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Fluid Identities and Posthuman Feminist Consciousness in Elif Shafak's *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World* (2019)

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ABSTRACT

Elif Shafak's 10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World (2019) offers a poignant exploration of gender, identity and marginalization through the life of Tequila Leila, a sex worker in Istanbul. The paper studies the construction of fluid identities and posthuman feminist consciousness of the protagonist through Rosi Braidotti's nomadic subjectivity (2011) and Homi K. Bhabha's theory of hybridity (1994) as its dual analytical lenses. While existing scholarship on Shafak's novels has largely focused on their socio-political critique of gender and marginalization in the Turkish context, the posthuman and nomadic dimensions of Leila's identity in 10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World (2019), as they manifest beyond the threshold of biological death, remain critically underexplored. The novel presents a fragmented narrative, unfolding Leila's posthumous final moments of consciousness, her complex and fluid female identity. The study aims to explore how Shafak dismantles patriarchal definitions of the female body by moving the narrative beyond the threshold of biological death, thereby challenging the constraints of anthropocentrism and traditional humanism. The study employs a qualitative textual analysis method. The analysis draws on the protagonist Leila's agency, whose life, narrated posthumously, is disembodied and thereby revealed as Braidotti's nomadic hybrid subject — one that refuses rigid social categorizations of being. The study argues that Shafak envisions an affirmative posthuman ethics in which resilience is secured through the dispersal of the self, positing that identity persists as a circulating energy of memory and matter, transcending the threshold of biological death.

Keywords: *Elif Shafak, Rosi Braidotti, Nomadic Subjectivity, Posthuman Feminism, 10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World (2019).*

INTRODUCTION

Elif Shafak's *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World* (2019) follows Tequila Leila, a sex worker in Istanbul whose body is discarded in a trash bin after her murder. However, her consciousness lingers for exactly ten minutes and thirty-eight seconds. In this fleeting window, Leila experiences vivid, non-linear memories that reconstruct her life—from a traumatic childhood in a conservative Turkish town to her migration to Istanbul. Leila's memories reveal a complex identity characterized by both violence and tenderness, resisting a binary narrative of mere victimhood. The novel uses Istanbul, a city straddling East and West, to highlight the tensions between tradition and modernity. Ultimately, Leila's physical death marks not an end, but a continuation of her influence on the friends who mourn her.

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As Leila dies, she reflects on the full spectrum of her life—its violence, tenderness, joy, and pain. Her memory brings forth moments of both tragedy and triumph, including her love affairs, the abuse she endured, and the small acts of kindness she experienced throughout her life. These memories reveal the complexity of her identity, which cannot be reduced to a mere victim of circumstance. Leila's consciousness, as it lingers after death, underscores the posthuman theme of fluid, ever-evolving subjectivity, and it critiques the traditional binary narratives of victimhood and agency.

Shafak's *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World* (2019) is a profound meditation on life, death, identity and belonging, exploring the intersections of gender, class, and marginalization. It is a story about survival, resilience, and the hybrid nature of human identity—one that resists binary categories and instead presents a complex, multi-faceted vision of subjectivity.

The protagonist Leila is studied through Rosi Braidotti's Nomadic Subjectivity (2011) to explore how Shafak's narrative depicts Leila's consciousness as a fluid, hybrid and transformative experience. Braidotti's notion of posthuman subjectivity emphasises the fluidity and interconnectedness of identity, where the human subject is always in process and never fixed while Bhabha's theory of hybridity highlights the ways in which identities are formed in negotiation between different cultural, social, and historical forces. In *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World* (2019), Tequila Leila embodies these theories—her consciousness is constantly shifting and hybrid, as she exists simultaneously in multiple worlds and identities. The framework helps in analysing Leila's subjectivity as one that transcends essentialist views of womanhood, reflecting a complex, multi-layered existence. Similarly, applying Bhabha's concept of hybridity, the study explores how Leila's identity is not simply a combination of different cultural forces but a site of resistance and transformation, where new forms of identity emerge in the spaces between fixed categories of race, gender, and social class.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts a qualitative, theory-driven textual analysis, grounding its reading of Elif Shafak's 10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World (2019) in Rosi Braidotti's posthuman feminist concept of nomadic subjectivity (2011) and Homi K. Bhabha's theory of hybridity (1994).

