www.TLHjournal.com Literary Herald ISSN: 2454-3365
An International Refereed/Peer-reviewed English e-Journal
Impact Factor: 7.825

Memories of Marginalisation through Symbolism and Sensory Elements in Elif Shafak's 1*0 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World*

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Abstract

Symbolism and sensory elements play a vibrant role in creating immersive experiences for readers by enhancing meaning, adding layers of interpretation, connecting themes, and deepening emotional resonance. Elif Shafak's *10 Minutes, 38 Seconds in This Strange World* (2019) is rich, memorable, and multilayered, as Shafak employs symbolic and sensory elements to reveal the characters' inner states indirectly. Through this heartbreaking novel, Elif Shafak explores memory and marginalisation, revolving around a minute after the death of Tequila Leila, who was forced into being a sex worker in Istanbul. This article attempts to analyse how Shafak reconstructs Leila's life by condemning social hierarchies and gender discrimination through a narrative rich in symbolism, metaphor, and sensory elements, which opens up the possibility of analysing this literary novel through a cognitive theory called ideasthesia. The study validates Shafak's handling of literary techniques by examining the motifs and sensory triggers, which significantly offer more profound insights into the protagonist Leila's consciousness and the socio-political environment of modern Turkey.

Keywords: symbolism, sensory elements, sensory triggers, memory, marginalisation, ideasthesia

Elif Shafak, born in Strasbourg, is a renowned Turkish-British author, essayist, and public speaker who writes in both Turkish and English and whose literary contributions have been recognised with various awards. She has authored 19 books, out of which 12 are novels. Many of her works vividly capture the city of Istanbul, the world and culture of the East and West, the subaltern status of women in society, and violations of human dignity. Her novel, *The Forty Rules of Love* (2009), was selected by the BBC as one of the 100 books that reshaped world literature. She explores the struggles of marginalised groups, friendship, identity, memory, trauma and multiculturalism through her novels. *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World (2019)* showcases the life of Tequila Leila after her death, as she reminisces about the final

moments of consciousness while her brain processes memories for ten minutes and thirty-eight seconds. Her mind rethinks the pivotal moments of her life, such as her conservative childhood in her town, sexual abuse by her uncle, and her struggles and survival in Istanbul's red-light districts. Shafak is not limited to stories and storytelling but is also drawn to silences—and the silenced, which is evident from one of her interviews, where she expresses:

> There is a cemetery I used to visit in Istanbul; it is known as The Cemetery of the Companionless. It has grown so fast over the years. It is massive. This is where people who have been 'othered' by the society are buried without a proper funeral –prostitutes, people who have died of HIV-related diseases, suicides, migrants who
> have lost their lives as they were trying to reach Europe… They are all buried there, side by side. 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. In my novel I wanted to flip this over. Just turn it upside down. I wanted to pick one of those numbers on the graves and give it a name, a story, friends or companions, reversing the process of dehumanisation. (An Interview with Elif Shafak)

In recent decades, contemporary fiction has used the afterlife as a narrative strategy to explore themes of identity, injustice, and memory. One significant example of this is Alice Sebold's *The Lovely Bones* (2002), in which the protagonist says, "My name was Salmon, like fish; first name, Susie. I was fourteen when I was murdered on December 6, 1973" (1). Sebold uses the character Susie to create the a bond uniting the living with the dead. Similarly, In *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World,*(2019) Tequila Leila says, "*Hey, I'm over here*! . . . *Please don't run away*. . . . *Don't be afraid*. . . . *Call the police, son. Call the police so they can inform my friends*" (Shafak 10-11). Elif Shafak allows Leila to narrate her afterlife consciousness through a cascade of memories, structuring the recollection of her life. Shafak and Sebold maintain that death is not an end, but rather a remembrance and a restoration of life.

