

Reclamation of the Istanbul City and the Migrant Flâneuse in Elif Shafak's *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World*

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Abstract

The paper argues that Elif Shafak's novel, 10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World, constructs a counter-narrative to Istanbul's existing narratives as a cosmopolitan city by recounting the lived bodily experiences of a migrant flâneuse. These experiences, rich in sensory descriptions, subvert and reclaim the conventional idea of a female flâneur or a flâneuse as a prostitute. They map the topography, the architectural and physical functions of the city, Istanbul and its history through the lived experiences, flânerie and memories of the sex worker, Leila, who migrated from rural Van to Istanbul. The paper explores the multiple ways in which the novel constructs the city architecturally with a language familiar to a streetwalker. This narrative of a city from the marginalised migrant community allows one to consider spaces as gendered and highly hierarchical in terms of nationality, religion and ethnicity. The paper attempts to understand this complex narrative of the urban history of Istanbul that dismantles patriarchally constructed notions of flânerie, migration, the city and its histories. The paper contends that the novel also provides an alternative vision and narrative for constructing a fluid cosmopolitan Istanbul, a she-city that is not fashioned by the sovereign state.

Keywords: flânerie, Istanbul, prostitution, architecture, cosmopolitanism, nationalism

Introduction

In 2003, the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality launched a project named “My City Istanbul”, which included sightseeing tours, coffeehouse talks, innumerable billboards, books and booklets with the objective of nurturing a sense of belonging among the inhabitants of Istanbul by narrating its history. This project was widely criticised as it appeared to be removed from the realities of the city's migrant population. It also stymied the possibility of constructing an

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urban identity that allows one to overcome the dichotomy of being an Istanbulite and a migrant in the city. The next year its tenure was not renewed, and Savas Özbey points out that “maybe the starting point of the project was erroneous, more emphasis should have been placed on the mutual points, a definition of Istanbulite should have been made based on what is being shared in this place” (Cengiz 2021, 5). Elif Shafak’s *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World* emphasises this kind of need to frame the city by recounting shared experiences of both the natives and the migrants of Istanbul city. The novel presents the lived experiences of a rural female migrant named Leila who rarely occupies a place in the state-authored narratives on Istanbul. At the beginning of the novel, the narrator states that “The Istanbul that Leila had known was not the Istanbul that the Ministry of Tourism would have wanted foreigners to see” (Shafak 2019, 2). Leila’s depiction of the city problematises the perception of Istanbul as a cosmopolitan city. The pre-existing narratives express a longing for Ottoman’s cosmopolitan Istanbul and possess an anti-migrant sentiment towards its rural migrants. The nostalgic recounting of the city that permeated literary works of the 1990s lamented the disappearance of non-Muslim minorities, and this was imagined to be a consequence of the occupancy of rural migrants (Cengiz *op. cit.*, 1-2).

The focus on rural migrants and particularly female migrants in Istanbul gained some importance in the area of urban studies by the late twentieth century. The need to explore the experiences of female migrants in a city came to the notice of sociologists in the late twentieth century or 1990s (Kaska 2020, 42). Similar to the phenomenon of migration which was a by-product of modernisation, the notion of a flâneur also emerged as cities came into existence. In the public spheres of Paris in the nineteenth century, a man who took an interest in the city and leisurely strolls was named a flâneur. It was only in the 1990s that feminist scholars started contesting the idea of flâneur being a male figure. The cultural sociologist Janet Wolff (1985), in “The Invisible Flâneuse: Women and the Literature of Modernity”, elaborates on the dominance of men’s experience in the literature of modernity. She points out that though the history of the emergence of modernity and its characteristics may differ in different accounts, the common concern regarding “the public world of work, politics and city life” remains the same.

Interestingly, these are areas where women are excluded and their experiences invisibilised (ibid., 37). This, in a way, defined the public sphere as a masculine domain. Wolff criticises Baudelaire’s essays and poems which have the presence of female city-dwellers, for instance, the ‘prostitute’ that appears in the poem, ‘Le Crépuscule du Soir’ (Baudelaire 1985, 277) and ‘The Painter of Modern Life’ (Baudelaire 1964, 44) evokes contradictory emotions of admiration and disgust. Though the accounts of Charles Baudelaire and Walter Benjamin (1973) on flânerie overlook the possibility of women becoming passionate spectators of public spaces, feminist critics often pointed out the subtle ways in which women’s experiences were subdued and denigrated by referring to prostitution as the female version of flânerie¹.