Nomadic subjectivity conceptualises identity as relational, processual and in constant becoming, rejecting fixed, humanist notions of the subject and aligning with Leila's fragmented, post-mortem consciousness and her continual reconstitution through memory, space and others. Hybridity, in Bhabha's sense, is treated as a productive "inbetween" space where new forms of subjectivity emerge from negotiations between cultural, gendered and classed positions, rather than a simple mixture of pregiven identities.

Together, these frameworks are used to examine how the novel constructs Tequila Leila's hybrid female consciousness as fluid, fragmented and shaped by intersecting forms of marginalisation, moving beyond binary narratives of victimhood versus empowerment. Shafak dismantles the biologically bounded conception of female subjectivity by narrating Leila's

posthumous consciousness as a site of relational, hybrid and posthuman becoming, thereby envisioning identity as a circulating force that persists beyond the threshold of death.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Posthumanism

Posthumanism is commonly defined as the idea that humanity can be transformed, transcended, or even displaced through technological, biological, and cultural developments (Oxford University Press, 2023). Conceptually, it emerges as a critique of the dominant humanist paradigm that positions "Man" as the universal measure of all things, and instead calls for a decentring of the human and a recognition of the agency of nonhuman entities such as animals, environments, and technologies (Braidotti, 2017; Wilde & Sylvia, 2024; Toffoletti, 2014).

Critical posthumanism thus rejects anthropocentrism and dismantles dualisms such as human/nonhuman and subject/object, proposing instead a vision of reality as constituted by complex, interdependent networks of human and nonhuman actors (Braidotti, 2017; Sandybayeva & Tolgambaeva, 2025; Mikki & Bhuvaneswari, 2023). It marks a shift in ontology (what exists), epistemology (how knowledge is produced), and ethics (how responsibility is distributed), insisting on relationality**,** pluralism and postdualism in place of isolated human subjects and rigid boundaries (Wilde & Sylvia, 2024; Sandybayeva & Tolgambaeva, 2025; Mikki & Bhuvaneswari, 2023).

As Braidotti and other theorists argue, this "posthuman turn" is not simply antihuman but aims to rethink subjectivity as embedded, embodied, and materially entangled across species, technologies, and environments, thereby opening new critical frameworks for understanding identity, power, and vulnerability in the Anthropocene (Braidotti, 2017; Toffoletti, 2014; Penner, 2022).

Posthuman Feminism

Posthuman feminism builds on this critique of humanism by highlighting how the figure of the universal human has historically been coded as white, male, and Eurocentric, marginalizing women, radicalised groups, and nonhuman life (Braidotti, 2017; Rodríguez, 2022; Penner, 2022). Braidotti's work is central here: she conceptualizes the posthuman subject as an embodied, embedded, and heterogeneous assemblage grounded in feminist new materialism, rather than as a sovereign, disembodied consciousness (Braidotti, 2017; Rodríguez, 2022; Toffoletti, 2014).

A key notion in Braidotti's project is nomadic subjectivity, which understands the subject as always in process, relational, and internally differentiated, rather than fixed in stable identity categories such as "woman" or "human" (Braidotti, 2017; Radulović, 2016; Toffoletti, 2014). Posthuman feminism therefore questions essentialist binaries (man/woman, human/animal and nature/technology) and calls for transversal alliances across differences, drawing on ecofeminism, queer theory, Black and decolonial feminisms (Rodríguez, 2022; Toffoletti, 2014).

Recent readings of Braidotti emphasize posthuman feminism as both critique and constructive ethics: it exposes how humanist norms sustain structural inequalities, while also proposing affirmative modes of subjectivity and solidarity that recognize vulnerability,

interdependence, and planetary interconnectedness (Braidotti, 2017; Rodríguez, 2022; Penner, 2022). This framework is particularly productive for analysing literary subjects whose identities are fragmented, liminal, and technologically or materially mediated, such as Tequila Leila, whose consciousness persists in a state that already exceeds the bounded, autonomous human individual.

