens through which the novel explores subalternity, marginalization, and resistance. Leila's life is shaped by multiple forms of oppression that emerge from patriarchal authority, social stigma. Her experiences illustrate how subaltern identities are produced through interconnected systems of power that deny recognition, dignity, and agency to individuals occupying marginalized social positions.

From childhood, Leila is subjected to conditions that limit her autonomy and position her at the margins of social power. Raised within a conservative environment characterized by rigid gender expectations, she experiences restrictions that reflect broader patriarchal structures. The family, often regarded as a protective institution, becomes a site where gendered inequalities are reproduced. As Beauvoir famously argues, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (Beauvoir 434). This statement emphasizes that gender is not a natural condition but a social process through which women are trained to internalize cultural expectations and patriarchal norms. Leila's identity is shaped not by her own desires but by social expectations concerning female behaviour, obedience, and respectability.

The violence that Leila experiences further intensifies her marginalization. Rather than receiving protection and justice, she becomes a victim of social systems that fail to acknowledge her suffering. The trauma she endures demonstrates how patriarchal societies often normalize or conceal violence against women. The inability of social institutions to address such violence reveals the extent to which certain lives are considered less valuable than others.

Leila's migration to Istanbul represents an attempt to escape the constraints of her earlier life. Traditionally imagined as a space of opportunity and transformation, the city appears to offer the possibility of freedom and self-determination. However, Shafak complicates this assumption by demonstrating that urban spaces often reproduce existing inequalities rather than eliminate them. Leila physically escapes her oppressive environment, she encounters new forms of marginalization within the city. "Just as women have different social experiences, they do not have the same exact bodies" (Butler 46). Her movement from the periphery to the urban centre does not guarantee social inclusion. Instead, she enters another structure of exclusion that continues to define her through stigma and vulnerability.

The social marginalization of Leila is primarily caused by her job as a sex worker. Society often denies respectability to sex workers and pushes them out of the mainstream. They become stereotypes that conceal their individuality, their human qualities. Leila's story is about how society stigmatizes certain jobs as moral failings, and uses them to rationalize exclusion and discrimination.

Instead of being perceived as a complex person with desires, memories and dreams, she is often seen only through the lens of her work. Because of her social position, she is outside the categories that society uses to confer recognition and legitimacy, and so her life tends to be ignored by official histories.

The novel also highlights the relationship between gender and social respectability. In patriarchal societies, female identity is often evaluated according to moral standards that regulate women's bodies and behaviour. Women who deviate from these norms are subjected to social condemnation and exclusion. Leila's life demonstrates how respectability functions as a mechanism of social control, determining who is considered worthy of recognition and belonging. Her marginalization is not solely the result of economic circumstances but also of cultural attitudes that stigmatize women who fail to conform to prescribed gender roles.

Istanbul as Geography of Exclusion

Istanbul functions as more than a geographical setting; it emerges as a complex social landscape that reflects and reproduces relations of power, privilege, and exclusion. The city turns into a symbolic map with social hierarchies written on it, defining who is visible, who fits in, and who stays on the periphery. "Istanbul was a liquid city. Nothing was permanent here. Nothing felt settled" (Shafak 306). Elif Shafak illustrates how metropolitan areas are not neutral settings but rather places where prevailing societal ideals are consistently upheld through her portrayal of Istanbul. The experiences of Leila and her friends show how the city divides people into groups based on social respectability, gender, class, and occupation, drawing clear lines between inclusion and exclusion.

Leila and her friends named Sabotage Sinan, Nostalgia Nalan, Jameelah, Zaynab¹²², and Hollywood Humeyra inhabit these invisible spaces in Istanbul. They live and work in the city but do not get the kind of recognition that socially respectable citizens get. They're only allowed to be there as long as they stay on the fringes. The novel shows many times how these people walk through the streets of the city and are not really accepted socially. They only enter into view in connection with moral judgment, criminality or social stigma. As a consequence, they are in a paradoxical state of physical presence and social absence.

