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Rewriting History through Women's Voices: A Postcolonial Feminist Reading of Shafak's Historical Narratives

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Abstract

This study examines how Elif Shafak rewrites history through women's voices by employing a postcolonial feminist lens to reinterpret silenced or marginalized female experiences. Shafak's historical narratives challenge patriarchal and colonial structures that have traditionally shaped collective memory. Through her novels, she foregrounds women who navigate displacement, religious tensions, cultural hybridity, and political violence, offering alternative perspectives often absent from mainstream historiography. By weaving personal stories into broader historical events, Shafak reveals how a woman's emotional, spiritual, and social realities contribute to a fuller understanding of the past. This paper argues that Shafak's work functions as a literary reclamation of women's agency, transforming them from passive subjects of history into active narrators who reshape cultural identity and memory. The study highlights how her storytelling not only critiques dominant power structures but also recovers forgotten voices, ultimately presenting history as a dynamic, multi-layered space enriched by female narratives.

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1. Introduction

History is never a neutral record of past events; rather, it is a constructed narrative shaped by power, ideology, and selective remembrance. Traditional historiography has largely privileged dominant voices, male, imperial and nationalist while marginalizing or excluding the lived experiences of women, especially those situated within colonized or postcolonial societies. Feminist scholars argue that such historical narratives not only silence women but also distort collective memory by reducing complex social realities to singular, authoritative accounts (Scott 23). In response, literature has emerged as a powerful counter-historical space where silenced voices can be restored and alternative versions of the past can be articulated.

Within this critical terrain, the fiction of Elif Shafak holds significant academic importance. As a contemporary writer who engages deeply with history, memory, gender, and identity, Shafak consistently challenges dominant historical narratives by foregrounding women's voices. Her novels rewrite history not through grand political events alone, but through intimate stories of women who experience displacement, religious conflict, patriarchal violence, and cultural hybridity. By doing so, Shafak transforms women from passive subjects of history into active narrators who interpret, question, and reshape the past.

The academic relevance of studying Shafak's historical narratives lies in their intersection with postcolonial feminist criticism. Postcolonial feminism emphasizes that women's experiences cannot be understood outside the contexts of colonial history, cultural specificity, and power relations (Mohanty 334). Shafak's work exemplifies this approach by situating women at the center of historical moments often dominated by male-centered political discourse. Her fiction thus offers a valuable site for examining how women's voices function as counter-histories that disrupt patriarchal and colonial constructions of the past.

1.1. Context and Background of the Study

The emergence of postcolonial feminist literature is closely linked to the broader intellectual movements of postcolonial studies and feminist theory. While postcolonial studies critique the legacy of colonial domination and cultural imperialism, feminist theory interrogates gender-based oppression and the exclusion of women from political, social, and historical narratives. Postcolonial feminism arises at the intersection of these two fields, addressing the ways in which colonialism and patriarchy jointly shape women's lives and representations (Loomba 192).

Elif Shafak writes within this intellectual and cultural context. As a Turkish-British novelist writing in both English and Turkish, she occupies a transnational position that allows her to challenge rigid national and cultural boundaries. Turkey's historical position situated between East and West, tradition and modernity provides a complex backdrop for Shafak's narratives. Her fiction frequently revisits contested histories such as the Ottoman past, the Armenian genocide, Sufi traditions, and modern Turkish state violence, all while centering women's perspectives.

Shafak's historical narratives are characterized by non-linear structures, multiple narrators, and a blending of personal memory with collective history. This narrative strategy reflects a feminist understanding of history as fragmented, plural, and subjective rather than singular and authoritative. Women's stories in her novels often unfold through memory, storytelling, food, spirituality, and bodily experience domains traditionally dismissed as private or insignificant within patriarchal historiography.

By integrating women's personal narratives into broader historical events, Shafak challenges the public-private divide that has long excluded women from historical significance. Her work suggests that the emotional and domestic spheres are deeply political and historically meaningful. This approach aligns with feminist historians' arguments that everyday experiences are essential to understanding the full impact of historical processes (Scott 28).