In *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World*, the stories recorded from the streets and experiences of a female migrant flâneur, Tequila Leila, interweave memories evoked by one's embodied experiences in the city. Rich in sensory descriptions, these stories subvert and reclaim the conventional idea of a female flâneur or a flâneuse as a prostitute. They map the topography, the architectural and physical functions of the city, Istanbul and its history through the lived experiences, flânerie and memories of the sex worker, Leila, who migrated from Van to Istanbul. The novel constructs the city architecturally with a language that is familiar to a streetwalker. It is important to consider this alternative narrative of a city provided by the marginalised migrant community, as it has the potential to build a new consciousness of urban spaces that allows one to consider spaces as gendered and highly hierarchical in terms of nationality, religion and ethnicity. It also provides a complex narrative of urban history that dismantles patriarchally constructed notions of flânerie, migration, the city and its histories. The initial part of the paper discusses the sensory descriptions from the memory of the migrant flâneuse that allow her to provide an alternative narrative to the state-authored historical narratives of the city. It also considers the central character, Leila's friends' experiences as migrant sex workers and how the notion of citizen allows the state to identify them as disease carriers and, thus, justify the disciplining of their bodies and their exclusion from public spaces. The paper contends that the masculinist narratives of the nation-state treat marginalised migrant women as not citizens but mere objects devoid of any rights. The paper concludes that the depiction of Istanbul as a she-city challenges the dominant and homogenising narratives of the city as cosmopolitan and envisions the city's future from a woman's point of view. This view presents Istanbul as a fluid city, thereby considering an alternative view of a cosmopolitan city that is not designed, engineered and regulated by a sovereign state.

The Migrant Flâneuse's Istanbul

Unlike a flâneur whose presence in an urban space is not interrogated, the presence of the migrant flâneuse, Tequila Leila, is perceived to be policed and regulated. However, her embodied experiences allow her to both reclaim and construct the city from her vulnerable position in an urban space. Though there exist many discursively constructed notions of a flâneur, Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson (1994) argues that the flâneur should be a solitary figure and companionship of any sort is undesirable: "Flânerie requires the city and its crowds, yet the flâneur remains aloof from both" (27). It can be argued that the male flâneur often acts like a disembodied entity with an eye for the details of the city. In contrast to this engagement with the city, the novel *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World* presents Leila's engagement with the city as one that occurs in the company of her friends and is rich in sensory accounts. Leila's memories of Istanbul are mediated by her sensory experiences that are historically and culturally constructed. The flâneuse here, being a migrant and a female sex-worker, exercises a conscious engagement with the city and takes advantage of her familiarity with the city and the everyday sensory encounters with the city. As Alan

Bairner (2006) says, “The flâneur’s interest is stimulated not only by the city’s physical landscape but also its smells, its sounds and snippets of conversations that are overheard as he wanders” (127). It is not a romanticised notion of a flâneuse that Leila represents, one who has the luxury of being anonymous and time for leisurely wandering through the city. Her freedom and mobility in the city are highly regulated and disciplined by the police force of the state. In the novel, Leila is forced into sex work after migrating to Istanbul, and her very appearance makes her hypervisible in the crowd. Though conventionally, a female flâneur was perceived as a streetwalker, Leila opens the possibility of reclaiming this identity so as to visibilise histories of inequality, discrimination, and social ostracisation of migrant and marginalised women that a hegemonic narrative of a cosmopolitan Istanbul city might erase.

Leila’s memories of the neighbourhood of her brothel to present enable the narrator to construct an alternative perspective to the chronologically arranged and reason-based historical narratives of the city. The narrator says, “... human memory resembles a late-night reveller who has had a few too many drinks: hard as it tries, it just cannot follow a straight line. It staggers through a maze of inversions, often moving in dizzying zigzags, immune to reason and liable to collapse altogether” (Shafak 2019, 45). The sensory description of Istanbul city enhances the ephemeral and permanent qualities of the city. The narrator says, “Smells of tobacco, sweat, perfume, fried food and an occasional reefer- albeit illegal- mingled with the briny sea air” (Shafak 2019, 46). Three minutes after Leila’s heart stops, she remembers cardamom coffee – strong, intense, dark, a taste forever associated in her mind with the streets of brothels in Istanbul (Shafak 2019, 45). These ephemeral sensory experiences, in a way, allow Leila to establish an intimate relationship with Istanbul city, though traditionally Muslim women’s presence in public spaces was constrained. Her memories of these public spaces and their smells challenge the conventional view of women being docile bodies and carve a public self that lays claim on city spaces.