There are many visible and unseen barriers that divide the city itself. These differences are social and ideological as well as geographical. While some districts are linked to poverty, vulnerability, and exclusion, others represent wealth, respectability, and inclusion. "Physical boundaries can still narrow our skies or horizons and thus become cultural boundaries" (Katan 76). By giving differing values to various locations and the people who live there, these disparities serve to uphold larger social hierarchies. The novel's depictions of marginalized populations are often found in areas that stay outside of society's symbolic center. Their presence in peripheral metropolitan settings reflects their marginalization from major social institutions.

A particularly significant symbol of spatial exclusion in the novel is the Cemetery of the Companionless. This location represents one of the most powerful critiques of social abandonment within the narrative. Reserved for individuals whose bodies remain unclaimed after death, the cemetery functions as a physical manifestation of marginality. Those buried there are not only excluded during their lives but also denied recognition after death. "Neither 'Tequila' nor 'Leila' was engraved on her headstone. She did not have a headstone. Nor a well-tended plot with a neat border of flowers. All she had was a wooden board scrawled on by some cemetery workers" (Shafak 270). The existence of such a space reveals the extent to which social exclusion extends beyond life itself, continuing even after individuals have ceased to exist.

The symbolic significance of the Cemetery of the Companionless is to reveal the link between social recognition and human dignity. The burial practices of different cultures are a reflection of social cohesion and shared histories. To be remembered after death is to be within a social community. Conversely, the notion of being interred among the companionless implies the total absence of social recognition. In an interview with The Booker Prizes, Shafak states that "There are no names or surnames on their tombstones, only numbers. It is a place where human beings are

turned into numbers, and stories into silences” (Shafak). So the cemetery is a powerful metaphor for the lives of marginalized people, lives which are invisible to the dominant society.

Shafak refuses to let that invisibility go unchallenged. The attempts of Leila’s friends to find her a dignified place to rest directly contest the exclusionary structures that the cemetery embodies. Their actions show that the mechanisms through which the marginalized are forgotten can be interrupted by solidarity. In insisting on Leila’s humanity and dignity, they are resisting the social forces that would erase her existence. In this way, it transforms space itself into a site of resistance, exposing the possibility of reclaiming recognition in systems that are supposed to deny it.

Marginalized Identities in Contemporary Turkey

The protagonist of the story is Tequila Leila, but the novel is not only about her, it is also about creating a collective image of people living beyond the limits of social respectability. Through the interwoven lives of Leila and her friends, Shafak constructs what might be called a literary map of marginality, uncovering the diverse forms of exclusion that characterize contemporary Turkish society. The novel shows that subalternity is not limited to one identity category, but is formed at the intersection of gender, class, sexuality, migration, and social stigma.

Leila's position as a sex worker illustrates how social exclusion operates through mechanisms of moral judgment. She is not evaluated according to her humanity, aspirations, or personal history but according to a socially stigmatized occupation. “Our way of seeing and judging is conditioned by preconceived notions, prejudice and stereotypes” (Beller 4). Such judgments create boundaries between those considered respectable and those deemed morally deviant. Through Leila's experiences, Shafak reveals how these boundaries function as instruments of social control. The novel challenges these assumptions by presenting Leila as a multidimensional individual whose life encompasses friendship, suffering, resilience, and emotional depth. In doing so, the narrative resists the reduction of marginalized women to simplistic social categories.

The experiences of transgender characters, especially Nalan reveal how social recognition is closely linked to normative definitions of identity. Because they fail to conform to accepted gender roles, they are often denied the visibility and dignity afforded to other members of society. “The club owners adored her. She was a money-making machine” (Shafak 239). Their lives are shaped by discrimination, vulnerability, and social isolation. Yet the novel refuses to portray them solely as victims. Instead, Shafak emphasizes their resilience, friendships, and capacity for self-definition. Through this representation, the narrative contests dominant assumptions about gender and highlights the humanity of those positioned at the margins.

