



Intersectional Feminism in Shafak's 10 Minutes 38 Seconds in this Strange World

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Abstract

The Intersectionality theory adds volume to gender equality discourse by invoking inclusivity that was missing in Eurocentric Feminist discourse. Intersectionality theory goes hand in hand with anti-essentialist discourse of third and fourth waves involving heteronormality and Third-Worldism. Gender equality discourse exposes gender-based oppression, violence, subjugation and discrimination. Intersectionality makes it possible to include all women and their different experiences in feminist discourse. This paper seeks to present an in-depth and exhaustive analysis of Shafak's work *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in this Strange World*; depicting a one-woman story who is a sex worker in Turkey, Istanbul while using Crenshaw's Intersectionality and Simone de Beauvoir's feminist discourse i.e., 'The Other' theory as the theoretical framework. The significance of this study lies in relevance of it in today's era where we still lack empathy for women who are working as prostitutes due to various socio-economic bounds. This study seeks to highlight the gender disparity and hypocrisy of a patriarchal society by showing the graphically disturbing life and murder of a prostitute.

Keywords:

Intersectionality
Inclusion
Gender
Domestic violence
Prostitute
Sociocultural context

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Introduction

Intersectionality discourse is important because it explains the multiple forms of discrimination. Discrimination can be centered on various sections like race, class, gender, sex, and various other identities. Intersectionality explains that one group's experience may not be the same for the other and solving problem of one group may not address the problem experienced by others. Discrimination, for instance would require different tackling for various groups; while black woman faces both racism and gender prejudice, a black man experiences only racism and not the gender prejudice. Articulated by legal scholar Kimberle Crenshaw (1991), Intersectionality can be defined in terms of metaphorical representation of diverse and multiple forms of gender biased oppression and inequality. These forms amalgamate and result in creation of various obstacles in multiple forms that remain unaddressed in conventional ways of thinking.

Shafak's *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in this Strange World* describes the process of "becoming" of a woman via socio cultural patterns of a patriarchal society. Women are doubly marginalized because of their gender, race, and sex. Every female character in the novel has to face domestic violence and subjugation on different levels. The most crucial face of the society is highlighted by the female characters of the novel especially Leila, an innocent girl who becomes a victim by her own family; her own blood relations and society turns her into a prostitute. Feminism seeks to expose this role of patriarchal society in 'making' woman and shaping their social status; "a movement which controls sexism, sexist oppression and exploitation" (Hook, 2002).

Elif Shafak is an award holder British Turkish novelist. She is the author of 12 novels, a public speaker and a proficient feminist writer. Her works majorly highlight city of Istanbul and present the themes of Eastern culture. Her novels mainly investigate the role of women in society and various issues which human beings have to face. This novel revolves around Leila who is an Istanbul prostitute. It describes Leila's painful journey from life to death. Through her narrative Shafak exposes the process of what Simone De Beauvoir calls "becoming" of a woman, the racial and gender segregation in form of Leila's five female friends who are symbol of an outcast in society. All the female characters in this novel are deprived of their basic human and legal rights

that makes the gender intersectionality a powerful analytical discourse to expose the multiple forms of discrimination.

Literature Review

Look at the world literature and you'd hardly find a place perfect for women of all kind of identities. If Asia is a hell for women for being patriarchal in general, Europe and America are not ideal for women of colour, we all know the atrocities the black women face there and their exclusion that is highlighted by today's African writers like Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in her book *Americanah* (2013). She highlights the struggle of an African American woman saying that "If you have braids, they will think you are unprofessional" (Adichie, Chapter 11, p. 119).

Similarly, Coleen Hoover depicts western society in her novels and yet there's an ample amount of gender violence that speaks of the presence of gender discrimination in that society too. Hoover's novel *Hopeless* describes the sexual assault of a child by her own father that results in her distorted identity afterwards.

If you explore south Asian voices, you'll see *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (Husseini, 2007) a perfect example of layered marginalization of women during wars. It involves the marital rape and war crimes against women. It gives the most vivid picture of what it means to be a woman in a south Asian society and that too when it's at war.

While we are at it, it is significant to note that despite being a discourse for a long time, feminism is yet to gain its ultimate goals. Women around the globe are still struggling to get their voices heard, they're still facing domestic violence, emotional and physical abuse, sexist work places, multilayered marginalization. Elif Shafak has presented the same reality in her novel. She has been praised on multiple platforms by the critics.