1.2. Research Gap and Problem Statement

Despite growing scholarly interest in Elif Shafak's work, significant gaps remain in existing research. Much of the current scholarship focuses on themes such as cultural hybridity, cosmopolitanism, exile, and spirituality in Shafak's fiction (Göknar 91; Mandel 54). While these studies provide valuable insights, they often treat women's narratives as secondary to broader discussions of identity and nationhood.

Furthermore, studies that address gender in Shafak's work tend to examine representation rather than historiography. That is, they analyze how women are portrayed but rarely investigate how women function as narrators and reconstructors of history. The specific role of women's voices in challenging patriarchal and colonial historical narratives remains underexplored.

Another limitation in existing research is the insufficient application of postcolonial feminist theory as a primary analytical framework. While scholars reference feminism or post-colonialism independently, fewer studies integrate these perspectives to examine how gender and colonial history intersect in Shafak's historical narratives. As a result, women's agency in shaping cultural memory is often overlooked.

This study addresses these gaps by offering a focused postcolonial feminist reading of Shafak's historical fiction. It examines how women's voices operate not merely as narrative devices but as epistemological tools that reshape historical understanding. By centering women as active historians rather than passive victims, the study challenges existing critical approaches that marginalize gendered historiography.

1.3. Research Objectives and Research Questions

The primary objective of this study is to examine how Elif Shafak rewrites history through women's voices within a postcolonial feminist framework. The research seeks to demonstrate that Shafak's historical narratives function as literary interventions that contest patriarchal and colonial constructions of the past.

The specific objectives of the study are:

- To analyze how women's voices are positioned as central narrators of history in Shafak's novels
- To explore how personal memory, storytelling, and emotional experience contribute to alternative historical narratives
- To examine how Shafak challenges dominant patriarchal and nationalist historiography through female-centered storytelling
- To assess the role of women in reconstructing cultural identity and collective memory

Guided by these objectives, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. How does Elif Shafak employ women's voices to rewrite and reinterpret history?
2. In what ways do these narratives challenge patriarchal and colonial representations of the past?
3. How do women's personal experiences function as valid forms of historical knowledge?

These questions allow for a critical exploration of history as a gendered discourse and literature as a transformative space for feminist historiography.

1.4. Scope and Significance of the Study

The scope of this research is limited to a close textual analysis of selected novels by Elif Shafak, namely *The Bastard of Istanbul*, *The Forty Rules of Love*, and *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World*. These texts are chosen because they explicitly engage with historical contexts while foregrounding women's narratives. The study does not attempt a comprehensive survey of Shafak's entire oeuvre; rather, it focuses on representative works that illustrate her approach to rewriting history through women's voices.

The significance of this study is both theoretical and practical. Theoretically, it contributes to postcolonial feminist literary criticism by demonstrating how women-centered narratives function as counter-histories. It expands existing debates on historiography by emphasizing the role of gender, memory, and narrative voice in shaping historical understanding.

Practically, the study offers valuable insights for literature educators and curriculum designers by highlighting the pedagogical potential of Shafak's fiction. Her novels can be used to teach students how history is constructed, contested, and reimagined through literature. By foregrounding

women's voices, the study also aligns with broader academic efforts to decolonize curricula and promote inclusive literary canons.

Ultimately, this research underscores the importance of rewriting history through women's voices—not as a corrective footnote to dominant narratives, but as a fundamental rethinking of how the past is remembered and understood.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Feminist Historiography and the Question of Voice

Feminist scholarship has long challenged the exclusion of women from historical narratives, arguing that traditional historiography privileges male experiences and public events while marginalizing women's lived realities. Joan Wallach Scott asserts that gender is a crucial category of historical analysis, emphasizing that history cannot be fully understood without examining how power operates through gendered structures (Scott 25). Feminist historians argue that women's experiences often embedded in domestic, emotional, and interpersonal spheres are historically significant and deeply connected to broader political and social processes.