Leila’s wandering through the city and her bodily engagements with the spaces around her brothel allow her to give an architectural account of the place. The very panoramic description of the location of her house which happens to be both her home and workplace, situated between a church and a synagogue, among lamp shops and kebab shops- “the street that harboured the oldest licensed brothels in Istanbul” lays out the architectural distribution of institutions which are presented in the cartographic image of Istanbul presented soon after the dedication of the novel (Shafak 2019, 45). Leila remembers remnants of a past no longer remembered by documenting the material structures that surpass and outlive the challenges of a monolithic history created by Kemalism: “September 1967- A dead-end street down by the harbour, just a stone’s throw from the port of Karaköy, near the Golden Horn, extending between rows of licensed brothels. There was an Armenian school nearby, a Greek church, a Sephardic synagogue, a Sufi lodge, and a Russian Orthodox chapel” (Shafak 2019, 45). The district, Leila remembers, was once a thriving commercial waterfront and home to Levantine and Jewish communities and the hub of Ottoman banking and shipping industries

that witnessed a different kind of transactions than the money-changing hands that she sees in the present. The remnants of religious institutions that remain in the streets are reminders of a time before the first world war. It is said that “until World War I, the city had a significant minority population comprising Greeks, Sephardic Jews and Armenians. . . . A series of events following World War I provoked the minority population’s² decline in Istanbul” (Cengiz *op. cit.*, 66). However, after World War I and the Kemalist regime made Ankara the capital of the Turkish Republic, the migrant communities started leaving the country out of fear of losing their lives. Because of Turkey’s international political and economic relations post World War II, Istanbul city received two major waves of migration. They comprised the arrival of Turkish migrants from Balkan countries and rural migrants from Anatolia (*ibid.*, 66-68). Thus, the narrator probably covers these socio-political shifts that occurred over a period of four decades by mapping the religious institutions of different belief systems and the changing migrant population of the city.

Spaces, Histories and Politics of Inclusivity

The popular accounts of Istanbul city present the land as one with a cosmopolitan culture and many opportunities for its inhabitants to flourish. However, the novel, by focusing on the marginalised sex workers of Istanbul who have come from different regions and countries, uncovers the relationship between history, politics, sexuality and moral standards. It was in the city of Istanbul that a man and his businesswoman sold Leila’s body to different men of various ages and backgrounds. Leila was raised in a family highly influenced by Islamic belief, wherein men had patriarchal control over women. It was the ill-treatment and sexual assault meted out to Leila in her house that forced her to migrate to a city like Istanbul. The different ways by which Leila and her migrant friends – Nostalgia Nalan, Humeyra, Zaynab and Jameelah – are all drawn into sex work to make a living, unravel the effect of Turkey’s liberalisation of the economy and introduction of liberal policies on the poor migrants, particularly women and transgender people. When Leila reached Istanbul, she thought she was absolutely aware of the ways of the city, Istanbul. The narrator says, “What she failed to see earlier, she saw now: the doors were padlocked, the windows sealed, and Istanbul was not a city of opportunities, but a city of scars” (Shafak *op. cit.*, 113). The metaphorical description of a city as one of the scars draws attention to the vulnerability and decay afflicting the city’s marginalised section. It includes “the street of ill-repute” (*ibid.*, 46) with brothels, a few minutes walk from the harbour. In contrast to the visual appeal of the place which is illuminated with naked bulbs of indigo, magenta, lilac, and ruby which are turned on in the evenings when ezan reverberates over the city, the physicality of the space in the brothel mirrors the deteriorating state of brothels that need revival. The narrator says, “The air was thickened by the scent of cheap perfume, the taps encrusted with deposits of limescale and the ceiling coated with the sticky brown stains of nicotine and tar from years of tobacco smoke” (*ibid.*, 46). The deteriorating state of brothels draws one’s attention to the rights of its inhabitants to the city and the state’s indifference to the conditions in which its citizens are forced to live.

The symbols of decay and deterioration that one finds in the descriptions of the brothel make one reflect upon the living conditions and the dehumanisation of the women who live inside it. The large handwritten sign framed in metal beside the brothel that addresses a responsible “Citizen” casts a prostitute as a carrier of syphilis and other sexually transmitted diseases. Leila’s room on the second floor was considered the best location in the house only because she could easily be heard from downstairs if she encountered any danger. The very description of her room also suggests the vulnerability a sex worker encounters in her everyday life. The only window in Leila’s room faced the back premises, a small courtyard with a single tree and a dilapidated building with a furniture workshop. Inside it, around forty men, half of whom were illegal migrants, worked for thirteen hours a day, inhaling dust, varnish and chemicals. She kept that window covered which, in a way, shows how spaces and the very architecture of a building discipline and affect one’s body. The whole area appears to be a place that is reserved for people who are not considered viable citizens in the eyes of the state and, therefore, allowed to be exploited by the population of “acceptable” citizens.

