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**BOUNDARIES AND TABOOS OF WOMEN: A CLOSE READING OF ELIF SHAFAK'S  
10 MINUTES AND 38 SECONDS IN THIS STRANGE WORLD**

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**Abstract**

Shafak's "10 Minutes and 38 Seconds in This Strange World," albeit less well-known than her other books, promotes the rights of outcasts, including transgender people and prostitutes. Pseudo morality of the society, gender bias based on religious/patriarchal norms and other discriminatory practices faced by women in Turkish society is depicted in this novel. This article aims to explore the taboos inflicted upon Islamic women in Istanbul. The theory of Islamic Feminism is applied to examine this novel's characters and the issues the female characters face.

**Keywords:** Turkish Muslim Women, Gender Bias, Islamic Feminism, Gender Roles, Social and Religious Taboos

**Introduction**

Shafak's novel "10 Minutes and 38 Seconds in This Strange World" was published in May 2019 and follows the lives of 'outcastes' who reside in the famous city of Istanbul. The central character, Tequila Leila – a bold and outspoken prostitute – is murdered. The initial part of the novel takes the reader through the thoughts and memories that flood her mind after her heart stops beating. Her childhood flashbacks reveal her orthodox upbringing, predominantly determined by religion and traditions. Shafak has again used her work to give voice to the silenced, in this case, the women of Istanbul, especially the sex workers. Leila and her five socially outcast friends were victims of circumstances and patriarchy. Yet, for no fault of theirs, they are prejudiced, oppressed and alienated from mainstream society. The novel also portrays other evils of Turkish society which affects the

women, such as honour killings, child marriages, virginity test, illiteracy, polygamy, preference for a male child, religious marriages (for which there was no validity in the court of law), physical and mental torture, etc.

**Islamic feminism**

The status and issues of Muslim women worldwide have been questioned, which has sparked much debate. The religion itself has been regarded as one that curbs and confines women in multiple ways through restrictions placed on their attire, interactions with men, marriage, education etc. Weir defines Islamic feminists as "political activists and academics in various contexts" who are "pursuing equality and justice for women within Islam." (98) Bahi describes them as "Muslim women engaged in the revision of Islamic traditions, the constitution of new modernity in the twenty-first century, the transformation of Muslim public sphere

and probably the transformation of feminism itself”(141). Islamic feminists mostly anchor their discourses with Quran as their primary text and differ from secular feminists by claiming equality in all public and private spheres. They encourage a re-reading of the Quran and believe that the holy text does advocate equal status of men and women, although it recognises diverse roles played by them. It is believed that the Quran has been interpreted as a text that promotes patriarchy because of who has read and preached it (primarily men) and how it has been interpreted for their benefit, ignoring the layers of meaning. Weir believes that one cannot look at the issues faced by Muslim women (social, economic and political) as human rights issues as they identify themselves as Muslims first and women second (101). Hence, western feminism deems it insufficient to tackle their issues.

Whether the Quran promotes complete gender equality has evoked a divided response from the Islamic feminist community. They agree that some part of it does and some doesn't (especially regarding wife beating, men being protectors of women etc.). Wadud believes that “there are more verses in the Quran regarding the full human dignity of women than any other issues” (205). She is supported by writers such as Riffat Hassan, who argue that freedom and human rights are central to the holy text. Hence, scholars like Wadud discourage the attempts of many feminists to misinterpret the holy text for their ends wrongfully. Hidayatullah opines that the solution lies in moving beyond the Quran as it “cannot fully reconcile with our understanding of sexual equality and justice (152). Weir feels that Islamic feminism has now reached a stage where they are “questioning the authority of the Quran and embracing freedom”; they now recognise that “god's will is the creation of social justice” and social justice requires the elimination of “relations of oppressions among human beings”(8).

### **Women in Turkey**

Many reforms were implemented to improve the status of women in Turkey under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal, the founder of modern Turkey. Yet there is still scope for much improvement. Some reforms included introducing a

civil code, voting rights, and equal rights in marriage, inheritance and child custody. Although it is a comparatively liberal Muslim nation, Turkey witnesses issues such as honour killing, child marriages, forced marriages, domestic violence, illiteracy etc. As feminism gained momentum, there was a divide between secular feminists and religious feminists, the latter insisting on religious freedom as in the case of attire, especially the headscarf. Yet, both groups worked together on other pressing issues and for the better status of women in the community. According to Art, the Islamic feminist in Turkey is interested in expanding opportunities in women's education, increasing employment opportunities and preventing violence.” (127).

### **Female characters in “10 Minutes and 38 Seconds in This Strange World.”**

Leila was raised by her father's first wife and had the misfortune of calling her real mother “auntie”. Her father, Haroun, was orthodox in his thoughts and expected his family members, especially the women, to obey him. He took decisions in the family based on the teachings of his religious teacher and as per the norms of the patriarchal society to preserve his family's honour. He expected his wives and daughter to be obedient, docile, pious, chaste, modest, untainted and respectable. When Leila was born, he named her “Leyla Afife Kamile”; her middle name meant chaste and untainted. He expected her to make him proud by being “true to the religion, nation and him” (27).

