

## THE BROTHEL AS A HETEROTOPIC SPACE OF ISOLATION AND PENETRATION IN SHAFAK'S *10 MINUTES 38 SECONDS IN THIS STRANGE WORLD*

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### Abstract

*This paper employs Michel Foucault's theory of heterotopia to examine brothels as paradoxical spaces of both isolation and penetration in Elif Shafak's 10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World. Foucault's heterotopias are spaces that exist outside conventional societal norms—distinct, marginalized zones that often serve as sites of exclusion or alternative social practices. These spaces, marked by their detachment from the dominant social order, facilitate mechanisms of isolation and penetration, both physical and symbolic. Defined by their deviance from the expected, they are viewed by state and capital as occupying “wrong” locations, moving in “wrong” directions, or fostering “wrong” relationships. While much of the scholarship on heterotopias has focused on public institutions such as prisons, hospitals, and cemeteries, this paper shifts the lens to brothels, spaces that, despite their marginalization, play a critical role in the disenfranchisement and exploitation of women in literature. In 10 minutes 38 Seconds in this Strange World, the brothel emerges as a heterotopic site where cultural norms are both inverted and reinforced. Leila, the protagonist, is forcibly confined to this space—a confinement dictated by male coercion and societal neglect. The brothel thus functions dually: it isolates women within its walls, while granting men access to dominate and penetrate, symbolically and physically, through those very boundaries. By applying Foucault's theory of heterotopia to Shafak's portrayal of the brothel, this paper reveals the complex dynamics of isolation, othering, and exploitation that pervade such spaces. It argues that the brothel, as a heterotopic site, serves not only as a mirror of societal power structures but also as a space that actively contributes to the reinforcement of those structures. Through this lens, the paper offers a nuanced exploration of the intersection between gender, spatiality, and societal norms, illuminating the ways in which physical spaces reflect and sustain power dynamics.*

**Keywords:** Brothel, heterotopia, spaces, isolation and penetration

### Introduction

The brothel is portrayed as a heterotopic space, in Elif Shafak's *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in this Strange World* as a place of enforcement and subversion of societal norms while highlighting the complicated relationship between the limited autonomy of a woman and her isolation within the social structures. Urban brothels are frequently portrayed as hidden, marginalized places woven into the fabric of modern cities. These spaces exist at the nexus of morality, legality, and socioeconomic need. Brothels are distinguished by their unique social dynamics and regulatory procedures. *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in this Strange World* offers a deep, intricate picture of an Istanbul brothel and a distinctive perspective on the intricacies of these settings. As the narrative progresses, it becomes clear that the story is about “subaltern woman who suffers due to her subaltern status and commitment as a woman” (Hussain 483).

Shafak exposes the pervasive hypocrisy in gender dynamics by showing that men, protected by societal double standards, enter these spaces without being subject to the same

moral scrutiny as women, who are driven into brothels by familial and societal abandonment and live in spaces of marginalization and isolation. Women are easily judged by society, which disregards their well-being and means of subsistence. *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World* exhibits the dual morality of society as the men while visiting brothels for these prostitutes are “never questioned or judged” (Zacharia 284). This creates a paradoxical environment that the women in the brothel are isolated and cut off from social support and acceptance, but at the same time, they are a site where societal hypocrisy and exploitation are being penetrated by the constant stream of men who covertly interact with and reinforce the very stigma that these women visage. Hence, the researcher follows the concept of heterotopia to explore what these spaces have in common is their difference (hetero) from the dominant space (topos) (Foucault 7).

Heterotopia is a philosophical and architectural concept about public spaces in society that was originally elaborated by Foucault in 1966 (Hatz) in his lecture titled “Des Espace Autres, translated as “Of Other Spaces”. He describes heterotopia as a space “which draw individuals out of themselves and where the erosion of their lives, of time and history occurs, the space that torments and consumes” (Miskowiec 22). There are undoubtedly real places in every culture and civilization, places that actually exist and are shaped from the very beginning of society and that function as counter-sites, a sort of successfully enacted utopia where the real sites, all the other real sites that exist within the culture are concurrently represented, contested, and inverted. These kinds of places, although their actual location could be discernible, are outside of all places (M. Foucault 3). Heterotopias, in contrast to utopias, are completely other from all the sites they mirror and speak about. These are adequately enforced utopias where all the other real sites within the culture are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted (Knight 16).