Despite the vulnerability of the inhabitants of the brothel, its material composition that suggests decay also suggests the survival of the brothels and the profession of prostitution over decades and centuries. The brothel owner, Bitter Ma, who runs it with license, claims that it was founded in the nineteenth century by Sultan Abdülaziz and keeps a framed portrait of the Sultan behind her desk until one day a client with ultra-nationalist leanings counters her claims. He says, “An ignorant woman has no right to distort history... There were no licensed brothels in the Ottoman Empire. If a few ladies wished to ply their trade on the sly, they must have been Christians or Jews- or heathen Gypsies. Because I’m telling you, no proper Muslim woman would ever have agreed to such immorality. They’d rather have died of hunger than agreed to sell themselves. Until now, that is. Modern times, immodest times” (ibid., 48). This offers a sanitised version of prostitution, wherein the possibility of a Muslim woman being a prostitute is negated in order to cast the migrants of the minority population as the ones tainting the city. It also lays open the constructed and contradictory nature of the country and Istanbul’s history, presenting the country as a pluralistic yet Muslim-dominated and seemingly secular and, thus, modern nation.

In contrast to Bitter Ma’s clients’ observation, Mark David Wyers (2017) in “Selling Sex in Istanbul” states that in Ottoman Istanbul, which was a bustling multi-ethnic, multireligious city, prostitution underwent periods of suppression and toleration, but it was a regular feature of the urban landscape and was carried out by women from all religious backgrounds (279). The archival documentation indicates that the streetwalkers of Istanbul in the eighteenth century were often homeless women, most likely migrants from rural areas (282). Efforts were made to eradicate prostitution in Istanbul, and royal edicts were issued that sought to restrict the public presence of women and strictly regulate the clothing they wore in public. In the tumultuous years of the late eighteenth century, the authorities opted to take more drastic measures. Wyers (2017) states that five well-known prostitutes were drowned, and

the bodies of three of them were hung up at different locations in the city as a warning. Other known prostitutes were then forced to repent, and many of them were banished from the city. This draconian approach, however, achieved limited results and despite continued raids and banishment, women continued to clandestinely engage in sold sex (84). The politics involved in portraying the city's migrants as "outsiders" who taint the dominant Istanbul culture, though some of them are involved in state-sanctioned and recognised labour, lay open the double standards of the state that uphold unwritten moral standards to pathologise and police women in public spaces of the city.

Pathologised and Invisibilised Women's Bodies

Historically established practice of scrutinising and labelling female- sex workers' bodies reduces women to mere objects that can be easily deprived of rights, invisibilised and removed from public spaces. In Istanbul, increased interaction between Ottoman and European physicians paved the way for the regulation of the system of prostitution and women's bodies. It also fuelled the development of hospitals and medical facilities and the dissemination of medical practices based on Western models. In 1878, the first move towards initiating regulation in Istanbul took place under the guidance of non-Muslim municipal authorities in a rather Europeanized quarter of the city. In 1880, after an experimental phase, the plan was given full royal approval, and the authorities began licensing brothels (Wyers *op. cit.*, 285). The pathologisation and regulation of prostitution continued even in Leila's times. Leila frequently had to visit Istanbul Venereal Diseases Hospital, where she experienced worse treatment than the one she experienced at the police station. The city's treatment of prostitutes as carriers of diseases subjected them to frequent medical tests, and a failure to get tested would land them in prison. It was on one such visit she met a young African named Jameelah from Somalia. Though Jameelah and Leila often crossed paths, they never spoke to each other. The narrator says, "By now Leila had learned that the women rounded up in various corners of the city, whether natives or non-natives, belonged to invisible tribes. Members of different tribes were not supposed to interact" (Shafak *op. cit.*, 116). The invisibilisation of women who belong to the native and migrant communities occurs by denying their rights and dehumanising them. It is as a result of human trafficking, Jameelah ends up doing sex work. Similar is the case with Nalan, who Leila noticed as a young man at the furniture workshop beside her room in the brothel. When Leila asks his name, he says she can call him Hiç – "Nothing." Leila meets Hiç exactly a year later, only to identify Nothing as a woman. The name "Nothing" itself critically responds to the general public and the nation-state's response to a transgender person. While the novel recounts the life of Hiç, the nation-state does not recognise her as a woman and thus erases her existence by negating her personhood.