Hybridity and the Theory of Cultural Hybridity

Homi K. Bhabha's theory of hybridity reconfigures identity and agency in postcolonial contexts by focusing on the "inbetween" spaces where cultures meet, clash, and negotiate new meanings (Senapati & Bano, 2025; Dizayi & Tahir, 2023; Bhandari, 2022). Rather than viewing cultures as pure and selfcontained, Bhabha's hybridity foregrounds ambivalence and third space—the interstitial zone in which colonial binaries such as colonizer/colonized or East/West are disrupted and rearticulated (Dizayi & Tahir, 2023; Bhandari, 2022; Kalua, 2009).

Within this third space, identity becomes a performative and ongoing process of negotiation rather than the expression of an authentic, originary essence. Hybridity thus displaces agency from fixed cultural origins to dynamic, relational processes of becoming, enabling marginalized subjects to contest dominant narratives through mimicry, irony, and "camouflage" (Dizayi & Tahir, 2023; Bhandari, 2022; Kalua, 2009; Khan, 2025). At the same time, critics have noted that Bhabha's emphasis on discourse and cultural negotiation can risk underplaying material inequalities and economic exploitation, raising questions about the political limits of hybridity as a strategy of resistance (Bhandari, 2022; Abou-Agag, 2021).

In literary studies, cultural hybridity has been widely used to analyse postcolonial and diasporic identities as fluid, fragmented, and multilayered, illuminating how characters inhabit liminal spaces between languages, religions, and national traditions (Senapati & Bano, 2025; Mothukuri, 2025; Qin, 2025; Khan, 2025). Hybridity in this broader sense can also encompass biological, linguistic, and technological fusions that produce new entities exceeding simple binaries or pure forms (Al-Omari & Al-Omari, 2025; Sandybayeva & Tolgambaeva, 2025; Mikki & Bhuvaneswari, 2023).

Hybridity in Posthuman Feminist Contexts

The concept of hybridity acquires renewed significance in posthuman feminist theory, where traditional boundaries between human and nonhuman, male and female, and nature and technology are systematically reconfigured (Wilde & Sylvia, 2024; Al-Omari & Al-Omari, 2025; Sandybayeva & Tolgambaeva, 2025). Posthuman frameworks emphasize that contemporary subjectivities are formed through entanglements with media, digital technologies, biotechnologies, and ecological systems, making hybrid conditions not an exception but a constitutive feature of existence (Wilde & Sylvia, 2024; Al-Omari & Al-Omari, 2025; Toffoletti, 2014; Mikki & Bhuvaneswari, 2023).

Posthuman feminism, in particular, mobilizes hybridity to articulate nonfixed, relational, and materially embedded models of female subjectivity that cut across species, machines, and environments (Braidotti, 2017; Rodríguez, 2022; Radulović, 2016). By decentring the category of "woman" as an essential identity while attending to intersectional differences, it aligns with

hybridity's challenge to purity and authenticity, yet situates these dynamics within histories of patriarchy, colonialism, and racialization (Rodríguez, 2022; Imran et al., 2025; Khan, 2025).

Bringing together Bhabha's third space and posthuman feminist thought thus allows female subjectivity to be understood as both culturally negotiated and morethanhuman: a hybrid, liminal positioning from which dominant gender norms, colonial binaries, and anthropocentric assumptions can be critiqued and reimagined (Braidotti, 2017; Dizayi & Tahir, 2023). This combined lens is especially useful for examining characters like Tequila Leila, whose identity unfolds at the intersection of postcolonial urban space, gendered marginalization, and a posthuman condition that destabilizes the very boundaries of life, death, and the human.

These three theoretical strands—posthumanism, posthuman feminism and cultural hybridity—converge on a shared critique of fixed, essentialist and hierarchically bounded conceptions of identity and the human subject, even as each targets a different axis of that fixity. Posthumanism ontologically rejects anthropocentrism, repositioning subjectivity as relational and materially entangled rather than autonomous and bounded. Posthuman feminism narrows this critique to gender: anchored in Braidotti's (2011) nomadic subjectivity, it exposes how the humanist subject has historically been coded as masculine, white and Eurocentric, marginalizing women and racialized others, and proposes in its place an embodied, heterogeneous model of becoming. Bhabha's (1994) hybridity complements both by relocating identity formation in the performative, negotiated third space where cultural and colonial binaries are disrupted. Read together, however, the three frameworks are not simply additive: posthumanism supplies the ontological ground of a non-anthropocentric subject, posthuman feminism supplies the political specificity of whose bodies have historically been excluded from that subject, and hybridity supplies the spatial mechanism of where and how new subjectivities are negotiated. It is this composite lens, rather than any one framework taken alone, that is required to account for Tequila Leila's posthumous consciousness, which is simultaneously more-than-human, culturally negotiated and irreducible to any single biological, gendered or national category.