The concept of "voice" is central to feminist historiography. Voice refers not only to speech but to narrative authority and epistemological legitimacy. Women's voices have historically been dismissed as subjective or anecdotal, reinforcing the notion that history must remain objective and detached. Feminist critics counter this assumption by asserting that subjectivity itself is historically meaningful (Smith 19). Literature, particularly historical fiction, becomes a key site where women's voices can reclaim narrative space and challenge dominant historical discourse.

2.2. Postcolonial Feminism and Gendered Histories

Postcolonial feminism expands feminist historiography by situating women's voices within the specific contexts of colonialism, nationalism, and cultural domination. Chandra Talpade Mohanty critiques Western feminist frameworks for their tendency to universalize women's oppression, arguing that such approaches erase cultural and historical differences (Mohanty 334). Postcolonial feminism insists on understanding women's experiences as shaped by intersecting forces of gender, race, class, religion, and colonial history.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's seminal question, "Can the subaltern speak?" highlights the structural silencing of marginalized voices within dominant discourses (Spivak 287). Spivak argues that even when subaltern voices appear to speak, they are often mediated or appropriated by elite narratives. This insight has significant implications for historical representation, particularly regarding women in postcolonial contexts.

Scholars such as Elleke Boehmer emphasize that postcolonial literature often functions as a counter-historical practice, rewriting colonial narratives from the perspective of the marginalized (Boehmer 173). Women writers, in particular, employ narrative fragmentation, memory, and oral storytelling to resist linear and authoritative historical accounts. These strategies allow for the recovery of suppressed histories while exposing the ideological nature of official historiography.

2.3. Literature, Memory, and Alternative Histories

The relationship between literature and history has been extensively explored by theorists of historiographic metafiction. Linda Hutcheon argues that postmodern historical fiction questions the objectivity of historical knowledge by foregrounding its constructed nature (Hutcheon 105). Such narratives blur the boundaries between fact and fiction, emphasizing that history is shaped by interpretation and narrative choice.

Memory plays a crucial role in this process. Jan Assmann conceptualizes cultural memory as a collective construction preserved through narratives, rituals, and symbols (Assmann 130). Feminist critics note that women often serve as custodians of cultural memory, transmitting history through storytelling, food practices, and everyday rituals (Hirsch 8). These forms of remembrance challenge state-sanctioned histories that prioritize political events over personal experience.

In postcolonial contexts, memory becomes a site of resistance. Scholars argue that personal and communal memories disrupt official narratives that deny or erase historical trauma (Trouillot 26). Literature allows writers to articulate these memories in ways that academic history often cannot, particularly when addressing taboo or contested events.

2.4. Critical Scholarship on Elif Shafak

Academic interest in Elif Shafak's work has grown steadily, with scholars examining her engagement with hybridity, identity, and transnationalism. Göknar notes that Shafak destabilizes nationalist discourse by presenting history as plural and contested rather than fixed (91). Her narratives resist binary oppositions between East and West, tradition and modernity, reflecting Turkey's complex cultural position.

Several studies focus on *The Bastard of Istanbul* as a novel that confronts historical denial, particularly regarding the Armenian genocide. Mandel argues that the novel's emphasis on memory and diaspora challenges Turkish nationalist historiography by foregrounding personal narratives over official silence (54). However, while such analyses recognize the novel's historical significance, they often prioritize national identity and trauma over gendered narration.

Feminist readings of Shafak highlight her portrayal of women's bodies, sexuality, and marginalization. Koca suggests that Shafak's female characters resist patriarchal norms by asserting narrative autonomy (116). Similarly, Arat examines how Shafak critiques gendered violence and moral regulation in Turkish society (203). Despite these contributions, feminist analyses frequently remain thematic, focusing on representation rather than historiographical function.

Scholarship on *The Forty Rules of Love* often centers on spirituality and Sufism. Critics argue that Shafak reinterprets religious history through a contemporary feminist lens, emphasizing inclusivity and personal transformation (Yavuz 78). Yet, few studies explicitly examine how women's spiritual experiences rewrite historical religious narratives traditionally dominated by male figures.

10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World has been discussed in relation to urban marginality and state violence. Scholars note that the novel restores dignity to socially excluded figures, particularly women (Erdoğan 61). However, the connection between marginal female lives and historical narration remains underexplored.