Elif Shafak has got much fame because of her struggle for women rights. Feminism can be traced in her works. "Shafak is passionately interested in dissolving barriers, whether of race, gender, culture, nationality, geography or a more mystical kind."(Sunday Times)

Anna, a journalist talks about Shafak and feminism in "the Guardian" and gives examples of various interviews of Shafak. She begins to pen her views about feminist discourse with a line by Shafak that "we can't take the rights; we are for granted." Julia Phillips writes about *10 Minutes*

38 Seconds in this Strange World “I’ll say *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in this Strange World* is well deserving of honors, Shafak writes with vision, bravery and compassion. Her novel is stunning portrait of a city, a society, a Julia Phillips lauds *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in this Strange World* as a work that is truly deserving of accolades. Shafak writes with remarkable vision, unyielding bravery and deep-seated compassion, crafting an exquisite portrait of not just a city or society, but rather an entire community and the singular soul at its core. (New York Times, 2019).

Michelle expounds upon how Shafak's masterful depiction of multiculturalism in Istanbul is prominently featured throughout *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in this Strange World* - notably through her vivid portrayal of the event occurring on the Bosphorus Bridge. Furthermore, Michelle notes that Shafak has skillfully illuminated some of Turkey's darker aspects through her writing. (New York Bloomsbury, 2019).

Ron Charles pens his views about *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in this Strange World*. He states that Elif is a courteous lady who, through her works unveils the true face of brutal Turkish government, sexual and domestic violence that is prevailing in Turkish society (2019, p.25).

Virginia Woolf wrote in *A Room of One’s Own* (1929) that men have treated woman as an inferior being since the beginning of the history. She claimed that it is the male who define what it means to be a female because of lack of female voices. She highlighted that women are termed as non-significant and inferior who have fewer mental capabilities than males. She claimed that women are also capable of writing like other dominant members of society and women can also write just like Shakespeare if given a chance. It's ironic how even after all the so called advancement of postmodern world, we are still there, struggling for the same issues as we were two centuries before.

Theoretical Framework

The discourse of gender equality reveals gendered oppression, violence, subjugation and discrimination. Intersectionality makes it possible to include all women and their different experiences in feminist discourse. This article seeks to present an in-depth and exhaustive analysis of Shafak's work *10 minutes 38 seconds in this strange world*; depicting the story of one woman who is a prostitute in Turkey, Istanbul, using Crashaw's intersectionality and Simone de Beauvoir's feminist discourse, i.e. the theory of "The Other" as a theoretical framework. The significance of

this study lies in its relevance in today's times when we still lack empathy for women who work as prostitutes from various socio-economic constraints. This study seeks to highlight the gender inequality and hypocrisy of a patriarchal society by graphically showing the disturbing life and murder of a prostitute.

Articulated by legal scholar Kimberle Crenshaw (1991), Intersectionality can be defined in terms of metaphorical representation of diverse and multiple forms of gender biased oppression and inequality. These forms amalgamate and result in creation of various obstacles in multiple forms that remain unaddressed in conventional ways of thinking.

Simon de Beauvoir has played a significant role during second wave of feminism. She talks about all those factors which contribute in domestic violence and female suppression. She published her most significant work *The Second Sex* in 1949 in order to make women recognize their worth in society. In her book she asserts that women are always portrayed as dangerous sexual species. Images of women are presented beyond the normal human beings. Her book's title also shows that women are regarded as second sex in front of male members of society. Beauvoir says "one is not born woman, but rather becomes one." She explains that patriarchal society has made racial and sexual binaries for the purpose of marginalization and "othering" of the female gender.

Kimberley Williams, an American lawyer who has coined the term Intersectionality to highlight the layers of oppression imposed on women in the form of race, gender, class. All these are factors are involved in women having to face unique mode of sexism or discrimination. She says that women are marginalized in male dominating society. She majorly talks about white middle-class women and Black women who are deprived of their rights and are sexually abused on the because of their gender. She says "the problem with identity politics is not that it fails to transcend difference, as some critics charge, but rather e opposite [...] that it frequently conflates and ignores intragroup differences."(2015,p. 155). It shows that intersectionality leads to comprehend "social location" in form of "crisscross system of oppression." (Collins, 2006, p. 7). It defines the status of women in society.

Analysis

Kimberley Williams, an American lawyer who has coined the term Intersectionality to highlight the layers of oppression imposed on women in the form of race, gender, class. All these factors are involved in women having to face unique mode of sexism or discrimination. She says that women are marginalized in male dominating society. She majorly talks about white middle-class women and Black women who are deprived of their rights and are sexually abused on the because of their gender. She says “the problem with identity politics is not that it fails to transcend difference, as some critics charge, but rather e opposite [...] that it frequently conflates and ignores intragroup differences.”(2015,p. 155). It shows that intersectionality leads to comprehend “social location” in form of “crisscross system of oppression.” (Collins, 2006, p. 7). It defines the status of women in society.

