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### WOMEN SUBALTERNITY: A STUDY OF ELIF SHAFAK'S NOVEL 10 MINUTES 38 SECONDS IN THIS STRANGE WORLD

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#### ABSTRACT

This study investigates the oppressed and marginalized female characters of 10 Minutes 38 Seconds in this Strange World, who have been driven subaltern socially and religiously. It further explores how the female subalterns become the victim of violence in the society having patriarchal structure. Elif Shafak's (2019) 10 Minutes 38 Seconds in this Strange World has been taken as the primary source of data. Moreover, the data has also been gathered from secondary sources stated in the section of references. The text which the researchers have picked has been evaluated in the light of theoretical framework of Spivak's (1988) concept of silencing the women who are treated as subaltern in Indian society. The study employs a qualitative content analysis method to delineate the picture of subalternity of women that occurs in selected novel. It seeks to exhibit the marginalized female characters' endeavors for their survival and freedom from the adamant shackles of suppression and violence. It replies the question "Can a subaltern speak?" as 'no'. Hence, it bears the lesson that female subalterns, due to the patriarchal structure and domestic colonialism, can express neither their thoughts nor feelings. Tequila Leila along with her

three best female friends has to face violence and oppression. They try utmost to rebel against their subalternity. But the stronghold of patriarchal set up crushes their rebellion, snatching their freedom.

## INTRODUCTION

Elif Shafak, a British-Turkish novelist, is an award winning and most popular female author in Turkey. Including eleven of her novels, she has published nineteen books both in Turkish and English Languages (Elif Shafak Official Website, 2020, para. 1). *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in this Strange World* was nominated for the Booker Prize, RLS Ondaatje Prize and was *The Blackwell's Book of the Year* (Publishers Weekly, 2019, para. 1). Many themes of this novel are also frequent in Shafak's earlier works. These themes can be categorized as violence against women, Armenians' massacre, and ill treatment of Yazidis, weakening of secularism as well as growing religious sects in Turkey. The novel is a motivation to writers across the world. Shafak is an enthusiastic feminist and proponent of freedom of speech who addresses political and sexual taboos. Consequently, she has been blamed for defaming the Turkishness. Therefore, threatened to undergo consequences if she returns her mother country.

The novel begins with the introduction of Tequila Leila, an Istanbul prostitute, who has been murdered and thrown into a dumpster. Her heart ceases to work but her mind remains alive for ten minutes and thirty eight seconds. During this time she recollects her most graphic memories. As the story moves onward, it reveals that it is the story of subaltern women who suffer due to their subaltern status and commitment as women.

The story accords a ground for inspection of violence for female subalterns and the causes of their endurance and silence against it. All the major female characters of the story possess a subaltern rank, their freedom is confined, and their state of affairs impels them to grasp the position of silence. As Walby (1989) states that patriarchy is a system that takes the men to the position of dominance, oppressive and exploiting the women (p. 213).

Men assert violence as a tool to control and subordinate women. The harassment, physical violence and murder of women have become a routine work in every nook and corner of the world. A report of United Nations reveals that seventy percent of women have to suffer physical violence, compelled into sex, or abused in their life time (Terry, 2014, p.1). Further, as stated by Asha-Rose Migrio, Deputy Secretary-General United Nations, the "women are being beaten, trafficked, raped and killed" in every part of the world (Women, 2010, p. iii).

The other prominent factor to keep women subjugated and marginalized is patriarchy. In patriarchal system, men possess powerful authority. They keep all institutions of society like culture, religion, and politics under their charge. Such system makes the women subjugated and subordinated. Their self-standing is reduced and their subservience to men is widens after they (male) have a control over the social institutions (Yaqoob, 2018, p. 2).

The target of this study is to investigate the circumstances, frames of mind, and set of beliefs which force the female characters to behave in a certain way. In this regard, four major female characters of the selected novel have been focused to analyze keeping in view the subalternity in the patriarchal society. They desire to unconfined themselves from the stronghold of patriarchy and try to prove that the subaltern can speak but all goes in vain.