The women in Shafak's novel are not the ones with the female body that is described in a biologically essential manner. The sisterhood she portrays is not limited to national and strict gender boundaries. They transgress boundaries, and it is the marginal position of these women

that brings them together as they navigate through Istanbul city. Though prostitution outside the licensed brothel's premises was considered illegal, Leila used to meet Bitter Ma's clients outside. One such night, the police raided dozens of nightclubs and bars on both sides of the Bosphorus and Leila was arrested. In the cell, she met Nalan, who once named herself Hiç. About Nalan, the narrator says, "All her life she had been trapped in a body that felt as unfamiliar as a foreign word on the tongue" (ibid., 56). This metaphorical expression articulates the estrangement one is likely to feel with one's body as it is inscribed with a gender that invisibilised her body. For Nalan, it was the city that enabled Nalan to cross the male gender assigned at birth to the female gender but at the cost of one's security. Nalan's experiences in the city clearly challenge the narrative around a metropolis as one that is progressive and inclusive of diversity. Nalan had come from a well-off family in Central Anatolia to the city to forge a new identity. After reaching Istanbul, Nalan worked as a masseur in a hammam with poor hygiene and a worse reputation. About Osman, who is now Nalan, the narrator says, "This was not the city he had imagined, and surely these were not the people he wished to share the highways and byways with. But it was only here in Istanbul that he could outwardly transform himself into the person he really was inside, and so he stayed, and persevered" (ibid., 60). The state refuses to identify Nalan as a woman who can be allowed to do sex work. While Istanbul city and Turkey seem to be fashioning a self-image of openness, tolerance, inclusivity and hospitality, Nalan's experiences of working at the train station and later as a prostitute negated her imagination of Istanbul that was formed by consuming popular beliefs. The pathologisation of women's bodies and the erasure of transgender bodies from public spaces, in a way, exposes the politics behind the construction of a city that adheres to the dominant cultural configuration of Turkey.

The Masculine Nation-State and the Female Subjects

In the novel, the state's treatment of the city's migrant women resonates with its treatment of the city. As the narrator calls the city a woman, her life is largely ignored by the state unless and until she is to be presented to another country for a national occasion. The description, "That night Istanbul looked glamorous and beautiful, although deeply nervous – like a woman who had dressed up for a party she no longer wished to attend" (ibid., 135), clearly articulates the treatment of the city like an object. It describes the event for which Istanbul and the street to the brothel, which released a rancid odour because of uncollected garbage and a pipe that burst a week ago forming puddles and stench, were cleared by authorities to receive the Americans who were in the Sixth Fleet which was about to reach Istanbul. Celebrations of the fiftieth anniversary of the Republic of Turkey and now celebrating this feat of engineering became reasons to adorn the city. The Bosphorus Strait, slender and narrow, had always been called 'the neckline of Istanbul', and here was a bridge decorating it like an incandescent necklace. High above the city, the necklace glowed, dangling over the waters where the Black Sea blended with the Sea of Marmara on one side and the Aegean ran to meet the Mediterranean on the other" (ibid., 148). The national interest in adorning

and celebrating its formation is scorned at as the narrator reflects upon the relevance of it to the poor. The narrator says, “The whole week there had been such an intense, shared sense of jubilation in the air that even the beggars in the city smiled as if their stomachs were full. Now that Asian Turkey was permanently connected to European Turkey, a bright future awaited the entire country. The bridge heralded the beginning of a new era. Turkey was now technically in Europe- whether people over there agreed or not” (ibid., 148). The new era and the nationalist discourse that depict Turkey primarily as European, though it shares borders with Asia, positions itself in a transnational discourse as modern and secular. While nationalist sentiments are glorified, the people who constitute the nation remain divided in their social order and status.

The metaphors and the materiality that suggest decay and deterioration are present in both the descriptions associated with Leila’s dying body and the female body of the city. The novel begins with “The End” of Tequila Leila. It presents the thoughts that cross her mind as her dead and decaying body remains in a metal rubbish bin on the outskirts of Istanbul. Shafak identifies Istanbul as a she-city and dedicates the novel “To the women of Istanbul and to the city of Istanbul, which is, and has always been, a she-city.” The need for identifying a city as a she-city emerges when the nation adopts a masculinist vision of a nation-state as a monolithic entity that upholds men’s interest. While the debates around the homogenising approach of Kemalism and the contrasting multicultural approach of the Ottoman encourage one to view the country and the city in dichotomy, a feminist perspective enables criticism of the existing state of affairs in the city. Shafak (2006), in the essay “The de-feminisation of Turkish Culture”, emphasises the need to investigate the construction of a cosmopolitan Turkish nation-state by considering its underlying gender and nationalist ideologies. She reassures her readers that a re-feminisation of Turkey is underway. Therefore, perhaps, in this novel, she attempts at re-feminising the city and the country by adopting the voice of marginalised migrant women and transgender people of the city.