Michel Foucault distinguishes six rules that permit a methodical depiction of heterotopic spaces. They exist:

1. They exist in every single civilization on earth, either ancient or modern. (Heterotopia of Crisis and Deviation)
2. They are present where different or opposing spatial forms come together. (Heterotopia of Emplacement and Displacement)
3. Heterotopia allows for the juxtaposition of disparate real-world spaces in one location. (Heterotopia of Juxtaposition)
4. It alludes to the mode of operation of a heterotopia that can change over the time; inside a heterotopia, there is heterochrony<sup>1</sup>, characterized as a break with constant. (Heterotopia of Time)
5. It can open and close, it can be both isolated and penetrated. (Heterotopia of Opening and Closing)
6. Heterotopias have the capability about other detectable spaces in society: they are either spaces of illusion or spaces of compensation (Lazăr 131). They may serve as gathering places for people "whose behavior is deviant; concerning to the required norm or mean" (Foucault 180). (Heterotopia of Illusion and Compensation)

Foucault's fifth principle of heterotopia underlines that these spaces act as locations of isolation and penetration, confounding and consolidating societal norms. The researcher intends to look at brothels as a heterotopic space as per its fifth principle, that heterotopias have an opening and closing mechanism that “isolates them from other spaces yet allows

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<sup>1</sup> Heterochrony, as defined by Foucault, is “slice in time” that is commonly connected to heterotopia for the sake of symmetry.

them to still be penetrated” (Topinka 56). Leila is regarded as an illegal employee in even legal establishments like registered bars and brothels like Shafak mentions “oldest licensed brothels in Istanbul” (Shafak 1). Female prostitute character frequently endures verbal, physical, and mental abuse from their clients, the worst of which is murder. “Lastly, sexuality” (Fajariyah 66). The female character's chastity continues to be the most significant factor in her family and society's determination. As the main character, Leila, discovers, violating the principles of purity may result in indefinite social exclusion. Thus, the existence of the brothel subverts cultural norms and opposes mainstream values, even within the context that perpetuates certain power relations and inequalities.

## Literature Review

In his article, entitled “Unraveling Foucault’s different spaces”, Johnson describes heterotopias as merely uncomfortable places. He intricately dissects heterotopias as to provide “lines of flight” and an “escape route from power”, places with liberator qualities and experimental spaces rather than as reservoirs of freedom, emancipation, or resistance. Heterotopias compel an individual to step outside of their selves, introduce, highlight differences and cast doubt on the places where one may truly feel at home. These locations are out of place and interfere with one’s feeling of inwardness. Different combinations of heterotopia exist, each of which resonates with the others and they really work in relation to one another, in a way. These conflicts only exacerbate the unsettling<sup>2</sup>. Leila, the protagonist of *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in this Strange World*, exemplifies the unsettling idea of heterotopias. While inhabiting in the brothel, she investigates the women's continued exploitation is facilitated by their isolation in the brothel, a place of enforced marginalization where societal norms keep them on the margins.. This affiliation takes her out of her previous life and puts her in a place that both isolates her and deeply ties her to the unknown outer social fabric. Leila's experience in the brothel alters and reshapes her internality and sense of self. The way brothel alters and reinterprets interiority of both who are inside and beyond its boundaries demonstrates its heterotopic character.

The fight for autonomy within the restrictive walls indicate that freedom is constantly negotiated and enacted through a constant resistance and self-assertion in the context of structural limitations. Brothels cannot be the reservoirs of freedom because this gives the impression that freedom is a thing, which is not the case. Foucault in “The Ethics of the concern of the Self as a Practice of Freedom” contends that, freedom is not a thing but a practice (Foucault 17). Therefore, viewing brothels as repositories of freedom is contradictory with Foucault’s wider theorizing on the nature of freedom, which is of course connected to his theory of power and resistance. The representation of Leila in the brothel is as if the prisoner is confined within the maximum freedom and on the widest road possible, securely chained to an endless crossroads. The area functions as both an entry and a prison. Thus, it offers a deep and meaningful metaphor for illustrating the liminal and relational space.

In “Heterotopias and the Experience of Porous Urban Space”, Stavros Steward provides a comprehensive exploration that thresholds divide while bringing together diverse but interrelated spaces. The social significance of a crossing act is to go from a familiar situation into one that is fundamentally “other.” Thresholds signal a potential shift towards otherness by controlling passages. After all, the concept of “otherness” is subjective

<sup>2</sup> Johnson, Peter. “Unravelling Foucault’s ‘different spaces’.” *History of the human sciences.* 9.4 (2006): 75-90. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0952695106069669>

(Stavrides 3). Brothels are further isolated from the moral and social standards of the larger community by their frequent location in secretive or marginalized locations. These limits, though, also serve as a link between the brothel and the outside world since clients must cross them to enter an area with distinct social norms and expectations. This act of crossing is a transition from a well-known social condition to a unique and frequently stigmatized "other" condition. Thresholds both symbolize and specify the socially meaningful act of connecting while separating and separating while connecting, thus isolating while being penetrable and penetrable while being isolated.