### **OBJECTIVE OF THE RESEARCH**

1. To shed light on the oppressed and marginalized female characters of the novel 10 Minutes and 38 Seconds in this Strange World, who have been driven subaltern socially and religiously.
2. To prove and answer the question “Can a subaltern speak?” as ‘no’.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The word ‘subaltern’ has been defined by the Advanced Learner’s Dictionary of Current English (2005) as “any officer in the British army who is lower in rank than a captain” (Hornby AS, 1541). The word has its roots in Latin language and lexically the term “stands as a synonym for subordinate and inferior people” (Mashori & Zaib, 2015, p. 186). The theory of subaltern was initially presented by an Italian Marxist and activist Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) in his book “Prison Notebooks”. Gramsci states, subaltern classes are those who are never permitted to take part in the power formation process that restricts them, contrary to it; they bring them to heels (Ghafoor, & Farooq, 2020, p. 43). The dominant class always makes them to remain dependent on it. They never have the liberty to express their true self and step up for their rights. Being underclass, Gramsci believes, subalterns remain under the hegemonic influence of the upper class. Afterward, various renowned critics who were the members of Subaltern Studies Group expanded the subaltern concept.

The concept of subalternity can be better perceived in the ideas of Guha, one of the chief proponents of subaltern studies. Guha (1989) states that the main function of subaltern studies is to devise well-organized and informative arguments of subaltern themes in the domain of South Asian studies (p. 7). Guha (1982) regards subalternity as demographic based construction, and eminent factors involved in causing subalternity in people, what he points out are caste, culture, class and age. Same is the case with Gramscian theory which also compares Italian workers with authorities. However, Gramsci analyses Italians as subalterns in his descriptions while Guha does have a discussion on Indian peasants as the subalterns. The notion of subalternity on the basis of caste system is specific to Indian perspective (Chowdhry, 2016, p.4). In the Hindu society that is based on caste system, the caste difference compels the people belonging to the lower class to remain subaltern (Dharmaraj, 2014, p. 113). Further, apropos subalternity on the basis of age, Guha classifies that this is the most suppressed category of subalterns (Guha, 1983, p. 20). In order to investigate Spivak’s concept of subaltern, several researches have been conducted and applied to various disciplines.

A study corresponding to the similar concept has been performed by Azad (2014) that investigates the exploited condition of the marginalized community during the era of British colonial rule (p. 119). He analyses Gosh's two novels namely *In an Antique Land* (1993) and *The Circle of Reason* (1986) from the viewpoint of diasporic vulnerability related to colonized people.

Ambessange Praveen's "Postcolonialism: Edward Said & Gayatri Spivak" is another exceptional study that investigates the powerful impact of colonialism and postcolonialism on history and cultures. The researchers of the study view that postcolonial literature strives to deconstruct the colonization process in order to do away with the misconceptions regarding misrepresented Orientals. The Marxist as well as the Poststructuralists thoughts draw a key impact on the theorist from Fanon to Spivak (2016, p. 47).

Spivak has also been criticized for her using of cryptic prose. Terry Eagleton laments on her use of overstuffed and excessively elliptical prose. Dinitia Smith (2002) complains that Spivak is bewilderingly eclectic and it is difficult to give her any coherent position.

Literature review reveals that several researched have been conducted on Gayatri Spivak's concept of subaltern. However, the present study aims to analyze Elif Shafak's novel *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in this Strange World* under this concept and the power structure operating behind subordination of female characters of the novel makes it distinctive.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study employs a qualitative content analysis method to explore the novel *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in this Strange World*. Content analysis method is systematic research method to analyze and make inferences from the text. The contents of the chosen novel take those female characters on the arena who has been impelled into the group of subaltern. The text is analyzed in terms of behavior of the patriarchal society which the female characters of the novel endure in their course of life. The research primarily focuses on four female characters i.e. Leila, Jameelah, Zaynab and Humeyra and their attitude towards male dominating society which is the ultimate cause of their subalternity.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

This study specifically tries to analyze, evaluate and understand the relevant sentences and characters of the novel through the lens of Gayatri Spivak's concept of subaltern as presented by her in 'Can the subaltern speak'? Spivak's theory apropos subalternity of women and their forcible silencing forms the basis of analysis. Spivak has presented her argument in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" that emphasizes the ideological and historical aspects to blame for the peripheral existence of marginalized class such as colonized, slaves, minority and women. Spivak establishes a postcolonial feministic approach as she is one among the leading figures of "Subaltern Studies" that familiarize poor famers, homeless people, daily wages laborers and women instances of subaltern. "However, Spivak focuses on subordinate females

(Sensebli & Fatehi, 2018, p.55). Spivak refuses to accept the simple ideological reading “which would have made the women a mere victim of false consciousness” (Spivak & Said, 1988, p.5).