In the novel, Istanbul is called a place of the dead and a she-city, which is adorned, physically assaulted, and contains both filth and beauty. The place where Leila’s dead body is found ultimately not only positions her whole existence in the periphery of the physical city but also positions her stories and experiences as ones that are to be discarded and never to be recorded in the annals of the state. The body of Leila, tightly crammed into the bin, is found by four adolescent boys, who are scavengers who sift through the rubbish. The novel begins by depicting the early morning Istanbul, where the beginning of a day clearly indicates the end of a marginalised migrant woman. It shows how the city is regularly reproduced with death and decay that needs cleaning and revival. Perhaps, it also suggests the need to envision the city differently than upholding the hierarchical positioning of its residence. The narrator says that “she could tell he had been sniffing glue, this boy who was no older than fifteen, whom Istanbul would pretend to welcome and accommodate, and, when he least expected it, throw aside like an old rag doll” (Shafak 2019, 6). The metaphorical expression

of an easily discardable “old rag doll” for a street scavenger challenges the cosmopolitan nature of the city. While critics like Martha Nussbaum and Seyla Benhabib, respectively consider cosmopolitanism as “love of mankind” over “love of country” and emphasise the need to initiate multiple processes of democratic iterations that recognise various identities, their cultures and right claims irrespective of their membership in bounded communities though it is crucial in reimagining “another cosmopolitanism,” the novel, primarily presents Istanbul’s cosmopolitan image as one that questions the very understanding of “human” itself (Benhabib, 2006). It also articulates the treatment of the underprivileged as lesser human beings, who can be invisibilised as they are not found to be “productive” and “respectable” in a city that is an expression of modernity and productivity.

Though the anonymity of a city allows one to forge a new identity and become a part of the social fabric of the urban culture, the characters in the novel struggle to develop a sense of belonging. Humeyra, Leila’s friend, changed her appearance and name to escape her husband’s search for her. She is also a migrant who left Madrin to reach Istanbul and become a prostitute. Contrary to their expectations, all of these characters share a sense of detachment from the city. Socially ostracised, denied rights that any regular citizen might claim, and discriminated against and humiliated for being in the work of prostitution, they are pushed to the peripheries of the city. The narrator says, “They each had their favourite spot by the same window, where they would sip their tea in the evenings and watch the city extending before them, mile after mile of concrete. They would look at Istanbul with curious eyes, as if they were not part of it, as if they were alone in the world, and all those cars and ferry boats and red-brick houses were only background decoration, details in a painting for their eyes only” (ibid., 163). For women like Nalan, “The law was clear about it: transvestites could not be employed in brothels- and since they could not get a job anywhere else either, they had to work on streets” (ibid., 148). For Leila, her very appearance in the public sphere made her an oddity. The narrator recounts Leila’s experience of walking through the streets of Istanbul; “Towards the evening, Leila headed to Istiklal Avenue, a route she avoided unless necessary. The main drag of shops was always packed. Too many elbows, too many eyes. Teetering in her high heels, low-cut blouse and red leather miniskirt, she joined the throng of pedestrians. They all took small, synchronised steps, their bodies moulded together. From one end of the avenue to the other the crowd flowed, leaking out into the night like ink from a broken fountain pen. ...Women glared, men leered at her” (ibid., 172). On this Avenue that is away from the streets nearby the harbour and her brothel, the pedestrians easily identify her as an ‘outsider’ and their behaviour makes her even avoid this street if possible. This also shows that the socio-cultural background of a person, which reflects in one’s bodily appearance, and the persona one adopts determine one’s engagement with a particular space. These urban spaces and one’s identity appear to be mutually influencing each other, where the spaces consistently mark one as an insider/ outsider, and its resident’s identity and social position also shift the rigid markers attributed to spaces as inclusive or exclusive in nature.

The inclusivity that seemingly exists in the city of Istanbul is criticised in the novel by depicting a space like a cemetery called the Cemetery of the Companionless. This space speaks for the many other unclaimed bodies that fall outside the domain of a legitimate citizen. The second part of the novel, titled “The Body,” which narrates the reason for Leila’s death, emphasises the body as a site of negotiations that affirm one’s existence in the world and in language. Marking the violence involved in Leila’s death, the medical examiner’s report states, “The victim was beaten with a heavy (blunt) instrument and strangled to death after being knocked unconscious” (ibid., 188). The narrator says, “Like all the unclaimed dead, she, too, would be consigned to the Cemetery of the Companionless. . . . In just a few months’ time, with no marker or stone, the woman’s grave would fully blend in with its surroundings. In less than a decade, no one would be able to locate her whereabouts. She would become yet another number in the Cemetery of Companionless, yet another pitiable soul . . .” (ibid., 189). The state strategically invisibilises the remains of a body that exerts its existence even after death by not allowing it to be claimed or named. Ironically, the anonymity that women migrants seek in a city to make a living extends to their death and afterlife too. Leila’s parents in Van refuse to claim her body, and while the doctor is informed of the friends who are waiting outside, the narrator says, “The friends of a street walker could only be other streetwalkers, people he would probably see here one day, lying on the same steel table” (ibid., 192). The doctor and his assistant refuse to hand over the body to the friends as the state does not permit it. The narrator says they knew that though every graveyard in the city might be fully booked years in advance, “there was always space available in the Cemetery of the Companionless – the loneliest graveyard in Istanbul” (ibid., 193). The streetwalker ultimately ending up on the steel table of the medical examiner to examine the cause of death highlights the vulnerable position of a streetwalker, who may also die anonymously in a foreign land. When the socially ostracised people form a family outside the immediate blood relations, the state denies any such kinship and denies them the right to claim their friend’s body, thereby upholding and imposing its patriarchal values.