This article draws upon the cognitive theory of ideasthesia proposed by neuroscientist Dr Danko Nikolić. In his article, "Is Synaesthesia Actually Ideastesia? An Inquiry into the Nature of the Phenomenon " he defines ideasthesia as "a combination of two ancient Greek words, one for concept, 'idea', and the other for sensation, 'aisthesis'. In translation, ideasthesis means sensing concepts or preserving meaning" (3). Unlike the canonical sensory theories, ideasthesia argues that the perception instigates concepts; it also suggests that the thoughts turn intangible ideas into sensory impressions. This theory is particularly evident in moments that emerge from symbolic and emotional concepts, as Leila's recollection of life is a tactile consciousness overlaid in sensory symbols and broader metaphors.

Elif Shafak describes Leila's final moments of consciousness, which unfold her sensory memories, symbolising the unique emotional register of her life in a linear narrative. Despite her clinical death, her brain is still active at the boundary between life and death. From the second minute after her heart stops beating, Leila feels "two contrasting tastes: lemon and sugar . . . A lonely child (Shafak 31)". The taste of lemon signifies a restricted and lonely upbringing in the conservative family of Vans, where affection is rationalised and obedience is demanded. Her early Childhood is a scar of emotional deprivation that compels her to adhere to the religious and gender norms established by her father, Haroun. The sweetness of sugar represents the

unwavering hope and comfort that she received from her mother and aunt Binaz. Both flavours reveal how harshness and fleeting sweetness subdue the same household under the shadow of different people.

Shafak writes, "Three minutes had passed since Leila's heart had stopped, and now she remembered cardamom coffee—strong, intense, and dark" (45). Cardamom coffee encapsulates the bitterness of life, showing how she is frustrated in the unimagined lifestyle amidst "the streets of Istanbul" (133). The texture of the coffee, as "strong, intense, and dark" (Shafak 45), metaphorically mirrors the psychological landscape, encapsulating the bitterness in her life as a prostitute. She recalls how she came to Istanbul three years ago with five lira and twenty kurush sold by a couple of hustlers in the brothel. The first month is desperate, as Shafak says, "This street had been so dark, the days like rope mooring her to despair, that several times she had considered suicide. A fast, quiet death—it could be done: Back then, every detail had unsettled her; every sound had been a thunderclap to her ears" (53). She is like the majority of people who believe, "Istanbul is a mysterious and complex puzzle" and "a city of secrets and contradictions" (Zhou).

In contrast to its spellbinding view, this city punishes marginalised and non-conforming individuals. Leila's journey to Istanbul reflects her transition to form a kinship in the margins of society. The unsupportive parents and her childhood abuse forced her to travel to Istanbul in search of meaning for her life. Leila's recall of "the taste of soil—dry, chalky, bitter" (Shafak 99) shows the dryness of her life, which was ruined in the crowded silence of her family. Shafak mediates, "the fleeting memory surfaced in Leila's mind, bringing with it the smell and taste of watermelon" (60), which reminds her of a trauma and violation of innocence that uncovers the psychological layers of her experience of being sexually abused by her uncle in Van. The watermelon serves as a multilayered metaphor, representing Leila's vulnerability and the violence that taints its purity. Shafak uses this metaphor to unlock the deep memory of pain and betrayal. This juxtaposition of a delightful sensory image with a traumatic event is a central feature of ideasthesia, demonstrating how sensory inputs encode the distressing incident with abstract experience.

Leila feels "the taste of single malt whisky. It was the last thing that had passed her lips on the night she had died" and the "single malt whisky" (Shafak 167) makes her a rebel. This episode is followed by the taste of chocolate bonbons in the ninth minute as Shafak writes, "She now remembered D/Ali, and the thought of him brought along the taste of chocolate bonbons with surprise fillings inside—caramel, cherry paste, hazelnut praline…" (132). In this moment, she remembers D/Ali, the man whom she truly loves and accepts despite her social status as a sex worker. The elements, like caramel, cherry paste, hazelnut pralines, and chocolate, symbolise her love, which is filled with surprises and comforts beneath the exterior label given by the society, this memory shows her resiliency to love and be loved by others as a metaphorical testament of emotional survival. After her wedding to D/Ali, whom she met in the streets of Istanbul, Leila left the brothel and began a new life with him. He died during the communion protest, leaving her to live alone. Leila reclaims her voice from the society that imposes on women like her. Shafak writes, "perhaps death is scary for everyone, but more so for the one who knew, deep within, that he had lived a life of pretences and obligations, a life shaped by the needs and demands of other people" (261).