Current scholarship on Shafak's novel 10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World (2019) has predominantly engaged with its socio-political critique of gender and urban marginalization; the posthuman and nomadic dimensions of Leila's identity remain critically unexplored. Moreover, while Braidotti's (2011) nomadic subjectivity and Bhabha's (1994) hybridity have each been applied individually to feminist and postcolonial texts respectively, their combined deployment as a framework for reading posthumous consciousness and post-mortem identity in fiction remains largely unaddressed. This study intervenes precisely at that theoretical intersection, arguing that 10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World (2019) uniquely stages the convergence of hybridity, nomadism and posthuman ethics through a marginalized female subject, Leila, whose identity persists and resignifies itself beyond biological death.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

Hybrid Female Subjectivity

Tequila Leila embodies a hybrid female subjectivity that challenges conventional categories of gender, identity and social roles. Rather than a fixed, unified self, Leila's identity is a fluid and dynamic process shaped by intersecting social, cultural and personal forces. Her status

as a sex worker and marginalized woman does not reduce her to a flat, victimized figure; instead, her life is characterized by complexity, contradiction and ongoing transformation. Through her interactions—particularly with her friends from marginalized communities—Leila moves between multiple roles (daughter, lover, friend, survivor), each layering her subjectivity with new meanings. This hybrid consciousness is not limited to traditional gendered scripts; it is constantly negotiated against the social structures that attempt to delimit her. In this sense, Leila's subjectivity resonates with Braidotti's concept of the nomadic subject, a self always in motion, continually reshaping and reforming in relation to its context and experiences (Braidotti, 2011). Refusing an essentialised version of womanhood, Leila presents a complex, multifaceted identity that unsettles binary frameworks of victimhood versus empowerment.

Nomadic Subjectivity and Fluid Identity

The novel's opening scene, in which Leila's consciousness awakens inside a rubbish bin, establishes the central premise on which her nomadic subjectivity is built: that identity survives, and continues to move, past the point at which the traditional, embodied subject would be considered finished. The passage below is examined not as illustrative colour but as the structural anchor of the section, since the physical image of the discarded, still-sensing body is the condition of possibility for the fluid, non-linear memory-work that follows.

> Tequila Leila would have given anything to be in her apartment now. Instead she was here, somewhere on the outskirts of Istanbul, across from a dark, damp football field, inside a metal rubbish bin with rusty handles and flaking paint. It was a wheelie bin; at least four feet high and half as wide. Leila herself was five foot seven – plus the eight inches of her purple sling back stilettos, still on her feet. (Shafak, 2019)

Leila's consciousness, as represented in her final moments, further substantiates the notion of fluid and nomadic subjectivity. Drawing on Rosi Braidotti's theory of nomadic subjectivity (2011), identity is not a stable, fixed entity but something perpetually in motion, shifting and evolving. The fragmented, non-linear memories that surface during the ten minutes and thirtyeight seconds after her death illustrate both the instability and complexity of her lived experience. Leila's mind traverses joyful, painful and mundane memories, underscoring the ongoing flow and openness of her subjectivity. Her identity is never completely circumscribed by her past; it remains available to new readings and meanings. Crucially, her subjectivity is not confined to the inert body abandoned in a rubbish bin. Instead, it is depicted as a dynamic, ever-changing force that exceeds the limits of the physical. This portrayal aligns with Braidotti's argument that posthuman subjectivity is relational, interconnected with other forms of life and continuously produced through processes of relation (Braidotti, 2013). Leila's memories thus function less as static images and more as fluid, shifting constellations that exemplify the nomadic, transformative nature of her identity.