Although her father earned his living by selling fashionable clothes and accessories for women, he never encouraged the women of his household to use them. He was prejudiced against women who were liberal and considered women, in general, to be weak and emotional. As the novel progresses, he becomes increasingly religious and imposes more restrictions on the women of the household, especially Leila. He did not see any benefit in women being educated and preferred women to stay at home, attending to domestic duties, nor did he favour the idea of educating women. On the rare occasions they stepped out, they had to wear hijabs as ‘respectable’ women were expected to. The hijab, he believed, was “their

package, the armour that protected them from suggestive looks and unwanted touches" (38). He blindly believes a Sheik who advised him that women were like tomatoes and "nobody wanted tomatoes that were touched, squeezed and sullied by other customers" (38). Haroun was deeply worried about the growing influence of secularism in the country as he believed it was "the reign of Sheitan" and in opposition to God-made Sharia. When the preacher advised him to change his personal life to be closer to God, he imposed further restrictions on the women in the household; they were banned from watching TV, reading magazines and listening to music.

As she became a teenager, Leila became increasingly rebellious towards mounting restrictions. In protest, she bleached her hair and eyebrows, refused to wear a headscarf, got a tattoo, and covered her notebooks with pictures of singers. When she was caught wearing lipstick, her father called her "a damned whore" (103). "Leila soon discovers that everything in her life was either forbidden to her or predetermined by age-old familial codes." (180) Her biological mother, Bennaz, can be considered another victim of patriarchy in the novel. Hailing from a low-income family, she was married off young to lessen the financial burden on her family. On her wedding night, her husband gifts her a chain with three gold coins indicating the virtues she was expected to bring to the house – "youth, docility and fertility"(24). She had to tolerate her unhappy marriage as she was aware that her family would not take her back as it would shame them. Bennaz fears society and its norms; her financial dependence on her husband furthers her into the marriage. She is constantly reminded that she must bear children, preferably males. She was illiterate and felt like an uninvited guest at the house. She suffers several abortions, and when she finally gives birth to Leila, the baby is forcefully taken away from her to be raised by her husband's first wife. The fact that she had no say in this incident shatters her psychologically and physically.

At age six, Leila was sexually molested by her Uncle, who blackmailed her by making her believe it was her fault. This continued on several occasions over the years during family gatherings, and she

eventually became pregnant. When she revealed it to her family, they blamed her for bringing shame to the family. To "fix" the problem, they arranged for her to marry her uncle's son. Outraged, Leila retaliates and runs to Istanbul, hoping to start afresh. Unfortunately, she ends up in a brothel and eventually becomes a much-sought prostitute in Istanbul. She adopts Tequila Leila and matures into a bold and outspoken lady. Shafak, through Leila, portrays how prostitutes in the city are prejudiced and discriminated against. They are often subject to violent attacks; one such incident leads to Leila's death. The prostitutes often end up in brothels as they are left alone by their families, and their circumstances leave them helpless. Society doesn't care and ignores their livelihood and welfare but is quick to judge and side-line them. The author exposes the dual morality of society as the men who visit these prostitutes are never questioned or judged.

The question of prostitution is another focal point to which the author calls for our attention. As Seshu and Saraswathi state, over the years, feminists have argued: "that sex work reduces the female body to an object of sexual pleasure to be exploited in the marketplace by any male" (46). As Leila seeks a way to escape from a forceful marriage decided by her father, she is betrayed and sold into a brothel from which she finds no escape. Thus, she acquires an inferior status in society and is subjected to mockery, oppression, and physical and mental torture. She is disowned by her family, who refuses to accept even her dead body and is buried in the "Cemetery of the Companionless". She is denied dignity even in her death and faces discrimination for being a prostitute. "No Islamic burial rituals would be performed for this woman. Her body would not be washed by the next of kin, her hands would not be placed gently over her heart in a gesture of eternal peace" (189).

### **Discussion**

Decisions made by men dictate Leila's life, and its spin is out of her control, thus preventing her from leading a contented life. While explaining the male-centric dominations, Taheri agrees, "the destiny of a large number of female characters and

specifically Leila's is dictated by strict and man-centric laws that oppress ladies" (29). The only character that stands apart is the lady pharmacist, who is independent, bold and confident; hence she is looked down upon by the champions of patriarchy. Attulah (5770) recognises how "beautiful, tactic, homely girls" are promoted and how issues such as "education, women's economic rights, financial stability and individual freedom are overlooked completely" in the novel. As Mehdi and Abbasi highlight, "Leila's destiny was fixed and firmed simply by being born a female in an exceedingly male dominant society. The multiplied and procreated stigma associated with women trafficked for sexual violence is very common in our society and culture" (76).