Because of gender-based violence, the protagonist, Leila, is brutally murdered when she leaves the Intercontinental Hotel after meeting a client and is thrown into a dumpster on the outskirts of Istanbul. Society rejects her for being a sex worker and a woman without family, which makes her even more vulnerable. The unknown man who murdered Leila, after every murder, added "a porcelain doll to their collection of angels" (Shafak 220). He believes that "they turned whores into angels" (Shafak 220).

Leila's corpse is transferred to the morgue and buried in the "cemetery of the companionless" (Shafak 244). In Istanbul, it is a mass burial ground for the "three types of dead: the unwanted, the unworthy and the unidentified" (Shafak 245). It reveals "a story of dispossession that denies the marginalized a social afterlife" (Zengin). This act serves as a metaphor for systematic neglect, which denies the individual her name and instead reduces her to a mere number, "7053," on the gravestone (Shafak 246). Shafak writes,

> Almost everyone interred in the Cemetery of the Companionless was, in some way or another, an outcast. Many had been shunned by their family or village or society at large. Crack addicts, alcoholics, gamblers, small-time criminals, rough sleepers, runaways, throwaways, missing citizens, the mentally ill, derelicts, unwed mothers, prostitutes, pimps, transvestites, AIDS patients . . . The undesirables. Social pariahs. Cultural lepers. (246).

Shafak transforms taste, smell, and texture in the archives of Leila's mind to create a poignant intersection of her memory. Her cognitive rhythm changes as her memory simultaneously slows down and spins "out of control as fragments of her past whirled inside her head in an ecstatic dance, like passing bees" (Shafak 132). She animates the layers of flavour with emotional resonance, which portrays childhood, trauma, love, and grief. The taste of cardamom coffee, the bitterness of lemon, the sweetness of sugar, and the unpredictable filling of chocolate bonbons are not simple cues but culinary recollections of emotional codes. This literary device is a compelling counterpart to the novel *The Mistress of Spices* (2005) by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, where the spices, more than just an ingredient, act as a vessel of mysticism. The protagonist, Tilo, uses spices not just for culinary rituals but also to unlock pain, restore joy, and guide people's destiny. Jagriti Sharma, in his article "Reception of Elif Shafak's Selected Works in Different Cultural and Linguistics Context", opines, "Each minute is marked by a distinct sensory memory" (Sharma 10). Leila's concepts of home, exile, or friendship are felt, seen, and tasted through her deeply embodied recollections, which fall under ideathesia, as the conceptual meanings generate these sensory reactions.

Leila's every memory is structured around a symbolic motif or sensory cue that is laden with meaning. Taste, scent, and a visual image are not just felt as raw sensations but become meaningful because of the ideas attached to them. The retrieval of the memory occurs due to the recognition and saturation of personal meaning in the conceptual identity of the objects. Through the lens of ideasthesia, these moments are deeply significant. In her case, the sensory simulations represent sensations that are conceptually activated and internalise complex affective truths. This instance also reinforces that ideas from consciousness are not chronological but experiential.

One can clearly understand the reason behind Shafak's choice of protagonists for her writings. The Cemetery of the Companionless, where Leila is buried, symbolises the ultimate

rejection of those who defy society's norms and traditions. Yet this same cemetery becomes a space of defiance against injustice and a site of memory when Leila's friends attempt to reclaim her body and dignity, transforming the marginal space into one of solidarity. Leila's friends deny this undeserved burial. Her connection with five friends "Sabotage Sinan, Nostalgia Nalan, Jameelah, Zaynab 122, and Hollywood Humeyra" (Shafak 8) represents a shared vulnerability, they together fight against the social structures that defame their identity and seek worthiness through gender, sexuality, and social order.

