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Embodied Trauma and Gendered Memory: Representations of Violence Against Women in Elif Shafak's *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World*

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the representation of embodied trauma and gendered memory in Elif Shafak's *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World*, focusing on the protagonist Tequila Leila's experiences of sexual violence, familial betrayal, and societal exclusion. The novel constructs a posthumous narrative that preserves the sensory and psychological imprints of trauma within a gendered body, foregrounding memory as both individual testimony and collective resistance. Shafak challenges patriarchal silencing by granting narrative agency to a marginalised female voice, thus reconfiguring trauma as a space of witness and reclamation. Through its fragmented temporality and affective realism, the text interrogates the socio-cultural mechanisms that perpetuate violence against women, ultimately affirming the ethical power of storytelling in confronting gendered histories of pain.

The interplay between trauma and memory has emerged as a central concern in feminist and postmodern literary studies, especially in narratives that foreground the female body as a site of historical and symbolic violence. Trauma, as theorised by Cathy Caruth, is "not simply an overwhelming experience," but an event "experienced too soon, too unexpectedly to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor" (*Unclaimed Experience* 4). In literary representations, trauma disturbs conventional narrative structures, breaking linear temporality and coherent identity, particularly when embodied in female subjects. The body thus becomes the repository of both memory and violence, a locus where pain is inscribed and re-inscribed through patriarchal, cultural, and institutional mechanisms. The notion of embodied trauma calls attention to how women's physical and psychic wounds are situated within larger structures of gendered oppression.

Feminist scholarship has long established that gendered trauma cannot be examined without accounting for the social inscriptions on the female body. Judith Herman posits that "traumatic events... inevitably involve threats to life or bodily integrity and often a close encounter with violence and death" (*Trauma and Recovery* 33). However, when women experience trauma, particularly sexual violence, these events are compounded by cultural codes that link feminine virtue to bodily purity, thus magnifying the psychic rupture. The victim is often silenced by shame, denial, and institutional neglect, thereby rendering her trauma socially invisible. Marianne Hirsch's concept of "postmemory" provides a further dimension to gendered trauma,

describing the transmission of memory through affective and bodily traces across generations, especially among women who have inherited the silence of violence rather than its explicit retelling (*Family Frames* 22). Through these frameworks, embodied trauma is not only a record of personal suffering but a palimpsest of intergenerational and sociopolitical silences.

Narratives centring on gendered violence frequently challenge the dominant logics of visibility and voice, especially within societies where female suffering is normalised or erased. As Elizabeth Grosz argues, "the body is inscribed with cultural meanings, social codes, and power relations" (*Volatile Bodies* 141), and in contexts where women's agency is restricted, the body may become the only medium of protest or remembrance. The representation of female trauma in literature thus serves a dual function: it memorialises violence while also resisting the structures that produce it. Writers like Toni Morrison, Assia Djebar, and Tsitsi Dangarembga have used literary forms to capture the unspeakability of trauma, often using corporeal imagery to express pain that language fails to articulate. In such texts, the body emerges not only as a victim but also as an archive—holding traces of memory, identity, and resistance.

In this landscape, *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World* by Elif Shafak offers a powerful meditation on gendered trauma through the story of Tequila Leila, a sex worker whose consciousness endures for minutes after her physical death. Shafak constructs a narrative where the fragmented recollections of the dying woman- sensory, emotional, and visceral- retrace the major traumas of her life. These include childhood sexual abuse, maternal abandonment, and the systematic rejection she faced from both familial and national structures. Leila's memories are embedded in her bodily sensations- flavours, smells, and textures- which act as narrative triggers. This sensory structure aligns with what Sara Ahmed describes as the "affective economies" of the body, where emotions and memories circulate through material and sensorial registers (*The Cultural Politics of Emotion* 5). Shafak's decision to locate trauma in the body foregrounds the corporeality of memory, suggesting that the female subject's history is preserved even in death.

Moreover, the novel resists the tendency to isolate trauma within individual pathology by contextualising Leila's suffering within broader patterns of social exclusion, patriarchal violence, and moral hypocrisy in Turkish society. Her trauma is not a singular event but a continuum of violations that extend from the domestic to the public realm. As Susan Brison observes, "trauma shatters the narrative structure of the self" (*Aftermath* 39), yet in Shafak's novel, this fragmentation becomes the site of resistance. Leila's posthumous narration functions as both testimony and counter-memory, disrupting official silences surrounding marginalised women. The text's oscillation between memory and death enables a feminist reappropriation of voice, reclaiming agency even in a space traditionally marked by silence and disappearance.