2.5. Limitations and Gaps in Existing Studies

Despite the breadth of existing scholarship, several critical gaps remain. First, most studies treat women's voices as thematic elements rather than as central mechanisms for rewriting history. There is limited analysis of how women function as narrators, memory keepers, and interpreters of historical events.

Second, postcolonial and feminist approaches are often applied separately. Few studies integrate postcolonial feminism as a unified theoretical framework to examine how gender and colonial history intersect in Shafak's narratives. This separation limits a deeper understanding of women's historical agency.

Third, existing research tends to focus on individual novels rather than examining Shafak's broader narrative strategy across multiple texts. A comparative approach that traces women's voices across different historical contexts remains largely absent.

This study addresses these limitations by offering a comprehensive postcolonial feminist analysis of selected historical narratives by Elif Shafak. It foregrounds women's voices as active agents of historical reconstruction, demonstrating how literature can challenge patriarchal and colonial historiography while recovering marginalized memories.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in postcolonial feminist theory, an interdisciplinary framework that interrogates the interconnected systems of patriarchy, colonialism, and cultural domination. Postcolonial feminism emerges as a corrective to both mainstream feminist theory, which often universalizes women's experiences, and postcolonial studies, which have historically privileged male-centered narratives of resistance and nationhood. By integrating gender into analyses of colonial history, postcolonial feminism provides a critical lens through which women's voices can be recognized as central to historical knowledge production.

One of the foundational premises of postcolonial feminism is the rejection of the notion that women constitute a homogeneous category. Chandra Talpade Mohanty argues that Western feminist discourse frequently represents "Third World women" as a singular oppressed group, thereby erasing historical and cultural specificity (Mohanty 334). Postcolonial feminism instead emphasizes contextualized subjectivity, recognizing that women's experiences are shaped by intersecting forces such as race, class, religion, nationality, and colonial history. This concept is essential for analyzing Elif Shafak's fiction, where women inhabit diverse socio-political positions and negotiate multiple forms of marginalization.

Another key theoretical concept guiding this study is voice, understood as both narrative authority and epistemological legitimacy. Feminist theorists argue that women have historically been denied voice within dominant discourses, including historiography, where objectivity has been associated with male-centered perspectives (Scott 25). In this

framework, voice is not merely the act of speaking but the power to narrate, interpret, and assign meaning to historical events. Shafak's historical narratives foreground women as storytellers, memory keepers, and interpreters of the past, thereby challenging patriarchal assumptions about whose knowledge counts as history.

The framework also draws on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concept of the subaltern, which highlights the structural silencing of marginalized subjects within dominant systems of representation. Spivak questions whether the subaltern can truly speak when their voices are mediated through elite discourse (287). Acknowledging this limitation, postcolonial feminist literary criticism suggests that fiction can create imaginative spaces where subaltern voices are partially recovered. Shafak's novels exemplify this process by allowing marginalized women prostitutes, migrants, illegitimate daughters, and spiritual seekers to narrate their own histories, thus resisting erasure.

Cultural memory constitutes another central concept within this theoretical framework. Jan Assmann defines cultural memory as a collective form of remembrance sustained through narratives, symbols, and rituals that shape group identity (130). Feminist scholars expand this concept by emphasizing women's roles in preserving cultural memory through oral storytelling, domestic practices, and embodied experience. Shafak's fiction reflects this feminist understanding by portraying women as custodians of memory who transmit history through food, rituals, spirituality, and personal narratives. These alternative modes of remembering challenge state-sanctioned histories that prioritize political events over lived experience.

The framework further incorporates intersectionality, a concept developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw to explain how multiple forms of oppression intersect to shape individual experience (1244). Intersectionality is particularly relevant to Shafak's work, where women's lives are shaped not only by gender but also by class, religion, ethnicity, and political power. This perspective prevents reductive readings of female oppression and allows for a nuanced analysis of women's agency within restrictive structures.

