

# Reconstructing the Self: Memory as Narrative in Elif Shafak's *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World*

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## Abstract:

This paper explores the role of memory as a narrative act in the reconstruction of selfhood in Elif Shafak's *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World*. Through the fragmented recollections of Tequila Leila in the final moments of her consciousness, Shafak crafts a rich narrative in which memory becomes not just a recollection of the past but a dynamic process of identity formation. Drawing on Paul Ricoeur's theory of narrative identity and the structuring of time through narrative. This study argues that memory serves as a mediating force that enables the protagonist to reclaim agency over her life story, even in death. Ricoeur contends that individuals construct their sense of self through the narratives they tell about their past, and this framework is vital in understanding how Leila's memories become a final act of self-authorship. This paper concludes that Shafak's novel enacts a form of narrative memory that transcends biological death, situating memory as both a literary and existential form of survival.

**Keywords:** memory, narrative, identity, selfhood, liminal, agency

## Introduction

Memory studies is an interdisciplinary field that investigates how individuals and communities remember, forget, and construct meaning from the past. Foundational theorists like Maurice Halbwachs argue that "it is in society that people normally acquire their memories" (Halbwachs 38), emphasizing that memory is not solely individual but shaped by collective frameworks. More recently, scholars such as Paul Ricoeur have explored the narrative dimensions of memory, proposing that memory functions as a temporal and interpretive process rather than a static record. In *Memory, History, Forgetting*, Ricoeur writes, "To be forgotten is to die twice" (Ricoeur 412), illustrating the moral imperative of remembrance. Within literature, memory operates not only as a theme but as a crucial narrative device, structuring time, character, and identity in ways that reflect the complex, layered workings of the human mind.

As a narrative device, memory enables authors to disrupt linear storytelling and craft plots that reflect the fragmented and associative nature of human recollection. Through literary techniques such as flashbacks, stream-of-consciousness, and sensory triggers, memory injects subjectivity and emotional depth into the narrative. Ricoeur's theory of *narrative identity* is

especially relevant here: “The narrative constructs the identity of the character, what can be called his or her narrative identity, in constructing that of the story told” (*Time and Narrative* 246). In this sense, memory allows characters to reinterpret past experiences, engage in acts of self-reclamation, and articulate identities that may have been obscured or denied. It is through this narrative process that literature not only mirrors consciousness but also participates in the formation of meaning and selfhood.

Moreover, memory as a narrative device carries ethical and political weight, particularly in stories centered on trauma, marginalization, or erasure. Marianne Hirsch’s concept of *postmemory* captures this dynamic, referring to the “experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are displaced by the stories of the previous generation” (Hirsch 22). Such stories, often found in postcolonial or feminist literature, use memory to challenge official histories and recover silenced voices. Literature that engages memory in this way performs a dual function: it provides a formal structure and serves as a medium of cultural critique and resistance. Thus, memory as a narrative device is not merely a storytelling tool—it becomes a means of bearing witness, affirming identity, and confronting the politics of forgetting.

In the liminal space between life and death, memory unfolds not only as a record of lived experience but as a final act of storytelling. Elif Shafak’s *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World* presents a haunting and poetic portrayal of this threshold, capturing the last flickers of consciousness in the protagonist Tequila Leila as she remembers key moments from her life. These memories, disjointed yet vivid, serve as narrative anchors through which her identity is reconstructed, reasserted, and rehumanised in the face of societal erasure. Shafak’s novel thus offers fertile ground for exploring how memory functions as a narrative mechanism through which marginalized identities are formed, challenged, and preserved.

This paper examines the novel through the lens of Paul Ricoeur’s theory of narrative identity, which posits that individuals come to understand themselves through the stories they construct about their past. In *Time and Narrative and Oneself as Another*, Ricoeur argues that memory and narrative are deeply interwoven, with narrative functioning as a medium through which temporality and identity are both structured and interpreted. For Ricoeur, identity is not static or essential but dialogic and temporal—an ongoing negotiation between past, present, and the imagined future. Applying this framework to Shafak’s novel, the paper explores how Leila’s memories—though fleeting and filtered through trauma and longing—allow her to engage in an act of self-authorship. In these final moments, she reclaims her story from the margins where she has been relegated, using memory as a form of narrative agency.