The women in the novel are time and again compelled to fit into gender roles as dictated by society, family and religion. Blackstone (335) defines gender roles as "based on the different expectations individuals, groups, and societies have of individuals based on their sex and each society's values and beliefs about gender. Gender roles are the product of the interactions between individuals and their environments, and they give individuals cues about what sort of behaviour is believed to be appropriate for what sex."

Leila's life is dictated to and shaped by the norms of Islam and the patriarchal society forced upon her by her father, who constantly seeks advice from preachers. Being a bold and fun-loving woman, it becomes increasingly difficult for her to live in a household that constantly questions her independence and free will. Her rebellion affects her relationship with her family, especially with her father, who had hoped to nurture her into an ideal Muslim woman who would make him proud. Fajariya observes, "Leila's father would rather lose her daughter than be hated by neighbours, disrespected, and ostracised because of his daughter's behaviour which is traditionally seen as against the existing culture" (48).

The final nail in the coffin was her family's refusal to believe her claim that her uncle sexually abused her. According to Rehejeh, "In traditional societies, such as the Turkish one, the collectivistic

culture puts pressure on the family to hide the sexual abuse, all the more so if a member of the extended family committed it"(80). The family feared losing their reputation in society through the tainted daughter. The uncle is never questioned or punished as the victim; Leila is the one who suffers from exposing him. Her family's belief that this act could be covered up through a marriage with her attacker's son was beyond her comprehension. This broke her soul, and she decided to leave her home. It is interesting to note how her father, who had constantly guided the women in the family to remain modest to escape evil eyes, fails to stand by his daughter when she is raped under his roof.

Leila's family's decisions are triggered by their fear of orthodox society. Her father valued the honour of the family more than his daughter. Fearing he will lose his place in society, he chooses to disbelieve his daughter and hope to nullify the rape by marrying her to his brother's son. When Leila refuses, he threatens to cut off all ties with her. Islam observes that such cultures "consider a girl who ran away from her abuser more shameful" than the ones who decide to marry him. (256).

Ayub and Amna observe that the female characters of the novel are "the representatives of the females in the society out there that reflect women are not supposed to be paving their ways, making their own choices, having the lives they want to be and deviating from the societal norms that are completely gendered and masculine."(5779).

Besides the portrayal of Leila, the novel also deals with Zainab, Nalan and Humreah. Shafak uses these characters to depict the dual morality of society in the treatment of women and transgender people. Bennaz and Humreah are victims of child marriage and are denied a proper education. Humreah is also a victim of violence in marriage.

Her husband's in-laws place abuse and treat her like a servant, forcing her to seek asylum in Istanbul. However, she constantly fears for her life as she believes her husband might find her and murder her, as she taints her family's honour. Zainab, a dwarf by stature, leaves her village hoping to build a better life in Istanbul. But the city treats her differently because of her physical disability, and

she is forced into prostitution. Nalen, once a man, flees his family when he is forced to marry a woman against his wishes. In Istanbul, he changes his gender but fails to gain a respectable societal position.

Islamic feminist champions the cause of women like Leila, urging for a reinterpretation of the holy text to uphold their dignity as human beings. Hidayattullah points out that current notions of gender equality might not often coincide with the verses of the Quran: "we have sometimes tried to make the Qur'an mean what we want it to mean, manipulating the text in our desire to derive textual support for our notions of justice" (151). The need for reinterpretation and explanation of the Quran "from the perspective of women" seems to be the need of the hour to ensure the security and prosperity of women everywhere (Gurkhan and Barut, 491). As Hassan (248) highlights, "justice is a prerequisite for peace, and peace is a prerequisite for human development.

### Conclusion

The novel provokes uncomfortable questions about circumstances that force women into prostitution and the discriminatory and cruel treatment they receive from society. Those women face exploitation in the name of religion, as bought forth by Islamic feminists. The conditioning of women from an early age, both by religion and patriarchy, creates unhappy individuals who can never be their true selves. As Nihad states in Turkey, "women are treated as the other," and as per "the code of social conduct in the Middle Eastern societies, women are always defined in relation with one of the male relatives" (2902). They constantly censor themselves to fit the prescribed codes and are never allowed to follow dreams and have ambitions of their own. Preserving family honour forces them to be meek, docile, and submissive. The suffocation and the lack of free will that women experiences in such stifled environments are voiced through the characters of Bennaz, Leila and her social outcaste friends. Al Salami opines that Shafak, by portraying women as passive individuals who live their lives based on a script that men write, is forcing the reader to "rethink the way we treat the lesser privileged amongst us." (30)

Women, like men, can contribute actively towards the progress of society; hence, they must be nurtured, recognising their individuality, choices and aspirations. Female suppression and biased social norms are not indicators of a modern and progressive society.

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