Finally, this study engages with feminist critiques of historiography, which argue that history is a narrative construction rather than a transparent record of facts. Linda Hutcheon's notion of historiographic metafiction underscores how literary texts expose the ideological nature of historical representation (105). While Shafak's novels are not overtly metafictional, they employ similar strategies by blending personal memory with historical events, thereby questioning the authority of official history.

By integrating postcolonial feminism, feminist historiography, cultural memory, and intersectionality, this theoretical framework provides a comprehensive lens for analyzing how Elif Shafak rewrites history through women's voices. It enables the study to examine women not as passive subjects of historical forces but as active agents who narrate, reinterpret, and reshape the past. Through this framework, Shafak's historical narratives are understood as feminist interventions that challenge dominant power structures and expand the boundaries of historical knowledge.

4. Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design, as it seeks to interpret meanings, representations, and narrative strategies rather than measure variables quantitatively. Qualitative

research is particularly appropriate for literary studies, where the focus lies on close reading, contextual interpretation, and theoretical engagement. The present research examines how Elif Shafak rewrites history through women's voices, a phenomenon best understood through in-depth textual analysis informed by postcolonial feminist theory.

4.1. Research Design

The study is interpretive and analytical in nature, drawing on qualitative literary criticism. It employs a thematic textual analysis approach to explore how women's voices function as agents of historical reconstruction in Shafak's fiction. This design allows for a nuanced examination of narrative voice, memory, agency, and gendered historiography within specific cultural and historical contexts.

Rather than treating literary texts as isolated aesthetic objects, this research situates them within broader theoretical and historical frameworks. The interpretive design enables the study to examine how fictional narratives engage with real historical events, collective memory, and power structures.

4.2. Selection of Primary Texts

The primary data for this study consist of three novels by Elif Shafak:

- *The Bastard of Istanbul* (2006)
- *The Forty Rules of Love* (2010)
- *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World* (2019)

These texts are selected through purposive sampling, as they explicitly engage with historical contexts while foregrounding women's narratives. Each novel represents a different historical and cultural moment: contested national history, religious and spiritual past, and contemporary urban marginalization. Together, they provide a broad yet coherent corpus for examining how women's voices operate across diverse historical settings.

The selection is justified on the grounds that these novels collectively illustrate Shafak's sustained engagement with history, memory, and gender, making them suitable for a comparative and thematic analysis.

4.3. Data Sources

In addition to the primary texts, the study draws on secondary sources that include:

- Peer-reviewed journal articles on postcolonial feminism and feminist historiography
- Critical studies on Elif Shafak's fiction
- Foundational theoretical texts by scholars such as Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Joan Wallach Scott, and Linda Hutcheon

These sources provide the theoretical grounding necessary to contextualize the analysis and situate it within existing scholarship. All sources are cited according to MLA 9th edition guidelines.

4.4. Analytical Approach

The analysis follows a thematic and discourse-oriented approach. Key themes such as women's voice, memory, marginalization, spirituality, and historical agency are identified through close reading of the texts. Passages that foreground women's narration of historical events, personal memory, or cultural identity are examined in detail.

The study also employs feminist discourse analysis to explore how language, narrative structure, and perspective construct women as historical subjects. Attention is paid to narrative techniques such as multiple voices, non-linear timelines, and memory-based storytelling, which disrupt conventional historiographical forms.

Furthermore, the analysis engages in theory-driven interpretation, where textual evidence is read alongside postcolonial feminist concepts such as subalternity, intersectionality, and cultural memory. This ensures that interpretation remains analytically rigorous rather than impressionistic.

4.5. Comparative and Contextual Reading

While each novel is analyzed individually, the study also adopts a comparative perspective to identify recurring patterns and narrative strategies across Shafak's historical fiction. This comparative reading highlights how women's voices consistently function as counter-histories, regardless of temporal or cultural setting.

Historical and socio-political contexts such as Turkish nationalism, religious patriarchy, and urban marginalization are considered to enhance interpretive depth. However, the study does not aim to verify historical accuracy; rather, it examines how history is imaginatively reconstructed through women's lived experiences.