Moreover, the novel’s non-linear structure, shaped by episodic recollections associated with sensory triggers—taste, scent, and sound—mirrors the nature of autobiographical memory itself. These sensuous remembrances resist the rationalist and chronological demands of traditional biography, instead foregrounding the affective and associative logic of the inner self. Shafak’s choice to narrate the novel through Leila’s posthumous consciousness further destabilizes

linear temporality, creating a narrative space where memory serves not only as recollection but as resistance—against death, invisibility, and dispossession.

### **Memory as a Narrative Device**

Elif Shafak structures *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World* around the protagonist's post-mortem memory, using it as the central narrative device. The novel opens with the striking line: "*Her name was Tequila Leila, but not always. Once upon a time, long before she was ever called that, she was known as Leyla Afife Kamile.*" (Shafak 3). From the first page, Shafak signals that identity is layered and mutable, accessible through memory. This temporal dislocation—beginning with death and unfolding through retrospective episodes—places memory at the narrative's core, guiding the reader through Leila's life in reverse. Each minute of her posthumous consciousness recalls a pivotal memory, constructing a mosaic of her identity while defying the linear constraints of time and life.

Shafak employs sensory memory as a narrative technique, using taste and smell to unlock recollections. For example, "*In the first minute, Leila's mind conjured up the taste of cardamom coffee...*" (Shafak 5). This flavor immediately transports her—and the reader—back to her childhood in Van, where she watched her mother prepare coffee in silence. The use of sensory triggers functions like Proust's madeleine, anchoring emotional memory in physical sensation. Each minute that follows is similarly attached to a sensorial prompt, providing a portal to a significant moment in Leila's life. This technique reinforces the psychological realism of memory: fragmented, affective, and often rooted in the body.

Shafak's novel resists chronological storytelling, embracing the fragmented structure of memory itself. Leila's recollections jump across time—from childhood trauma to friendships formed in Istanbul—emphasizing how memory does not follow a straight path but emerges in emotionally charged fragments. This aligns with Paul Ricoeur's idea that memory, when narrated, reshapes temporal experience: "*Time becomes human time to the extent that it is organized after the manner of a narrative*" (*Time and Narrative* 3). In Shafak's narrative, time is humanized through Leila's subjective experience, where the past is not distant but vividly present, collapsing temporal boundaries and reassembling her identity through memory.

Memory in the novel also acts as resistance against the erasure of marginalized identities. Leila, a sex worker discarded in death, reclaims her voice through the act of remembering. As the narrator states, "*Just because she had died didn't mean she had stopped thinking*" (Shafak 1). This defiance of death through memory allows Shafak to foreground the inner life of someone whom society renders invisible. The very structure of the novel—delaying death's finality by stretching consciousness across ten minutes—challenges the idea that lives like Leila's are disposable. Her memories narrate a fuller, richer identity than the one assigned to her by social stigma, emphasizing the political power of narrative memory.

Memory is also instrumental in portraying Leila's relationships, especially with her found family of misfits. In one recollection, she remembers: "*She had always believed that family was not made of blood but of love and shared secrets*" (Shafak 176). These remembered bonds

contradict the biological family that rejected her and offer an alternative narrative of belonging. Through memory, Shafak reconstructs a web of solidarity and love that stands in contrast to the cruelty Leila experienced from kin and state alike. This reconfiguration of memory allows readers to understand the emotional truth of Leila's life, highlighting the relational nature of memory as narrative.

Finally, Shafak stretches memory beyond the limits of physical life, suggesting that narrative itself offers continuity after death. In the last pages, even after Leila's bodily functions cease, her memory lives on through her friends' stories. "*She was no longer with them, not in the way they wanted. But she lived in their memories, in every word they whispered about her*" (Shafak 284). This collective memory continues the narrative she began, echoing Ricoeur's belief that narrative identity is not a solitary endeavor but one shaped in dialogue with others. Thus, memory, both individual and communal, becomes the thread that sustains identity, making the narrative an act of survival and remembrance.