Migration and displacement represent another important dimension of marginality within the narrative. Several characters experience forms of social dislocation that complicate their relationship to belonging and identity. ‘Identity’ is invoked to highlight the unstable, multiple, fluctuating, and fragmented nature of contemporary ‘self’ (Brubaker and Cooper 8). Migration frequently involves not only geographical movement but also cultural and social exclusion. Individuals who leave familiar environments often encounter barriers that prevent full integration into new communities. Consequently, they may occupy ambiguous positions between inclusion and exclusion.

The significance of this collective representation lies in its challenge to conventional understandings of social identity. Rather than treating marginalization as an individual failure or isolated condition, the novel reveals its structural dimensions. The difficulties faced by the characters are not simply the result of personal choices but of social systems that distribute recognition, opportunity, and dignity unequally. By highlighting these structural factors, Shafak shifts attention away from individual blame and toward the broader mechanisms that produce exclusion.

The novel does not present these marginalized identities as isolated from one another. Instead, it emphasizes their interconnectedness. The friendships among Leila and her companions demonstrate how different forms of exclusion can generate shared experiences of vulnerability and resistance. Despite their diverse backgrounds, the characters recognize common patterns of marginalization that unite them. This recognition forms the basis for collective solidarity and mutual support.

Friendship as Counter-Community : Solidarity and Belonging

One of Elif Shafak's most significant contributions lies in her portrayal of friendship as a powerful form of resistance against marginalization. Through the relationships that develop among Leila and her companions, the novel demonstrates how alternative communities emerge when dominant social institutions fail to provide recognition, care, and belonging. These friendships create spaces where marginalized individuals can affirm their identities, preserve their dignity, and challenge the isolation imposed upon them by society.

The characters in the novel create alternative forms of kinship based on mutual understanding and shared experiences. These relationships challenge conventional definitions of family by demonstrating that belonging is not necessarily determined by biological ties. Instead, the novel suggests that genuine community can emerge through emotional bonds, solidarity, and collective care. For Leila and her friends, friendship becomes a means of survival in a society that frequently denies them recognition.

The diverse backgrounds of Leila's friends further reinforce the significance of this collective identity. Although they differ in terms of gender, class, occupation, and personal history, they are united by their experiences of exclusion. Each character carries the burden of social stigma, yet these differences do not prevent the formation of meaningful relationships. On the contrary, their shared awareness of marginalization becomes the foundation for solidarity. The novel thus suggests that collective identity can emerge from common experiences of exclusion rather than from cultural or social homogeneity. The formation of this alternative community can be understood through the concept of counter-community.

The novel's portrayal of friendship also challenges conventional understandings of resistance. Resistance is often imagined as a dramatic confrontation with power, involving public protest or political rebellion. Shafak, however, highlights the significance of everyday forms of resistance that occur within interpersonal relationships. Acts of kindness, emotional support, and loyalty become strategies through which marginalized individuals preserve their dignity and humanity. These seemingly ordinary actions acquire political significance because they contest the dehumanization produced by social exclusion.

The most compelling example of collective resistance occurs after Leila's death. Faced with the possibility that she will be forgotten and buried among the companionless, her friends refuse to accept the logic of social abandonment. Their determination to secure dignity for Leila transforms friendship into an explicitly political act. By insisting that her life matters, they challenge the structures that seek to erase her existence. Their actions demonstrate that remembrance itself can function as resistance against systems of exclusion.

Social exclusion frequently denies marginalized individuals access to spaces where they can feel accepted and valued. Leila and her companions experience this denial in various forms throughout their lives. Yet within their friendships, they discover an alternative sense of belonging that challenges the boundaries imposed by dominant society. Their community offers recognition, affirmation, and care qualities that mainstream institutions repeatedly fail to provide.

Memory as Counter-History: Recovering Subaltern Voices

The novel's unique structure, which unfolds during the final moments of Tequila Leila's consciousness after death, transforms memory into a powerful tool of resistance against forgetting and erasure. Rather than presenting memory as a purely personal or psychological phenomenon, Shafak employs it as a means of reconstructing histories that have been excluded from dominant social narratives. Through Leila's recollections, the novel creates what may be described as a counter-history, an alternative account of society that foregrounds the experiences of individuals who remain absent from official records and collective memory.