The graveyards in cityscapes again appear highly hierarchical as the Cemetery of the Companionless, located on the outskirts of the city, becomes the place for the dead bodies of the outcasts and misfits of Istanbul city. Though the city seems to have many graveyards that remind people of their mortality, there seems to be an attempt to erase prostitutes, illegal migrants and asylum seekers from the city by not allowing them even to be remembered in a cemetery. The erasure of their existence is done by not naming the headstones but by numbering and allowing them to disintegrate into the national amnesia of injustices. The narrator says, “And somewhere in this unholy mess, among the hundreds and hundreds of untended graves, there was one freshly dug. This is where Tequila Leila was buried. Number 7053” (ibid., 256). The place of an underprivileged migrant in the city is well-defined by the places their bodies are buried. The narrator says that the foreigners and even many locals are often unaware of the burial ground in Kilyos – The Cemetery of the Companionless. The narrator says the ground is reserved for three types of dead: the unwanted, unworthy and

unidentified. It is said, “Almost everyone interred in the Cemetery of the Companionless was, in some way or another, an outcast. ... The undesirables. Social pariahs. Cultural lepers” (ibid., 256). Though death appears to be a leveller in an unequal, discriminatory and deeply hierarchical society, the graveyards again impose the hierarchy by either pushing some dead bodies to the peripheries or erasing some lives from the surface of the city and reducing them to a number on a headstone.

In order to revive and reimagine the city as a cosmopolitan city that is not fashioned and engineered by patriarchal forces, the narrator presents the city as an ailing giant, a dream, and finally, a she-city. The depiction of the city as an ailing giant dismantles the dominant narrative of a triumphant Western metropolis of enlightenment and order. The narrator states, “Far ahead the rush-hour traffic was clogging the arteries of the city, a city which now resembled an ailing giant animal, its breathing painfully slow and ragged. The city is also called a “manic old city” wherein the madness is reflected in both the physicality and its dysfunctional state that disallow a section of the society to even live with dignity” (ibid., 201). While the novel focuses on the suffering of the female-bodied city, it also offers the possibility of the feminine city enabling its people to overcome the regulatory and disciplinary ways of the state. Despite this state, the city offers hope to largely the discontented, dreamers and hashish eaters. The narrator says, “Istanbul was a dream that existed solely in the minds of hashish eaters. In truth, there was no Istanbul. There were multiple Istanbuls – struggling, competing, clashing, each perceiving that, in the end, only one could survive” (ibid., 202). Calling Istanbul a dream also emphasises its fluid nature in order to contest the monolithic national representation of Istanbul. To put it in the writer’s words, she says:

I feel connected to cities, especially to Istanbul. I have a profound love for Istanbul. I think Istanbul is a she-city. She plays an enormous role in my fiction. In all my novels she is an active actor, not only a setting where incidents take place. Istanbul is a very old, highly difficult and profusely complex city. It is certainly not the right place for people who like everything in neat shape. It is sad to see how Turkish nationalism waged a war against “cosmopolitanness,” and yet it is striking to notice that despite all the attempts to build a monolithic national culture, the spirit of cosmopolitan culture and the vestiges of the past still survive in the she-city called Istanbul. (Chancy and Shafak 2003, 69)

Shafak envisions a she-city that upholds the values of a cosmopolitan culture that allows people to define Istanbul in multiple ways from their different socio-cultural positions while aspiring to be the citizens of the world.

The narrator of the novel shows that it is not only the state-authored and disseminated narratives of Istanbul that draw a difference between its regular citizens and prostitutes, but the police and the media also play major roles in retaining that difference to allow discrimination.