4.6. Ethical Considerations

As this research is based solely on published literary texts and secondary sources, it does not involve human participants and therefore poses no direct ethical risks. Nonetheless, ethical academic practices are strictly observed. These include accurate representation of theoretical arguments, proper acknowledgment of sources, and avoidance of plagiarism through meticulous citation.

The study also maintains interpretive responsibility by avoiding reductive or culturally insensitive readings, particularly when engaging with issues of gender, religion, and historical trauma.

4.7. Limitations of the Methodology

While qualitative textual analysis allows for depth and theoretical engagement, it is inherently interpretive and may reflect the researcher's critical perspective. To mitigate this limitation, the study grounds its analysis in established theory and engages with existing scholarship to ensure analytical balance.

Additionally, the focus on selected novels limits the generalizability of findings across Shafak's entire body of work. However, this limitation is deliberate, as the study prioritizes depth over breadth.

5. Analysis / Discussion

This section presents a detailed postcolonial feminist analysis of Elif Shafak's historical narratives, focusing on how women's voices function as tools for rewriting history. The discussion is organized thematically to demonstrate how Shafak transforms women from marginalized historical subjects into active narrators, memory keepers, and agents of cultural reconstruction. By examining women's engagement with memory, spirituality, marginality, and resistance, the analysis reveals how Shafak challenges patriarchal and colonial historiography.

5.1. Women as Narrators of Silenced Histories

One of the most significant ways Shafak rewrites history is by positioning women as primary narrators of events that have been systematically silenced or denied. Traditional historiography often excludes women from historical agency, relegating them to peripheral roles. Shafak disrupts this pattern by allowing women to speak from within history rather than about it.

In *The Bastard of Istanbul*, history is not narrated through political leaders or official documents but through the memories of women across generations. The Kazancı women preserve family history through storytelling, domestic rituals, and oral transmission. Their narratives expose historical silences surrounding the Armenian genocide, a topic frequently suppressed within Turkish nationalist discourse. By privileging women's voices, Shafak suggests that history survives not only in archives but in lived memory and familial storytelling (Shafak, *Bastard*).

From a postcolonial feminist perspective, this narrative strategy challenges the assumption that historical truth must be institutional or male-authored. Feminist historians argue that women's stories often exist outside formal historical records yet remain essential for understanding the emotional and social impact of historical violence (Scott 27). Shafak's fiction validates these voices as legitimate forms of historical knowledge.

5.2. Memory, Trauma, and Intergenerational Storytelling

Memory functions as a central mechanism through which women rewrite history in Shafak's narratives. Rather than presenting history as a linear progression of events, Shafak depicts it as fragmented, layered, and emotionally charged. This approach aligns with feminist critiques of historiography that emphasize the subjective and affective dimensions of memory.

In *The Bastard of Istanbul*, Armanoush's search for her Armenian heritage illustrates how intergenerational memory disrupts official denial. Her identity is shaped not by state narratives but by stories passed down through female relatives. These memories carry trauma, loss, and unresolved grief, revealing how historical violence continues to shape present identities. The novel suggests that women play a crucial role in transmitting such memories, ensuring that suppressed histories are not erased.

Similarly, *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World* reconstructs Leila's life through sensory memories in the moments following her death. These memories—linked to taste, smell, and emotion—challenge traditional historical narration that prioritizes objective distance. Feminist theorists argue that embodied memory offers an alternative epistemology rooted in lived experience rather than detached observation (Hirsch 9). Through Leila's recollections, Shafak restores historical visibility to a woman whose life would otherwise remain undocumented.

5.3. Women's Bodies as Sites of Historical Inscription

Shafak's narratives repeatedly depict women's bodies as sites where history leaves its mark. Patriarchal and colonial systems often regulate women's bodies as symbols of honor, morality, or cultural identity. Shafak exposes this regulation while simultaneously reclaiming women's bodily experiences as historically meaningful.

In *10 Minutes, 38 Seconds in This Strange World*, Leila's body bears the consequences of social exclusion, sexual

violence, and state neglect. Her status as a sex worker renders her disposable in the eyes of society, reflecting how certain lives are excluded from historical recognition. By centering Leila's perspective, Shafak challenges the moral hierarchies that determine whose lives are considered historically valuable (Shafak, *10 Minutes*).