Spivak discusses the term subaltern in detail and considers that “If the subaltern could speak- that is, speak in a way that really mattered to us- then it wouldn't matter to us” (Beverly, 1999, p.1). However, the term subalternity propagates the segments of society who have been subdued, marginalized and dominated. The current literature depicts such unjustified sections of society where women are kept marginalized and they are made voiceless. Likewise, Jean Francois Lyotard (1984) asserts that in the existing scenario that nature of knowledge has got diversity so as the society. This position of knowledge he refers as ‘incredulity towards metanarratives’ (p. 15). Similarly, Spivak explores the place of women in the context of post colonialism, she argues, “The subaltern has no history and cannot speak” (Gandhi, 1998, p. 83). She associates this marginalization with that of colonization that has made a powerful influence on the marginalized lives, especially on women. She states, “Between patriarchy and imperialism...the figure of woman disappears” (Spivak, 1988, p. 306). This research paper examines the issue of subalternity in the text of the selected novel with contextualization of Spivak's essay from the perspective of colonialism.

## DISCUSSION

10 Minutes 38 Seconds in this Strange World highlights the core issues of patriarchal society which keeps the women subjugated and marginalized. The four women characters of the novel represent the subaltern as they are suppressed, dehumanized and marginalized due to their peripheral position in a patriarchal society. They have to undergo numerous forms of persecution on social, economic, cultural, and religious basis. They try their level best to speak, escape, resist by making their voices heard but they are forcibly made silence. The plot of the novel exhibits how hard it is for women to survive in deeply entrenched patriarchy and how fanaticism exists in many shades.

### *Tequila Leila as a Subaltern*

Shafak takes an unflinching observation at the trauma faced by the minds and bodies of women in a society determined by the codes patriarchy. The book shows the brutal and relentless story which vividly delineates the violence, distress and sorrow. The character of Leila represents the true subaltern identity as she is marginalized and oppressed throughout the depiction of the narrative of 10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World.

The most vital moments of the novel takes place at the beginning when Tequila Leila, an Istanbul prostitute, murdered and thrown into a filthy bin. Being there into the bin, she faces the reality that “life goes on with or without us”(Shafak, 2019, p. 5). After her heart stops beating, her brain keeps on functioning for ten minutes and thirty-eight seconds. Once authorities would identify her, she expects that they would inform her family. But she does not aspire them to come and take her dead body as she had been rejected by them long ago, saying, “You've brought us shame. Everyone is talking behind our backs (Shafak, p.4)”.

The next part of the novel depicts Leila's life in Van, a Turkish city. It draws how she was compelled to work in a brothel in Istanbul, the hardships she had to face in that kind of life. The final part of the story is developed by Leila's five bosom friends. This is a group of outcasts who make Leila's hardships of lives endurable and sometimes full of joy. As her brain is in the process of cessation, Leila remembers her past life, from a little girl to the story consisting of two columns in newspapers. She remembers, "Things she did not even know she was capable of remembering" (Shafak, 2019, p. 11).

Thus begins a remarkable story of a dehumanized and broken but extremely brave woman who maintains her humanity in spite of a world striving to leave no stone unturned to crush her at each phase of life. There is beautiful depiction of picture of her early phase of life, as she recollects her birth and childhood in the house of a prosperous tailor, who has been waiting for the birth of four sons from his wives. Haroun wanted to have a son, a desire more than anything in the world. Suzan, his first wife had yielded no offspring that's why he had to marry Binnaz, a barely sixteen years old girl. Binnaz got pregnant for couple of times but ended up in miscarriages. Binnaz knew that if she did not beget offspring, she would be thrown out of the house and she would have to marry again. This is very true to patriarchy that the value of woman is measure by her ability to beget children. But she had it in her mind that no one going to accept her anyway, a divorcee, a used woman. After three years, Haroun's elders began to pressurize him to marry third time. Alternately, "he could divorce his useless young wife and then get remarried" (Shafak, 2019, p. 17) Upon the birth of Leila Haroun commented that 'next one will be a boy' (Shafak, p. 21).