By embedding trauma within sensory recollection and bodily experience, Shafak's novel contributes to a growing corpus of feminist literature that interrogates the intersections of memory, violence, and gender. It exposes the systemic dehumanisation of women and reimagines narrative as a space for restorative remembrance. As trauma theorist Kali Tal contends, "literature that emerges from trauma carries with it a testimony to survival and an appeal for justice" (*Worlds of Hurt* 7). In *10 Minutes 38 Seconds*, Shafak not only memorialises the violence inflicted on Leila but also gestures towards the collective histories of countless other silenced women. The novel compels readers to confront the embodied realities of trauma

and to acknowledge the memory that survives in flesh, in pain, and in story.

The Politics of Gendered Violence

The politics of gendered violence in Elif Shafak's *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World* interrogates how structural patriarchy, cultural norms, and state-sanctioned exclusions intersect to perpetuate the marginalisation and violation of women. Through the posthumous recollections of Tequila Leila, a murdered sex worker in Istanbul, Shafak reveals the cumulative nature of gendered violence as both intimate and institutional. Leila's experiences foreground the systematic erasure of women whose bodies and lives fall outside the framework of social acceptability. The novel's sustained engagement with violence against women forces the reader to confront the mechanisms that normalise such suffering within both familial and national structures. Gendered violence, as the narrative shows, is never accidental or isolated but deeply rooted in the ideological operations of patriarchy, religion, and cultural silence.

Shafak begins her critique of gendered violence within the family structure, where Leila's earliest traumas take place. The novel recounts the sexual abuse Leila suffers at the hands of her uncle, a violence that remains unacknowledged and unpunished. This silencing is emblematic of what Judith Herman identifies as the "private terrors of domestic life" that are often excluded from public discourse (*Trauma and Recovery* 28). Within patriarchal family systems, the home is idealised as a space of protection, yet it often becomes the very site of violation. Leila's mother is forced into silence, while her stepmother reinforces conservative gender roles. The trauma is neither recognised nor addressed, and Leila is blamed, shamed, and ultimately banished. This institutional silence around childhood sexual abuse, especially of girls, reflects what bell hooks terms a "culture of domination" that naturalises violence and protects male perpetrators (*Feminism Is for Everybody* 41).

The novel also portrays how religious orthodoxy is mobilised to legitimise gendered violence. Shafak critiques the moral hypocrisy embedded in interpretations of Islam that are used to condemn women like Leila, even as male violence is condoned or ignored. Leila's existence as a sex worker is stigmatised, yet the men who exploit her face no moral scrutiny. This double standard is part of what Deniz Kandiyoti calls the "patriarchal bargain," where women are forced to submit to systems that reward their compliance with protection while punishing deviance (*Women, Islam and the State* 274). Leila's ostracisation is not only a result of her profession but also of the way Turkish society defines female virtue in relation to sexual purity. The novel does not sensationalise her experiences but rather humanises them, forcing the reader to reconsider assumptions about morality, respectability, and agency.

Furthermore, Shafak places Leila's individual suffering within a broader landscape of urban marginality. Istanbul itself becomes a character in the novel, a city that is both alive and complicit in the violence it houses. The alleys of Brothel Street, the isolation of the Cemetery of the Companionless, and the police's indifference to murdered sex workers all speak to the spatial politics of exclusion. As Gillian Rose argues, space is not neutral but deeply gendered and racialised; it reflects and reproduces power structures (*Feminism and Geography* 5). Shafak's Istanbul is stratified, where women like Leila are relegated to invisible spaces. Their deaths are unrecorded, their lives ungrieved. The state plays a silent but active role in their erasure, reinforcing what Achille Mbembe identifies as "necropolitics"- the control of who (He/She) is allowed to live and whose death is socially acceptable (*Necropolitics* 40).

In addition to institutional critique, the novel explores the affective dimension of gendered

violence through Leila's body and memory. As her consciousness persists for ten minutes and thirty-eight seconds after death, each minute becomes a gateway into a significant memory, often involving sensory detail. The body remembers what society wishes to forget. This alignment between bodily sensation and narrative structure mirrors theories of embodied memory. According to Sara Ahmed, "the pain of the body is not simply a sign of damage but a sign of what remains unassimilable" (*The Cultural Politics of Emotion* 27). Shafak turns the body into an archive, embedding political critique within visceral experience. The taste of lemon and sugar, the sound of sea waves, and the feel of her mother's veil all serve as narrative triggers, highlighting the inseparability of trauma and physical sensation.