Postcolonial feminist critics emphasize that women's bodies often become battlegrounds for ideological control, particularly in postcolonial societies where nationalism and patriarchy intersect (Mohanty 339). Shafak's portrayal of bodily experience exposes these power dynamics and reframes women's physical suffering as historical testimony rather than personal failure.

5.4. Spirituality and Feminist Reinterpretation of Religious History

Religion and spirituality constitute another important domain through which Shafak rewrites history from a feminist perspective. Historical religious narratives are frequently male-centered, marginalizing women's spiritual experiences. Shafak challenges this exclusion by foregrounding women's engagement with faith and mysticism.

In *The Forty Rules of Love*, Shafak revisits the historical relationship between Rumi and Shams of Tabriz while simultaneously narrating the contemporary story of Ella Rubinstein. Although the historical narrative revolves around male spiritual figures, women's voices play a crucial interpretive role. Characters such as Kerra and Desert Rose embody alternative spiritual experiences that resist patriarchal moral judgments.

Desert Rose, a former prostitute, disrupts the binary between purity and sin imposed by patriarchal religious discourse. Her spiritual awakening challenges historical narratives that associate women's bodies with moral corruption. Feminist scholars argue that reclaiming women's spirituality is essential for challenging religious histories that exclude female agency (King 74). Shafak's portrayal aligns with this view by presenting spirituality as an inclusive, transformative space.

Ella's contemporary journey further illustrates the continuity of women's spiritual resistance across time. By linking past and present, Shafak suggests that women's spiritual voices remain integral to reinterpreting religious history in more egalitarian ways.

5.5. Marginality, Urban Space, and Counter-Histories

Shafak's historical narratives frequently focus on women who inhabit the margins of society—prostitutes, migrants, illegitimate daughters, and social outcasts. These characters challenge dominant historical narratives that prioritize elite experiences and national heroes.

10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World situates its narrative within the urban landscape of Istanbul, a city marked by political violence and social inequality. Leila and her chosen family exist on the fringes of society, yet their lives reflect the broader socio-political realities of modern Turkey. By narrating urban history through marginalized women, Shafak constructs a counter-history that exposes the exclusions of official narratives.

Postcolonial critics argue that urban spaces often reveal the contradictions of modernity, where progress coexists with exclusion (Boehmer 181). Shafak's focus on marginalized women within these spaces highlights how history is experienced unevenly. Women's voices reveal the costs of

political decisions and social prejudice at the most intimate levels.

5.6. Cultural Hybridity and Female Identity

Cultural hybridity is a recurring theme in Shafak's work, closely linked to women's historical experience. Her female characters often inhabit multiple cultural identities, navigating tensions between tradition and modernity, East and West, belonging and exile.

In *The Bastard of Istanbul*, Asya's identity crisis reflects Turkey's unresolved historical tensions. Her sense of displacement mirrors the nation's fractured relationship with its past. Feminist postcolonial theory emphasizes that women often bear the burden of cultural continuity, expected to uphold tradition while adapting to change (Loomba 196). Shafak critiques this burden by portraying women who question and redefine cultural expectations.

By allowing women to articulate hybrid identities, Shafak resists nationalist histories that demand cultural purity. Women's voices become sites of negotiation where history is reimagined as plural and interconnected rather than singular and exclusionary.

5.7. Women's Storytelling as Feminist Historiography

Across her historical narratives, Shafak presents storytelling itself as a feminist act. Women's stories challenge the authority of official histories by offering alternative perspectives rooted in memory, emotion, and lived experience. This narrative strategy aligns with Linda Hutcheon's assertion that historical fiction can expose the ideological foundations of historiography (105).

Women's storytelling in Shafak's novels does not seek to replace one authoritative narrative with another. Instead, it embraces multiplicity and contradiction, reflecting the complexity of historical truth. Feminist critics argue that such plurality is essential for resisting oppressive historical frameworks (Scott 30).