Hybridity as a Site of Transformation and Resistance

Leila's hybrid identity operates as a powerful site of transformation and resistance. Drawing on Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity (1994), this study shows that her identity is not simply a mixture of discrete cultural, gendered and social identities, but a "third space" where new, subversive forms of subjectivity emerge. For Bhabha, hybridity disrupts rigid

cultural and gender norms by producing identities that are neither one nor the other but are always in process (Bhabha, 1994). Leila's life as a sex worker on the margins of society does not imprison her within a purely victimized frame; rather, her hybrid subjectivity enables her to negotiate power and agency in complex ways. Her position is marked by constant tension between the oppressive forces that seek to define her and the relationships she cultivates, especially with friends who share her marginalisation. These friendships, formed around common experiences of exclusion and survival, create a space of solidarity that exceeds the limiting narratives imposed by dominant culture. This relational, hybrid space allows Leila to defy the binary of victim versus survivor and adopt a more nuanced sense of self. In doing so, she resists traditional stories attached to women like her—stories that label them as either "fallen" or "redeemed." Her identity is instead characterized by an ongoing process of transformation, defiance of social norms and the creation of new, subversive ways of being.

Intersectionality of Marginalized Identities

The intersectionality of Leila's identity reveals how overlapping modes of marginalisation—gender, class and sexual status—shape her hybrid consciousness. Her life is deeply affected by social, political and economic oppression, yet her subjectivity is not wholly determined by these structures. Rather, her hybrid identity emerges precisely at the intersection of these forces, intensified by her position as a sex worker in a patriarchal society. The novel illustrates how Leila's identity is forged through the convergence of multiple social, cultural and historical vectors. Her struggles as a woman in a patriarchal order are exacerbated by her class position and stigmatized profession, but she navigates these conditions through her bonds with others in her community. These relationships are central to her self-understanding; they provide recognition, mutual support and a collective space of resistance against the oppressive systems that seek to fix her identity. Leila's hybrid subjectivity, shaped by intersecting experiences of gender, class and sexuality, enables her to move beyond simplistic narratives of pure victimhood and instead forge a dynamic, relational and complex sense of self. This interpretation is consistent with the work of feminist scholars such as Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) and bell hooks (2000), who insist on viewing identity as intersectional and multifaceted.

Subversive Female Subjectivity

The study identifies Leila's subjectivity as fundamentally subversive, as it disrupts conventional gender roles and normative expectations of femininity. Her hybrid, fluid identity challenges familiar binaries that divide women into the virtuous/pure and the fallen/corrupt. Throughout the novel, Leila's experiences and memories unsettle these reductive gendered frameworks. Leila actively subverts the "grandiose and unambiguous" names given to her by her father at birth—*Afife* ("Chaste, Untainted") and *Kamile* ("Perfection") (Shafak, 2019). The novel notes that she became a "walking embodiment of imperfection" and that "staying chaste" was not her priority. She changes the spelling of her name from "Leyla" to "Leila", telling clients that she "traded the 'y' of 'yesterday' for the 'i' of 'infinity'". Even in death, she refuses to be spoken of in the past tense, asserting her identity through her profession and nickname: "'Is, darling, not was … My name is Tequila Leila' (Shafak, 2019).

Leila's journey is marked by her refusal to submit to her father's increasingly rigid religious dictates and her uncle's abuse. When her father tells her that sinners face "eternal

damnation" and God's unceasing threats, Leila experiences a "burning rage". She subverts his authority by shouting, "'God, God, and God! I've had enough of this crap'" and walking out on his religious studies (Shafak, 2019). At sixteen, Leila treats her body as a "mannequin she could shape and dress and paint to her heart's content," bleaching her hair and getting a black rose tattoo on her ankle in direct defiance of her father's ban on Western influences and "immoral" appearances. Leila subverts the family's plan to marry her to her cousin Tolga—a plan intended to "save" her honour—by running away to Istanbul on the day of her brother's funeral (Shafak, 2019).