Yet, the novel does not reduce Leila to a victim. Shafak constructs a counter-narrative of resistance through female solidarity and friendship. Leila's "chosen family" of outcasts- including a trans woman, a dwarf, and a refugee- stand in sharp contrast to the blood relations who abandoned her. These characters embody what Judith Butler terms "precarious lives," lives that are devalued by the dominant social order but are nonetheless capable of love, agency, and protest (*Precarious Life* 20). The collective act of retrieving Leila's body from the Cemetery of the Companionless and giving her a dignified burial becomes a subversive gesture against state-sanctioned forgetting. It is an act of political mourning, where grief becomes a form of resistance. In doing so, Shafak challenges the notion that only certain lives are worth remembering, and certain deaths worth grieving.

Ultimately, the politics of gendered violence in Shafak's novel are exposed through an intricate interplay of personal memory, bodily trauma, and systemic injustice. The narrative resists closure, refusing to neatly resolve Leila's story or redeem the institutions that failed her. Instead, it invites the reader into a space of ethical discomfort. As Kali Tal notes, "to create literature from trauma is to resist, to remember, and to survive" (*Worlds of Hurt* 7). Shafak's text does precisely that. It bears witness to the lives of women whose suffering is made invisible and demands that such stories be told, not as exceptions, but as systemic realities. Through its powerful critique and lyrical construction, the novel portrays gendered violence not as an individual tragedy but as a political condition that must be confronted.

Embodied Memory and Leila

In the novel, embodied memory emerges as the core narrative strategy that anchors Tequila Leila's post-mortem consciousness. As her heart has ceased but her brain continues to process, Leila's sensory recollections surge forth: "Her memory surged forth, eager and diligent… she recalled things she did not even know she was capable of remembering, things she believed to be lost forever. Time became fluid, a fast flow of recollections seeping into one another, the past and the present inseparable" (Shafak 2). Through these images, Shafak establishes that memory resides in the body as much as in the mind. The text explicitly links bodily sensation to recollection—the gustatory, olfactory and tactile senses become conveyors of identity and history. Such phenomenological narrative aligns with contemporary trauma theory that sees the body as a repository of affective memory. In other words, the body does not just suffer trauma but remembers it.

Each memory sequence is keyed to a distinct sensation that she experiences physically. The first memory is salt on her newborn skin and tongue, anchoring the moment of her arrival into the world (Shafak 63). In the second minute the taste and smell of lemon and sugar evoke her childhood home and early female community rituals. In later minutes cardamom coffee, goat stew, soil, watermelon, and strawberry cake trigger episodes across her lifespan (Shafak 102).

These punctuated sensory moments signal that embodied memory is not only sequential but deeply episodic. They reflect memory as a patchwork of bodily flashpoints rather than orderly narrative. By foregrounding this structure Shafak emphasises that female bodily experience is fundamental to mnemonic identity, resisting linear histories that often render women invisible.

Shafak's embodied memory technique also permits a politicised mapping of Istanbul through Leila's body. Critics have noted Leila as a migrant flâneuse whose sensory engagement with the city allows her to reclaim space (Al-Jassim, *Reclamation of Istanbul*). Leila recalls "smells of tobacco, sweat, perfume, fried food and an occasional reefer mingled with the briny sea air" (Shafak 45). The sensory detail situates her physically and politically. It frames her marginalized body in public space while resisting erasure by official cosmopolitan narratives. Istanbul is not just a backdrop but sensorially embodied through her experience, making memory both personal and civic. Embodied memory thus becomes a subaltern cartography.

The narrative structure formally enacts the philosophy of embodied memory. With the novella divided into minute-by-minute sections, each memory is triggered by a bodily sensation. Leila's last ten minutes become a compressed biography governed by embodied recall. Literary critics have likened this memory technique to Proustian involuntary memory, yet Shafak reconfigures it through the female body in struggle. In contrast to male literary traditions where memory may evoke grand historical reflection, Shafak's memory is corporeal, intimate and political. The physicality of her final recollections grounds the story in bodily experience, reinforcing that identity persists through sensation even when the body fails.