Through fragmented narratives, multiple voices, and temporal shifts, Shafak transforms history into a dialogic space where women's voices coexist rather than compete. This approach challenges patriarchal assumptions about historical coherence and authority.

5.8. Summary of Key Analytical Insights

The analysis demonstrates that Elif Shafak rewrites history through women's voices by:

- Positioning women as narrators of silenced and contested histories
- Using memory and storytelling as alternative historical methodologies
- Reclaiming women's bodies and spirituality as sites of historical meaning
- Centering marginalized female lives within urban and political histories
- Embracing cultural hybridity and plural identity

Collectively, these strategies reveal history as a dynamic, multi-layered construct shaped by women's lived experiences rather than a fixed record controlled by dominant power structures.

6. Conclusion

This study set out to examine how Elif Shafak rewrites history through women's voices by employing a postcolonial feminist framework that challenges patriarchal and colonial modes of historical representation. By foregrounding marginalized female perspectives, Shafak destabilizes dominant historical narratives that have traditionally privileged male authority, imperial power, and singular versions of truth. The analysis has demonstrated that her historical fiction does not merely revisit the past but actively reshapes it by placing women at the center of cultural memory, political struggle, and ethical reflection.

The study has argued that Shafak's narratives function as a literary intervention in historiography. Through characters who experience exile, religious conflict, gendered violence, and cultural hybridity, Shafak reveals history as lived, felt, and narrated from below rather than imposed from above. Women in her novels are not passive victims of historical forces; instead, they emerge as storytellers, healers, witnesses, and moral agents who carry intergenerational memory. This repositioning challenges the conventional separation between public history and private experience, showing that emotional, spiritual, and domestic spaces are equally significant sites of historical knowledge (Mohanty 22; Spivak 287).

One of the key findings of this study is that Shafak's postcolonial feminist approach exposes the silences embedded within nationalist and colonial histories. By focusing on women who exist at the intersections of gender, ethnicity, religion, and geography, Shafak highlights how power operates through exclusion and selective remembrance. Her narratives contest official histories that erase minority voices, particularly those of women, and instead offer plural, fragmented, and dialogic accounts of the past. In doing so, she aligns with feminist historiography that views history as a contested space rather than a fixed record (Scott 34).

The analysis further reveals that storytelling itself becomes an act of resistance in Shafak's work. Oral traditions, letters, recipes, myths, and spiritual narratives serve as alternative archives through which women preserve and transmit historical memory. These narrative strategies challenge Eurocentric and patriarchal notions of historical evidence by validating subjective, embodied, and emotional forms of knowledge. Shafak thus expands the boundaries of what counts as history and who is authorized to tell it, reinforcing the postcolonial feminist claim that marginalized voices are essential to any meaningful understanding of the past (Loomba 199).

In terms of academic contribution, this study addresses a significant gap in existing scholarship by offering a sustained postcolonial feminist reading of Shafak's historical narratives with a specific focus on women's agency and memory-making. While previous studies have examined themes of identity, exile, and multiculturalism in Shafak's fiction, fewer have analyzed how her rewriting of history challenges both colonial epistemologies and patriarchal historiography simultaneously. By bringing together postcolonial theory and feminist criticism, this research provides a more integrated and nuanced interpretation of her work.

The implications of this study extend beyond literary criticism. Shafak's rewriting of history invites readers and scholars to reconsider how historical knowledge is produced, circulated, and legitimized. It suggests that inclusive historiography must account for gendered experiences and recognize literature as a powerful medium for historical re-imagination. Future research may build on this study by conducting comparative analyses between Shafak and other postcolonial women writers or by exploring reader reception of female-centered historical narratives in different cultural contexts.

In conclusion, Elif Shafak's historical fiction transforms women from marginal figures into central narrators of the past. Through a postcolonial feminist lens, her work challenges dominant power structures, recovers silenced voices, and presents history as a dynamic, multilayered process shaped by women's stories. By reclaiming women's agency in the making of cultural memory, Shafak not only rewrites history but also redefines how history itself can be imagined, remembered, and retold.

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