### **Narrative as Post-memory**

In *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World*, Elif Shafak constructs a narrative that resonates with the theoretical framework of postmemory, a concept developed by Marianne Hirsch to describe the relationship of second-generation survivors to the traumatic experiences of the past. While Hirsch originally coined *postmemory* in relation to the children of Holocaust survivors, the concept has since expanded to encompass inherited or culturally transmitted trauma, especially among marginalized communities. Shafak's protagonist, Tequila Leila, occupies a position that mirrors postmemorial subjectivity—not through biological inheritance, but through the social and emotional legacies of trauma passed down in a patriarchal, oppressive culture. Leila's memories often carry the emotional residue of others' pain—her birth mother's silence, her stepmother's bitterness, and the generational cycles of violence against women. These recollections are not simply personal; they are imprinted with collective trauma, making her narrative one of inherited sorrow.

Hirsch describes postmemory as arising when "the experiences of the previous generation are transmitted to the next so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right" (*The Generation of Postmemory* 5). This framework is particularly relevant in Leila's recollections of her birth mother, who was exiled from her life in early childhood and whose absence becomes a haunting presence. Though Leila has no direct memory of their relationship, she reconstructs her mother's pain through fragments—"She had no photographs of her mother, no keepsakes... but the scent of rosewater always reminded her of the woman who had once held her and never held her again" (Shafak 23). This sensory memory becomes a vehicle for postmemory, as Leila feels and narrates a history that she did not fully witness but nonetheless internalizes as her own. The gap between lived experience and emotional inheritance is bridged through narrative, where storytelling becomes a tool of reclamation.

Postmemory also shapes Leila's connection with her chosen family, particularly her friends who, like her, carry the burden of exclusion, stigma, and social trauma. Their stories intertwine

with hers, creating a network of remembered pain and shared resilience. As Hirsch explains, “postmemory is not identical to memory: it is ‘post,’ but at the same time, it approximates memory in its affective force and its psychic effects” (*Family Frames* 22). In this way, the narrative structure of the novel—built on flashbacks, overlapping lives, and emotionally charged recollections—reflects the workings of postmemory. Leila and her friends engage in acts of storytelling that resemble therapeutic re-narrations of trauma, offering not only individual catharsis but collective validation. Their friendship becomes a sanctuary where the past can be told, retold, and perhaps transformed.

Leila’s posthumous narration—memories surfacing during the ten minutes her brain remains active after death—also aligns with Hirsch’s understanding of *postmemory as a belated form of remembrance that emerges after rupture or loss*. Shafak stretches this concept to its literal extreme: the protagonist is remembering after the ultimate rupture—death. Yet, even then, memory does not cease. This spectral mode of narration embodies Hirsch’s idea that postmemory arises “when the connection to the past is mediated not by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation” (*The Generation of Postmemory* 107). Leila’s mind fills the narrative space with memories charged with affective intensity, seeking coherence and dignity in a life denied both by society. Her imaginative return to formative experiences, filtered through pain and longing, becomes a postmemorial act of identity construction—an afterlife of memory.

Moreover, the novel challenges dominant historical narratives by centering the stories of sex workers, trans individuals, and migrants—figures often erased from public memory. The use of postmemory in this context becomes a political act. As Hirsch asserts, “acts of remembrance are also acts of resistance” (*Family Frames* 43). Leila’s memories, and those of her friends, defy the institutional forgetting that often follows marginalized death. Even after she is buried in the Cemetery of the Companionless, her memory is reactivated by the living—those who remember her with love. The persistence of her story in the minds and voices of others exemplifies postmemory’s power to counteract erasure and reconstruct legacy through narrative.

Thus, Shafak’s novel exemplifies postmemory as both content and form—embedding inherited trauma within its characters and mimicking its structure through non-linear, emotionally charged narration. Leila’s voice, though silenced in death, reverberates through the memories of others, enacting what Hirsch calls “an afterlife of the past, one that can be re-inhabited through narrative and imagination” (*The Generation of Postmemory* 105). In this way, *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World* becomes a testament to the enduring power of postmemory, where storytelling bridges generational wounds and asserts the right to be remembered.

While Marianne Hirsch’s theory of postmemory provides the foundation for understanding inherited trauma, scholars like Dominick LaCapra emphasize the ethical dimension of narrating trauma that is not one’s own. LaCapra distinguishes between *acting out* and *working through*, suggesting that narratives rooted in postmemory must avoid merely repeating trauma and

instead aim to process it meaningfully (LaCapra 70). In Shafak's novel, Leila's reconstruction of her mother's abandonment, her sexual abuse, and her marginalization does not spiral into repetition; rather, it becomes a space for insight and agency. The retrospective voice of the narrative—delivered after death—suggests a form of “working through” that provides clarity and continuity, allowing Leila to reclaim her identity through the narration of events that were previously disempowering. Shafak thus positions narrative as a form of *posthumous healing*, where the retelling of postmemorial trauma becomes a final assertion of subjectivity.