Lines from the novel illustrate this embodiment. When Leila observes her own corpse she notes "her skin was already turning greyish-white even though her cells were still abuzz with activity… she could not believe that her mortal existence was over and done with… she was still thinking" (Shafak 3). This paradox of bodily decay and mental vitality emphasises the disjunction between physical death and embodied memory. Her cells may die yet her sensory memory refuses to abide by biological limits. It is an act of resistance- memory survives to bear witness beyond physical demise.

Shafak couples embodied memory with themes of trauma and survival. Many of Leila's memories recall painful or violent experiences- a childhood picnic at which her sexual abuse began, betrayal by family, loss and abandonment. Yet these memories persist through bodily sensation, demonstrating survival through sensory recall. As one critic notes, memory becomes "a late-night reveller who has had a few too many drinks… staggering through a maze of inversions, immune to reason" (Shafak 45). This metaphor captures the erratic but enduring persistence of embodied trauma. It underlines that the female body holds experience whether the world acknowledges it or not.

Shafak invites readers to inhabit Leila's final consciousness and through her body remember lives that society discards. The tactile immediacy of lemon, salt, coffee and blood becomes a form of historical testimony. This departure from abstractions of trauma replaces them with concrete sensory truth. In doing so, embodied memory becomes political resistance, asserting that even those erased by violence continue to exist in the world through the sensations and memories their bodies carry. Shafak's narrative thus reclaims memory from oblivion, makes it flesh and defies forgetting.

Representations of Violence against Women

The representation of violence against women in the novel operates at multiple levels: intimate, familial, communal, institutional and political. Elif Shafak portrays Tequila Leila's experiences of sexual abuse, social exclusion and brutal murder as deeply embedded in patriarchal structures entrenched in Turkish culture. From the outset, violence is neither incidental nor sensational; rather it is systemic and sustained. Sexual abuse in childhood, domestic betrayal and moral hypocrisy echo through Leila's memory, visible in flesh and psyche. Critics argue that Shafak's novel exposes gendered power inequities perpetuated by patriarchal norms which define women as passive, obedient and confined to private domestic roles (Atta Ullah). Leila's life from birth to death is shaped by cultural expectations and institutional violence that silence and devalue women.

Shafak begins Leila's story in Van, where family honour and patriarchy manifest as enforced obedience. Her father's jealousy and control escalate when Leila innocently plays with a hula hoop, resulting in her being labelled a whore and expelled from school (Shafak 63). That early incident like many intimate violences equals the moment that sets Leila on a trajectory of alienation and trauma. Simon de Beauvoir's feminist critique and social role theory help explain how Turkish patriarchal society employs gendered power to relegate women into roles of domestic subservience (Atta Ullah). The voice of the novel reveals that violence in patriarchal society is as often emotional and symbolic as it is physical- a young girl's spirit is injured long before her body.

Childhood sexual trauma, which Leila endures at the hands of her uncle, is rendered through memory as both intimate and communal violence. Shafak avoids sensational detail, opting instead for the slow accrual of shame and familial betrayal. The trauma is compounded by denial: the family refuses to act and Leila's mother remains silent, while her stepmother reinforces patriarchal social codes. The emotional violence of silence and shame becomes structural. As Mirza Waheed notes, Shafak's novel takes an unflinching look at sexual violence women's minds and bodies are subjected to in a social system defined by patriarchal codes. By depicting sustained maltreatment rather than discrete violent acts, Shafak highlights that gendered violence is not exceptional but endemic.

When Leila flees to Istanbul she encounters further institutional and cultural violence- human trafficking, abuse under the guise of protection, acid attack, exploitation within the sex trade. These layers reflect what feminist theorists call “gendered social exclusion” (Beauvoir). Shafak illustrates that sex workers are stigmatised, marginalised and denied civil recognition even in death. The authorities ignore violence against them. No official investigation is launched. Her death is reported coldly, without grief or inquiry. The state thereby colludes in erasure. Urban exclusion is spatialised in the Cemetery of the Companionless, where discarded bodies rest unclaimed. Shafak's rendering of Istanbul as a “she-city” underlines that the city itself is coded female yet publicly neglected by state institutions (Atta Ullah). At a collective level the novel portrays violence against women as extending beyond the personal body into communal structures of belief and moral policing. Leila's murderers justify their crime in the name of purifying Istanbul of sex workers- an honour-based justification that reveals vigilante patriarchy cloaked in religious morality. The narrative thus critiques how religious orthodoxy is weaponised to control women's bodies and mobility. Critics observing Turkish societal hypocrisy highlight that male violence is rarely examined, while the “fallen woman” is shamed and cast out. Shafak's novel resists this double standard, by narrating Leila's interior life with

dignity and complexity, thereby restoring memory to silenced bodies.