Traditional historical narratives frequently privilege the perspectives of political leaders, state institutions, and dominant social groups, often neglecting the experiences of ordinary individuals. Subaltern Studies emerged as a response to this exclusion by emphasizing the need to recover histories from below. Leila's memories function as an alternative archive that records experiences rarely acknowledged by official history. Through recollection, the novel documents the realities of

gender oppression, social exclusion, migration, friendship, and survival. These experiences may not appear in formal historical records, yet they constitute an essential part of social reality. By preserving them within narrative form, the novel challenges the boundaries that traditionally separate significant history from ordinary experience.

The structure of the novel itself reinforces the importance of memory as a mode of historical reconstruction. Each chapter is organized around a sensory memory that triggers recollections from Leila's life. Smells, tastes, sounds, and images become gateways to forgotten experiences, allowing fragments of the past to re-emerge. This narrative technique suggests that memory operates differently from official history. Whereas institutional histories often seek coherence and linearity, personal memories are fragmented, emotional, and deeply subjective. Yet it is precisely this subjectivity that enables the recovery of experiences excluded from dominant accounts.

The novel's counter-history is particularly significant because it focuses on individuals whose lives are often considered insignificant by dominant social standards. Sex workers, transgender individuals, migrants, and social outcasts rarely occupy central positions in official narratives of national identity or social progress. Shafak demonstrates that their experiences are essential for understanding the realities of contemporary society. By documenting their lives, the novel expands the boundaries of what counts as history and whose experiences deserve remembrance.

Memory in the novel is closely linked to dignity and recognition. The relationship between memory and friendship further strengthens this process of historical recovery. Leila's friends function as custodians of her memory, preserving aspects of her identity that society seeks to erase. Their commitment to remembering her demonstrates that memory is not solely an individual activity but also a collective practice. Through acts of remembrance, communities can challenge social forgetting and sustain alternative histories.

Conclusion

Elif Shafak's *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World* offers a profound exploration of marginalization, exclusion, and resistance through its portrayal of individuals who exist at the edges of social visibility. By centering the experiences of Tequila Leila and her companions, Shafak constructs a narrative that foregrounds the lives of those who are frequently excluded from official histories, social recognition, and institutional protection. The novel therefore functions not merely as a story about death and memory but as a significant critique of the social structures that determine whose lives are considered valuable and whose experiences remain ignored.

The paper has demonstrated that Leila's life exemplifies the condition of subalternity. Throughout her life, she experiences multiple forms of oppression rooted in patriarchy, social stigma, and institutional neglect. "Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears" (Spivak 102). Her experiences reveal how dominant social systems regulate female identity and marginalize those who fail to conform to accepted norms of respectability. Through Leila, Shafak exposes the mechanisms by which society silences vulnerable individuals and denies them visibility. However, by granting Leila narrative centrality, the novel simultaneously challenges this silencing and restores dignity to a character who would otherwise remain invisible within dominant social discourse.

As a symbol of this geography of exclusion, Istanbul is shown to be a city of socially differentiated space in which social inequalities are spatialized and reproduce themselves. Istanbul is depicted as a geography where visibility and invisibility, belonging and exclusion are negotiated and inscribed. Through the evocation of spaces of marginality in Istanbul and especially the Cemetery of the Companionless, the novel also shows to what extent abandonment has permeated death as well. However, those spaces of abandonment also turn into sites of resistance where people extend mutual aid against that mechanism of social exclusion that aims to remove marginalized persons from the public sphere.

A major contribution of the novel is its portrayal of a collective subaltern community. Including sex workers, transgender people, migrants, and social outcasts, Shafak shows that marginalization is not a single identity category. These characters illuminate the integral relation of

social exclusion, as well as the intersectional nature of the social order. By bringing together these disparate voices, the novel constructs a literary map of the socially excluded and illuminates the inequities that are built into the social structures of contemporary life.

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