As a girl with free thinking, Leila discovers with the passage of time that many things around are impermissible to her or fixed by old age norms. After suffering from many painful miscarriages, there is the birth of Leila. It is unendurable on Binnaz' (Leila's mother) part when her husband issues a decree that the child would be brought up by his first wife, and she (Leila's mother) will be treated as an aunt. If she would reveal the secret to Leila, they threat her to put her in the lock up of a mental hospital or send her back to village (Shafak, 2019, p. 42).

Shafak chases to expose the utter injustices society does to women. As Leila's father develops into an extremely devout religious, the women of the house are hushed and subdued: "Things were not always as they seemed," Shafak writes, "just as the sour could hide beneath the sweet, or vice versa (Shafak, 2019, p. 44)". Haroun's Sheikh compares the women with tomatoes. He states that never a person would buy those tomatoes which would have been touched, squeezed and sullied by other customers (Shafak, p. 38).

Early in the novel, depicting the social life of Van, Shafak narrates an extremely alarming scene when Leila is six years of age. She has to reside during at a beachside hotel during a family picnic. She is fallen victim to her uncle who secretly comes into her bed. It's this distressing incident that becomes an axis around which young Leila's whole life rotates. The reader is

introduced the brutal realities of Istanbul. "Istanbul was an illusion. A magician's trick gone wrong" (Shafak, 2019, p. 202).

However, Leila is determined not adopt her luck as a subaltern, so she decides to challenge the social norms and strives to gain her identity. When she turns sixteen she exposes her uncle. Instead, she is blamed to have done all that with her friend in a school. Her father knows who is right and who is wrong, whether his daughter or his brother, but he does not expose his brother. Leila's schooling is abandoned and is set to marry the son of her uncle who is the abuser. Leila girds up her loin to challenge such cruel norms and decides to run away from home to Istanbul, "the city where all the discontented and all the dreamers eventually ended up"(Shafak, 2019, p. 90).

In Istanbul, Leila is sold to brothel and is compelled to be involved into prostitution. The life at brothel is very distressing. The 'food', the 'payment' and even the 'shoes' are miserable. Once a foul-mouthed violent man tries to pour sulphuric acid on Leila's face, but luckily it hits her back instead of face. Later on, she is murdered by a fanatic who kills her just because (he thinks) he wants to clean the filthy city. Post mortem report shows that "the victim was beaten with a heavy instrument and strangled to death after being knocked unconscious (Shafak, 2019, p. 188). She is consigned to the cemetery that is specifically made for companionless people. No burial rituals are performed for such an impious woman. Her body is not supposed to be washed. Upon informed by the officials, her parents refuse to claim her. An old man requests the medical officer to hand over the dead body to her friends on humanitarian grounds. The medical officer states, "don't try to bring new customs to an old village" (Shafak, 2019, p. 193).

The second half of the novel focuses on Leila's "water family" that consists of the outcasts who provide Leila shelter when her own relatives bother not to see her. There's Sabotage Sinan, Nostalgia Nalan, Zaynab122, Hollywood Humeyra, and Jameelah. This group is known as "the five". According to "water family", their friend Leila deserves a proper burial. They won't let her rot in the Cemetery of Companionless, as they are there as her companions. She is not a companionless and does not belong to that place. But the cruel law does not listen to their cries. It was Leila's wish to be thrown into sea after her death. So her friends secretly take her body out from the Cemetery of companionless to fulfill her wish. Her wish is fulfilled but for this her friend Sabotage has to be struck by a bullet in his shoulder. The norms, even after her death, don't make it easy for her to get freedom. She is free from the clutches of cruel social norms only after her death, as the narrative states, "There was no pain there...She was relieved to have left Cemetery of the Companionless (Shafak, 2019, p. 304)."