Moreover, memory as a narrative act often involves what Annette Kuhn terms *memory work*: a conscious engagement with the past that reinterprets and sometimes reconstructs memory in dialogue with the present. Kuhn writes, “Memory work... makes visible the collective nature of the activity of remembering and the materiality of its effects” (Kuhn 12). In *10 Minutes 38 Seconds*, Leila's memories are not isolated monologues but are situated within a larger collective of the marginalized—her friends Nalan, Zaynab, Jameelah, Humeyra, and Sinan—all of whom contribute to a collective archive of trauma and resilience. Their stories intersect with hers, forming a memory network in which remembering becomes an act of solidarity. Shafak uses Leila's memory not just to narrate an individual life but to foreground forgotten or silenced histories. In this way, memory work becomes a feminist and political narrative strategy that challenges dominant discourses of morality, death, and remembrance.

Further supporting this collective aspect of postmemory is Aleida Assmann's theory of *cultural memory*, which distinguishes between personal memory and broader, socially shared forms of remembrance. Assmann notes that cultural memory is “institutionalized, canonized, and mediated through symbolic forms” (Assmann 8), but it also opens a space for counter-narratives. However, the novel itself functions as a counter-memory: a narrative space where the voiceless are remembered in vivid, dignified detail. Through Leila's memories and the continued remembrance by her friends, Shafak resists the state's attempt to discard her story. The novel thus transforms personal postmemory into cultural memory, creating a literary monument for the marginalised dead and asserting the enduring political power of storytelling.

### **Liminal hovering in the narrative**

Elif Shafak's *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World* is deeply invested in the theme of liminality—the state of being in-between, on the threshold of transformation or exclusion. The very structure of the novel is framed by a liminal moment: Leila is dead, yet her mind remains active for precisely ten minutes and thirty-eight seconds. During this threshold between life and death, memory becomes her means of resistance and self-reclamation. As Victor Turner explains in his work on liminality, “Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial” (*The Ritual Process* 95). Leila exists in this exact betwixt-and-between space—not fully alive, yet not entirely gone. In occupying this space, she also resists the social norms that defined her as disposable in life.

This concept of liminality also extends to Leila's identity as a sex worker in Istanbul—a figure situated on the margins of social and moral acceptability. Her social position is doubly liminal: both physically cast out from mainstream society and symbolically denied dignity in death. As Homi Bhabha argues in *The Location of Culture*, liminal spaces can also become “the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity” (Bhabha 2). Through her memories, Leila narrates a self that defies the labels placed upon her, shifting from victim to storyteller. Her body, dumped in a garbage bin, may be erased, but her narrative voice reclaims her agency. Shafak thus uses liminality not only as a state of suspension but also as a site of narrative and political potential.

Additionally, the Cemetery of the Companionless, where Leila is buried, is itself a liminal space—a zone of exclusion between the remembered and the forgotten. The cemetery functions as a symbolic threshold where societal outcasts are buried without ritual or recognition. According to Arnold van Gennep, liminal spaces mark transitions between significant phases in life, and he notes that “such transitions are often marked by ambiguity, openness, and indeterminacy” (*The Rites of Passage* 11). The cemetery embodies this indeterminacy, yet Shafak transforms it into a space of rehumanization through narrative. Leila's friends, themselves liminal figures—trans, disabled, migrant, queer—literally and metaphorically cross boundaries to give her a proper burial. Their act resists the city's attempt to erase her memory, transforming the liminal into a space of belonging and ethical re-entry into communal memory. Leila's body itself becomes a site of liminality—not just as a corpse suspended between life and death, but as a body that transgressed normative gender and sexual codes in life. Her life as a sex worker placed her in the ambiguous zone between desire and disgrace, between visibility and erasure. This ambiguity reflects what Julia Kristeva calls the *abject*—that which is cast out by society to maintain the illusion of purity and order. Kristeva notes, “It is not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order” (*Powers of Horror* 4). Leila's existence as a woman who refuses prescribed norms—sexual, familial, religious—marks her as abject in the eyes of the state and society. Her murder and the disposal of her body in a dumpster become a literal act of abjection. Yet, Shafak's narrative reclaims that very body through memory, bringing it back into symbolic and narrative space.