While sex work is often framed solely in terms of victimization, Shafak's portrayal complicates such readings, presenting Leila as an active, reflective subject who asserts agency and self-definition despite systemic marginalization. Her relationships—with friends, fellow outcasts and lovers, including Sabotage Sinan, Nostalgia Nalan, Jameelah, Zaynab122 and Hollywood Humeyra (Shafak, 2019)—are multi-layered and fluid, offering an alternative to the conventional feminist dichotomy of victim versus empowered woman. Leila's "water family" of friends and fellow outcasts consists of individuals who have all subverted societal expectations to live their own truths (Shafak, 2019). Born Osman in a rural village, *Nalan* rejects her assigned gender and an arranged marriage, stating, "Osman was no more. There was only Nalan, and no going back". She undergoes surgery to "correct the mistake that God the Almighty had so blatantly made". *Humeyra* flees an abusive marriage in Mardin, changing her name and appearance to escape an "honour killing". She views her survival as a subversion of the odds stacked against her. In an act of defiance against those who stare at her dwarfism, *Zaynab* adds her height (122 cm) to her name, transforming a perceived flaw into a point of self-definition (Shafak, 2019).

The novel's second part, "The Body," focuses on the five friends' subversive act of exhuming Leila's body from the Cemetery of the Companionless. They challenge the hospital director's assertion that they are "not family," with Nalan believing that "water ran thicker than blood" and that friends could be "closer to her than family" (Shafak, 2019). By stealing the body to bury it next to her "eternal love," D/Ali, or throwing it into the Bosphorus, they subvert the state's classification of Leila as an "unclaimed" or "undesirable" citizen. Nalan mocks the Deputy Police Chief's statement that "normal female citizens" have no need to worry about the murders of prostitutes, highlighting the state's exclusion of sex workers from the category of "humanity" (Shafak, 2019). Even Binnaz, Leila's mother, performs a small act of subversion against her husband's patriarchal household by sharing a "big secret" with Leila: the truth that Binnaz is her biological mother, despite the family's attempt to pretend the first wife, Suzan, raised her. Binnaz also releases all the caged birds and the betta fish in the house during Leila's birth, an act of "freeing" that Leila eventually mirrors by seeking the sea in death.

Leila's agency does not reside in a single, fixed role; it arises through her ongoing negotiations between structural constraints and personal desires, and through the affective ties she maintains. In this way, she embodies a subversive, posthuman feminist subjectivity that rejects essentialist categories and foregrounds the complexity of lived experience. This mode of subjectivity not only contests traditional feminist narratives but also introduces a transformative model of female identity in a posthuman context.

CONCLUSION

10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World (2019) is far more than a narrative of personal survival. It is a politically charged literary intervention into the conditions that render certain lives disposable within patriarchal, nationalist and anthropocentric systems of power. Through the posthumous consciousness of Tequila Leila, reading through Braidotti (2011)'s nomadic subjectivity and Bhabha (1994)'s theory of hybridity, Shafak has staged a profound critique of the social and political forces that circumscribe female subjectivity in contemporary Turkey and beyond. Leila's fragmented, fluid identity refuses the fixity imposed by essentialist gender categories, class hierarchies, and national belonging, persisting beyond her biological death as a circulating energy of memory and matter that patriarchal and humanist frameworks ultimately fail to contain.

The implications of this reading extend across three interconnected domains. In the context of Turkish politics and migration, the novel allegorizes the systematic erasure of women's rights, the criminalization of sexual marginality, and the dislocation of subjects who inhabit Bhabha's third space — belonging fully to no single place, yet forging identity precisely through that in-betweenness. Shafak herself, writing in exile, enacts the nomadic condition she theorizes: a deterritorialized voice that refuses silencing by national borders or political censorship. Within contemporary feminism, Leila's story challenges liberal frameworks centred on individual agency, proposing instead a model of feminist consciousness that is relational, embodied, intersectional, and affirmative — aligned with the broader posthuman and new materialist turns in feminist theory (Braidotti, 2017; Rodríguez, 2022).

The novel thus theorizes marginalization rather than merely representing it. Leila occupies multiple, overlapping margins simultaneously — woman, sex worker, migrant, and corpse denied dignified burial — yet it is precisely from these intersecting sites of exclusion that her most transformative subjectivity emerges. Shafak's novel thus insists that the most silenced voices carry the most urgent visions of identity, belonging, and what it means to persist — humanly and post-humanly — against erasure.

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