Leila's post-mortem narrative becomes a mode of resistance and ethical testimony. For ten minutes and thirty-eight seconds after death she remains conscious, recalling sensations tied to key moments in her life: salt, lemon, sugar, soil, coffee, cake. These embodied memories resist patriarchal erasure. Through sensory recall, Leila testifies to experiences of violence and resilience alike. The narrative form becomes politicised- embodied memory resists teleological history or institutional amnesia. Critics suggest that what Shafak offers is a feminist counter-memory: storytelling as witness, narrative as act of defiance (Atta Ullah).

Leila's circle of friends- a trans woman, a dwarf, a refugee and a migrant sex worker- forms a symbolic "water family" outside patriarchal structures. Their communal grief, collective exhumation of her body and attempt to honour her wishes become subversive acts against misogynist violence and state neglect. As Mirza Waheed remarks, these acts of kindness and resistance affirm solidarity among the marginalised and resist narratives that dehumanise victims of violence. By choosing to bury Leila or release her into the sea, these characters enact a politics of remembrance. Sexual violence thus is not only depicted as destructive but met with activist compassion.

It reveals how patriarchy, religious hypocrisy and institutional silence coalesce to brutalise female bodies and erase their stories. Yet Leila's narrative refuses invisibility. Her embodied memory, posthumous voice and friendships reclaim agency and testify to survival. Through feminist critique and narrative form Shafak asserts that violence against women is not only a personal tragedy but a cultural and political crisis. The novel demands that readers witness, remember and act- the politics of violence must be confronted through compassion, narrative and collective refusal to let the dead remain silent.

Conclusion

Elif Shafak's *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World* emerges as a deeply political and affective literary work that exposes and critiques the systemic nature of violence against women within patriarchal, religious, and institutional frameworks. Through the life and death of Tequila Leila, Shafak constructs a narrative that not only bears witness to individual trauma but also interrogates the socio-political structures that render certain lives expendable. The novel refuses to separate physical brutality from emotional, cultural, and epistemic forms of violence. Rather, it insists that gendered violence is a continuum, one that begins within the domestic sphere, pervades the city, and culminates in the body's final erasure by state mechanisms. Leila's story reveals that violence against women is not merely the result of interpersonal failure but is deeply embedded in a culture that thrives on silencing, shaming, and marginalising those who defy its codes.

Central to Shafak's novel is the notion of embodied memory, which functions as both a narrative technique and a theoretical framework. In resisting linear temporality and rational coherence, the novel foregrounds the body as the primary site of memory. Leila's sensory recollections during the final moments of her posthumous consciousness- ranging from the taste of salted yoghurt to the feel of the Bosphorus wind—render her life not as a series of facts but as a visceral continuum of affective experience. This sensory narrative aligns with feminist theorists such as Sara Ahmed, who emphasise that the body stores affect, pain, and survival in ways that escape traditional historiography. Memory, in this text, is inseparable from the materiality of the body, and in that embodiment lies a political resistance to erasure. Shafak thus

situates trauma not in abstract language but in physical sensation, offering a radical alternative to disembodied forms of remembrance.

The representation of violence against women in the novel is neither voyeuristic nor sentimental. Instead, it is layered, deliberate, and unflinching. Shafak avoids sensationalism by focusing on the structural and symbolic dimensions of violence: the family's collusion in abuse, the moral policing of women's bodies, the spatial segregation of the marginalised, and the legal system's indifference to the murdered. Leila's death in a rubbish bin, and her unceremonious burial in the Cemetery of the Companionless, underscores how even in death, women deemed fallen are denied dignity. Yet, through posthumous narration, embodied memory, and the loyal defiance of her chosen family, the novel reclaims narrative and memorial space for the silenced. These representations function as literary acts of mourning, justice, and feminist critique.

In synthesising gendered violence, embodied memory, and representation the narrative offers a compelling feminist intervention in contemporary literature. Shafak challenges readers not only to recognise the persistence of violence against women but also to engage with the ethical imperative of remembrance. The novel articulates a politics of empathy grounded in the material reality of female suffering and survival, asserting that even in death, the voices of the marginalised can, and must, endure.

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