The difference between “normal” women and streetwalkers that discriminate against and regard prostitutes as lesser human beings become evident as the general public, media and government official start conversing about the recurring murders of streetwalkers in the city. Regarding the death, the newspaper report had the caption: ‘Fourth Mysterious Murder in a Month,’ ‘Istanbul’s Streetwalkers on High Alert’ (Shafak *op. cit.*, 208). The newspaper states that the Deputy Police Chief told the press, “... citizens, especially women, do not need to be alarmed. These murders were not randomly committed. One particular group, without exception, was targeted. All the victims were streetwalkers. *Normal female citizens* [emphasis added] have no need to worry about their safety” (ibid., 217). The anti-migrant sentiments prevailing in the city become evident when a grocer expresses his concern to Zaynab. The grocer says, “Inshallah they’ll catch that maniac soon. I wouldn’t be surprised if the murderer turns out to be a gang member.’ He nodded in agreement with himself. ‘They’d do anything for money, those looters. Too many Kurds, Arabs, Gypsies and whatnot in this city. Ever since they moved here, the quality of life has vanished – poof!’ (ibid., 209). Along with the media, the state machinery also discriminates and wipes out the misfits and the outcasts of society. The police officers of the city carried out the cleaning process of the city, which included keeping gender non-conforming people out of sight of the common public. Each time there was a state occasion or a major international conference in Istanbul, as black cars carrying foreign delegates wove their way through the traffic from the airport to the five-star hotels scattered across the city, some police chief would decide to clean up the streets on their routes. On such occasions, all transvestites would be taken into custody overnight, swept away like so much litter. Once, after one of these clean-up operations, Nalan was kept in a detention centre where her hair was shaved in random patches and her clothes stripped. They had made her wait in a cell, naked and alone, every half hour or so coming to check how she was doing and to throw another bucket of dirty water over her head. It was safer working in the nightclubs, provided she could find a way in, and time and again, she had. As the club owners were delighted to discover, Nalan had a surprising talent. She could drink and drink and not get even slightly tipsy (ibid., 239). Nalan considering working at nightclubs rather than in the streets explains the conscious construction of the city by the lawmakers and the police as one that has no space for people who transgress the boundaries of gender. Transgender people are denied their right to be a part of the city’s nightscape, as they are found to be the misfits who make the “normal” citizens uncomfortable. The refusal of the state to identify Nalan as a woman and a citizen, her migrant position and her denial of entry into licensed brothels make her life more precarious than other migrant women in the city.

Conclusion

The novel illustrates the formation of the metropolis of Istanbul as a malleable piece of land that is yet to be solidified. Perhaps, this description suggests the possibility of constructing a city that is based on a woman’s vision. It advances Elif Shafak’s demand to re-feminise

Turkish culture in general and to coexist and clash with the masculinisation of the nation-state and its cultures. The narrator says, “Istanbul was a liquid city. Nothing was permanent here. ... When the floods arrived, they burst in from all sides, drowning everything in their path – animals, plants, humans. In this way the Black Sea was formed, and the Golden Horn, and the Bosphorus, and the Sea of Marmara. As the waters flowed all around, together they created a patch of dry land, on which someday a mighty metropolis was built. It still had not solidified, this motherland of theirs. When she closed her eyes, Nalan could hear the water roiling under their feet. Shifting, whirling, searching. Still in flux” (ibid., 306). For Nalan to have water roiling under her feet suggests the unreliable nature of a masculine nation-state that can betray the misfits, outcasts, cultural lepers and social pariahs. The water roiling and still in flux can also suggest a change in circumstances and the possibility of perceiving Istanbul as a cosmopolitan city that allows its residents who are not marked by territorial boundaries of the nation-state, to coexist with different cultures and socio-political identities and develop a sense of belonging to the city.

This vision becomes clearer in the description of Leila’s soul leaving the decaying body and chasing the betta fish that was released into the creek of Van when she was born. This exemplifies the liberation that Leila experiences as soon as she leaves the male-dominated nation-state. The “comforting harmony” that Leila never thought was possible to experience and the “vast blue, bright as the birth of a new flame” under the sea show the possibility of envisioning a world without boundaries of nation, religion and gender (ibid., 304). The “Note to the Reader” at the end of the novel states, “Many things in this book are true and everything is fiction” (ibid., 307). The Cemetery of the Companionless is true so is the street of brothels. The characters, too, are inspired by actual people. Nonetheless, the fictional accounts of migrant women who live as social pariahs in Istanbul city construct and reconstruct the city by unfolding these truths that are invisibilised by the state-authored narratives of Istanbul.

Notes

1. For a critique of critics’ perception of a flâneuse as a streetwalker, see, Elkin, Lauren. 2018. *Flâneuse: women walk the city in Paris, New York, Tokyo, Venice, and London*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux.
2. Here the minority population that is referred to, is the non-Muslim population

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