### ***Jameelah as a Subaltern***

Jameelah was born in Somalia. Her father was a Muslim and her mother was a Christian. The childhood of Jameelah was blissfully free. Her smiles dimmed when her mother dies of cancer. Her father marries a widow who proves to be cruel for Jameelah and her siblings. Her attitude is that of a master to his

subaltern. She wants to eliminate all the traces of woman she replaced. Jameelah, being eldest daughter, develops frequent clashes with her mother who all the time forces her how to wear, how to speak and what to eat. She starts visiting the church just because she feels connected to her mother, but this infuriates her father and leaves her siblings heart broken. As she wants to change her position, one of her acquaintance tells about the *feringhees* who were looking for healthy and hardworking women to take to Istanbul. Upon arrival to Istanbul, being a group of more than forty people, they are lined up and separated into groups. Younger girls like Jameelah are kept one side. Soon she realizes that it was a pretext to bring people for cheap labor and sexual exploitation. It is too late for her to escape. At day time they are forced to work and at the night time many women were called- they never knew which of them it would be. Those women who confront the captors, they were locked up in small dark cellar beneath that house. No one knew their whereabouts. This how a subaltern is made silent and can't have a word against his plight.

### *Zaynab as a Subaltern*

Zaynab was born in northern Lebanon. For generation, families in that area had intermarried, and the dwarfism was so common in the village. Zaynab alone inherited her parent's condition, both were little people. Taunted, pitied and tired of people's intrusive gaze, with no prospects of getting married, Zaynab considers her body a curse. So, she decides to find her own path. She crosses the border into Turkey with help of an Armenian family. But finding a job for a female dwarf was not an easy job. Luckily she finds a job at a hairdresser shop but unluckily her owner is unkind (Shafak, 2019, p. 131). She is forced to stand on feet long hours each day with little wages. She starts suffering from excruciating back pain. Afterwards, a thickest woman who is a regular customer hires her for brother where she cleans up, brews coffee and washes the cups. Three places, three stories of miserable plights, a lot set for a subaltern.

### *Humeyra as a Subaltern*

Humeyra, at the age of sixteen, is abruptly pulled out of school, and is engaged to man who is her father's partner in business. She is already a wife by the age of sixteen. Her husband did want this marriage. She tries her level best to understand his type as well as his needs. She keeps her needs aside for his sake, but he is never happy. Everyone in the home treats like a servant who has no name, "bride, go and bring tea. Bride, go and cook the rice" (Shafak, 2019, p. 158). She is also the worst victim of domestic violence. To keep her silent and obedient like a slave, her husband once breaks a wood made coat hanger while hitting on her back. Once another time he beats on her legs with iron that leaves "claret colored mark on the side of her left knee" (Shafak, p. 159). Even after her escapement from home to Istanbul, she remains terrified that she might become the victim of honor killing.

## **CONCLUSION**

The novel *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in this Strange World* delineates the manner women are perceived in patriarchal society, how they are kept silent and



treated within the four walls, at public places, chiefly in the perspective of being a woman. The lives of all major female characters of the novel all are in processes of trials, journeys and struggles. They desire to relish freedom but are stuck in the shackles of patriarchal norms. Rehman and Anwar (2020), while analyzing Khalid Hosseini's novel *A Thousand Solendid Suns*, explain the Spivak's words that the male dominated society never endures marginalized class representation (p.120). They are forcibly kept silent so as not to threaten the society's powerful class. In the same manner, the women characters depicted by Elif Shafak are also unable to make their voices valued in the patriarchal systems as well as societies

The female characters of *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in this Strange World* are archetype of present day world as they have to endure social and domestic brutalities with great courage. They keep going with the reflection of using conventional or unconventional approaches to cope with the patriarchal tribulations and struggle for their freedom. In the light of phrase by Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' Elif Shafak perpetuates that the women are marginalized and subaltern in a society having patriarchal set up. They cannot, as Spivak maintains, speak or allowed to speak. If they would try to rebel against the powerful patriarchal codes, they will have to face the fate like that of Leila.

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