10 Minutes 38 Seconds in this Strange World explores the gender inequality in society in general. It exposes the hypocrisy of society that never forgives a woman even though it itself makes her go for prostitution for survival. It shows that women are abused sexually and physically by their own blood relations and outer society which plays a role in making innocent women the prostitutes. It exposes men and their evil doing. Hypocrisy is self evident by the very institution of prostitution that works for male. Elif presents oppressive and brutal view of Turkey as she herself was born in Turkey. As an insider she knows everything about Turkey that how it doesn't allow its women to walk, breathe and live freely. She says that in Turkey women are even not allowed to come out of their houses without their male counterparts in evening. Novel begins when Leila, protagonist of this novel is putting towards death and by every passing minute she is recalling her journey from life to death. She is recalling her mother Binnaz who is about 19 years old, lying on the bed and looking more than her age. Here, Elif is presenting the picture of Turkish married women that how they have to face domestic violence and how they are considered as machines which are only created to produce offsprings. It also presents how a desire of having a son gives license to males to exploit the lives of many women. Leila's father Haroun is portrayed as a religious person. His first wife Suzan was unable to give him a son. So he left her and married another girl of 16 because he wants a male heir more than anything else in this world.

Elif presents purpose and need of wife in patriarchal society whose only purpose is to give birth. As second wife of Haroun who is only 16 years old has approximately six miscarriages in

few years and every time she has to face more trouble and severe pain. As lines of novel clearly demonstrate her pain by stating “it ended in a miscarriage that almost killed her.”(p.17)

Elif presents another example of domestic violence and oppression in the form of child’s custody. When Leila was born her father took her from her mother and handed over her to her first wife. Binnaz tries to resist this cruel act but Haroun as being the father and male member has authority to decide the fate of her daughter. They are not even allowed to come out of their houses without covering their heads. It shows that how women are playing the roles of puppet in the hands of males.

Another incident on intersectionality and domestic violence is described in the novel through the character of Humeyra who is a girl of 16 years old. She was forced to leave school and became an unwanted wife of a man who loves another woman. Then ultimately her husband leaves her alone and she has to play the role of an unpaid servant for her in-laws.

“She was treated like a servant-a servant without a name. Bride, go bring the tea. Bride, go cook the rice. Bride, go wash the dishes”(p.158).

Humeyra is the true picture of domestic violence as her husband and her in laws used to beat her physically. She remembered that once her husband broke a wooden coat hanger on her back, another time he hits her legs with iron tongs. Moreover, physical violence includes rape, clitoridectomy and honor killing. Elif talks about worst side of turkey in terms of sexual violence and rape culture. She says that these topics are hidden in our society but we should talk about them openly so that we can save their girls from rape and prostitution. When Leila was 6 years old she was sexually abused by her own uncle on a family picnic. She was abused at the age of 6 when she knows nothing about anything. This is just lack of humanity that even girls of 6 years are not safe in this society. Following lines shows oppression of Leila:

“Again he puts his hand on her belly, and this time the circles were bigger, persistent-searching, demanding what he already believed belonged to him”(p.65).

When her mother gave birth to a baby and whole family was busy in this regard *“the whole week uncle had visited her every night. It hadn’t bled after that first night but it had always hurt”*(p.98).

These lines show marginalized life of a female. Leila at the age of 6 has miscarriage and everyone from her family, instead of punishing her uncle, forced Leila to marry her uncle's son in order to save the family from humiliation.

Furthermore, Elif presents intersectionality of women and their marginalized status in the society. Leila became prostitute because of her family and environment. Leila and her friends present that part of society which is outcasted. This society turns her into a prostitute and to save their so called pure society from prostitutes they started to kill them without any reason. Leila was also killed without any reason. The man who was killing these prostitutes was justifying this criminal act by saying that they are killing these women in order to make them good souls in hereafter. And they are proud of doing so.

“For that is what they did, he believed. They turned whores into angel”(p.228).

It was considered a normal thing to murder the prostitutes. These whores including Leila was not even allowed proper burial just like other females members. They are buried in a graveyard named as “companionless Cemetery” which itself presents marginalized picture of women. This study is significant as it highlights how the oppression against women needs a micro research. There are still sections of society that deal with different kinds of unaddressed discrimination and oppression.

Conclusion

To conclude, Elif's *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in this Strange world* presents various incidents of intersectionality and domestic violence because of race, gender and sexual orientation. This work is an effort to highlight the struggles of often forgotten victims of societal oppression; Prostitutes. Simon de Beauvoir's and Crenshaw's gender theories go hand in hand with Shafak's thematic concerns. Elif presents the true face of Istanbul which is fantasized as a dreamland from outsiders. Many incidents in the novel are taken from real happenings. Even author herself has to undergo through investigation from Turkish authorities for highlighting sensitive incidents in her book. Significance of this study lies in the interpretative value of novels like these. Through this work Elif gives individuality and voice to those who lived silently, died silently and turned into numbers in Cemetery of Companionless.

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