This liminal condition is also mirrored in the lives of Leila's friends, each of whom embodies a threshold identity. Nalan, a transgender woman, lives between genders in a society that refuses to accept her full personhood. Zaynab<sup>122</sup>, a woman with dwarfism, is treated as spectacle and outsider. These characters exist in what Gloria Anzaldúa famously described as the *borderlands*—the “in-between space” where “the contradictions rub together and blow sparks of transformation” (*Borderlands/La Frontera* 19). By choosing friendship over biology, and love over law, this found family creates a liminal community, where their outsider statuses become sources of mutual recognition and strength. Shafak situates the novel in this space of contradiction and solidarity, where liminality does not signify loss but radical connection.

The city of Istanbul itself is portrayed as a liminal space—geographically bridging Europe and Asia, culturally suspended between tradition and modernity. Shafak's Istanbul is not merely a setting but a metaphor for the in-betweenness her characters inhabit. As Leila reflects on her

life, the city becomes a palimpsest of memory, trauma, and desire. Urban scholar Edward Soja suggests that “liminal urban spaces... are often the sites of resistance, redefinition, and spatial justice” (*Thirdspace* 60). Istanbul, for Shafak, becomes a character that both oppresses and liberates. Its alleys and cemeteries, brothels and mosques, represent competing forces that mark and re-mark the bodies of its inhabitants. Leila's last journey—from the alley where she is dumped to the Cemetery of the Companionless and finally to her chosen burial—reclaims the cityscape as a space of narrative agency.

Finally, the act of memory itself functions as a liminal device within the novel. Leila's memories unfold in a zone of consciousness that is neither fully physical nor spiritual—a psychological threshold. Her recollections do not follow linear time but emerge episodically, emotionally, and sensorially. This temporality echoes what Mikhail Bakhtin terms the *chronotope*, or the narrative time-space where events unfold with thematic significance. Bakhtin writes that in the chronotope, “time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible” (*Dialogic Imagination* 84). In Leila's dying minutes, time is indeed thickened: each minute becomes a vessel for a lifetime of emotion and meaning. This collapse of temporal boundaries further situates the narrative within the realm of liminality, where past and present, life and death, pain and healing converge through the storytelling act.

## Conclusion

Elif Shafak's *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World* powerfully demonstrates how memory operates as both a personal and political narrative device. By structuring the novel around the protagonist's final moments, Shafak allows memory to function not just as recollection, but as reclamation. Leila's life, marginalized and silenced by societal norms, finds coherence and meaning in her own memories. These recollections, emerging at the boundary between life and death, offer a counter-narrative to the dominant stories that have excluded her. As Annette Kuhn argues, “memory texts are not simply records of the past but acts of remembering that shape and reshape identity” (*Family Secrets* 5). In this novel, memory becomes an act of resistance and self-definition, especially for characters whose lives are routinely devalued.

The episodic unfolding of Leila's past, through sensory triggers like the taste of salted goat's cheese or the smell of cardamom, turns memory into a richly layered storytelling technique. Rather than presenting a linear biography, Shafak mirrors the fragmentary nature of remembrance, using narrative to reconstruct moments that define Leila's emotional world. These fragments are not isolated; they are woven together to form a mosaic of lived experience. This approach aligns with broader theories in memory studies which suggest that memory is inherently narrative in structure—selective, subjective, and shaped by context (Erl 4). Through this narrative method, Shafak not only tells Leila's story but critiques the systems that attempt to erase it, showing how memory can subvert forgetting and offer visibility to the forgotten.

Paul Ricoeur's theory of narrative identity supports this reading—particularly his idea that “to be a self is to be able to recount oneself” (*Time and Narrative* vol. 3, 246). Shafak also moves



beyond the philosophical to the deeply human. Her novel engages memory as a lived, embodied experience, intertwined with trauma, friendship, culture, and place. Memory, in this context, is not merely a tool of identity formation, but a space of dignity, survival, and connection. In giving voice to the silenced and allowing memory to shape the narrative, the novel becomes a literary act of remembering, challenging who is deemed worthy of a story, and insisting on the humanity of those on the margins.

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