Shafak emphasises that these friendships were not formed because of character but because of the familiar otherness they shared in society. Each friend carries a mark of social exclusion: Nalan is a transgender woman, Zaynab is a dwarf, Humeryra is a former sex worker, and Sinan is separated from his cultural roots. Their friendship is a parallel society where they have the freedom to stand together against the harsh realities of the society. Together they construct the water family, as Shafak says,

> A good water family could wash away the hurt and pain collected inside like black soot. It was therefore possible for your friend to have a treasured place in your heart and occupy a bigger space than all your kin combined. But those who had never experienced what it felt like to be spurned by their own relative would not understand this truth in a million years. They would never know that there were times when water ran thicker than blood. (193)

The novel reflects sensory tastes, which serve as shortcuts for ideas and perception. Shafak employs this literary technique from the first to the last ten minutes and thirty-eight seconds to show how ideasthesia bridges the gap between the concept and sensation. Shafak honours those excluded from public recognition and established histories through the voice of Leila. Chika Gujarathi observes:

> These recollections, which begin from her birth in January 1947 to her death in November 1990, give glimpses of life as a woman in a country where personal, political and moral values are heavily dictated by religion and men. These glimpses are heartbreaking. They are unfair. And yet they also represent courage, beauty and hope, like a rag-tag team of misfits who are determined to stick it to the man against all odds … (An Interview with Elif Shafak)

This novel also portrays Istanbul as a dynamic metaphor, symbolising both decay and bursting with vitality. This article analyses how Shafak's use of symbolism and powerful metaphors transforms death into the site of resistance, challenging the line between divine law and human conscience. Shafak challenges the societal narratives that aim to erase the voices of the voiceless through her expansive narrative space, particularly using urban landscapes like Van and Istanbul and sensory imagery. She crafts a narrative that transcends death and validates the lives lived by the culturally overlooked, who often exist in the shadows of society's gaze.

Shafak writes, "Istanbul was not a city of opportunities but of scars" (Shafak 114). The Cemetery of the Companionless, where Leila is buried, unquestionably proves the case. However, as an act of defiance, her friends steal her body from the grave to give her a proper burial and restore her dignity, at least after her death. One of Leila's friends, Zaynab 122, says, "She said she had been told that the day she was born, someone in their house had freed the fish

they kept in a glass bowl. She seemed to like that idea very much. She said that when she died would go and find that fish, even though she couldn't swim" (Shafak 281). So, after they had no way to bury her body as the policemen chased them, they threw her into the "Bosphorus Bridge" (Shafak 291).

Shafak illustrates the end of memories as follows: "Her mind had fully shut down, her body was already decomposing and her soul was chasing a betta fish. She was relieved to have left the Cemetery of the Companionless. She was happy to be part of this vibrant realm, this comforting harmony that she had never thought possible, and this vast blue, bright as the birth of a new flame. Free at last" (291). The symbolism of the blue betta fish demonstrates its resilience and fierceness, even in a confined environment. This suggests that Leila's life may be confined in a prison of darkness and despair, but she is never defeated, as she is freed into a place. This phrase refers to the place where she wishes to be at the end of her life. Water: The ocean, specifically, serves as a prominent metaphor in the novel, acting as an ambiguous bridge between life and death, as well as between memory and oblivion.

Through vivid sensory imagery, symbolic use of natural elements, and the metaphorical weight of the body and the city, Elif Shafak's *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World* (2019) transforms a story of death into a celebration of life. Her symbolism not only captures the inner world of an ostracised woman but also indicts the social structures that contributed to her demise. In doing so, Shafak affirms the humanity of those whom society would rather forget and elevates remembering into an act of resistance. By giving a voice to someone who has been ostracised from society, Shafak employs sensory language in a powerful narrative, utilising vivid metaphors and symbols to highlight the marginalised individuals present in society. Thus, Shafak transforms Leila's final moments into a defiant act, highlighting the marginalised.

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