Differential spaces are the localizations that shatter the integrity of the individual body; the social body, the mass of human needs, and the archive of knowledge come to an end. The body has an innate right to difference because it creates difference through rhythms, gestures, and imagination. Stewart in "Bodies, visions, and spatial politics: a review essay on Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space*" contends that the "quest for a counter-space"<sup>3</sup> must originate from the bodies themselves, through the appropriation of space and the exercise of the capacity to create new types of space, such as a place of delight. Differences persist or emerge at the periphery of the homogenized domain, as well as the creation of "heterotopias" (Stewart 615). The function of the brothel is obvious in Lefebvre's notion of differentiated space, which emphasizes the "development of new social spaces by marginalized bodies". The traditional integrity of the individual and social body is fragmented and reinterpreted in this heterotopic space. Women, like Leila create new rhythms and modes of social interaction that defy mainstream homogenization and exercise their right to diversity within the brothel. This change emphasizes the brothel's dual role as a place of isolation and possible liberation, supporting Lefebvre's theory that such spaces are made via people's lived experiences and abilities. For this reason, the brothel serves as a potent example that heterotopias and differential spaces function to both mirror and subvert established social orders.

### Analysis

The myth of the postmodern city is marked by disjunction and fragmentation. In the novel, *10 minutes 38 seconds in this Strange World*, Istanbul's brothel serves as heterotopic locations that reveal the deep social marginalization and isolation of women in Turkish society. Istanbul, frequently glorified as a bridge between East and West, modernity and tradition, yet features the ruptured and contradictory areas in which impoverished individuals are driven to the margins. "Istanbul was not a city of opportunities, but a city of scars" (Shafak 113). In this postmodern city, the brothel functions as a place where gender, purity, and honor myths are created and dismantled, exposing the underlying inequalities and conflicts in the society. In addition to serving as a paradigm for modern social and economic advancement, the city is also a site of metaphysical reality, "a place where the real and the imagined are persistently commingled in ways we have only begun to understand..." (Hatz

<sup>3</sup> Stewart, Lynn. " Bodies, visions, and spatial politics: a review essay on Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space*." *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 13.5 (1995): 609-618.

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*The* story of Leila, a considerable prostitute, is a traumatic story of physical and psychological exploitation. *10 minutes 38 seconds in this Strange World* addresses the place of sex workers in Istanbul who are persistently and widely considered as others or outcasts in the society. Leila, the main character of the story is a representative of a specific social class that must deal with this mindset on a daily basis. Her life is even more horrible because she was compelled to enter into this undesired space<sup>4</sup>. Leila loses the link that binds her to her family after losing the foundation that her family provided, and she reaches a point where she is no longer bound by the conventions, values, and obligations of the typical social structure. After moving to Istanbul, Leila is entrapped by a man and a woman, who were considerably agents “who sold her to a stranger the same night, and within a week to several others” (Shafak 113).

In Shafak's *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in this Strange World*, the idea of heterotopias is consistent with the way the brothels have been portrayed. Heterotopias are places that defy conventional social norms and structures. According to Foucault, heterotopias are actual locations with a dual character: they are both connected and isolated at the same time, reflecting and defying social norms. Heterotopias are described as places where a “normal ordering of things is juxtaposed with the different ordering of things.” The unexpected result of this juxtaposition is that it exposes the typical “order of things” (Beckett 4). Foucault describes heterotopia as places that function to make the existing orders as easily decipherable. The portrayal of the brothel encourages readers to investigate the complex relationships between location, identity, and social standards via the perspective of Foucault's heterotopias. The story emphasizes how unconventional settings like brothels may be the hubs for rethinking social possibilities, resistance, and resilience.

Brothels are often located in a deteriorated area of the city, far from the lively, busy streets that are being visited by the general public. It is situated in an area that is very different from the city's more reputable and well-known neighborhoods. “There was the street of brothels. A worn-out iron gate marked the boundary between the interior and the exterior. In front of the gate, there stood a few police officers on eight-hour shifts. Some of them visibly hated their job; they despised this street of ill repute and anyone who crossed its threshold: women and men alike” (Shafak 46). This physical isolation emphasizes how society wants to marginalize and conceal things that are viewed as immoral and taboo. The deep psychological and emotional isolation that permeates heterotopic environments symbolizes the depression and suffering that these women endure. Their estrangement from the majority of society and the social stigma they encounter intensifies these emotions as

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<sup>4</sup> Mehdi, Muntazar, Uzma Moen, and Shanza Abbasi. “Abjection And Marginalization Of Females: A Critical Review Of Leila’s Character In Elif Shafak’s Novel *10 Minutes 38 Seconds In This Strange World*.” *Pakistan Journal of Gender Studies* 22.1 (2022): 67-82.

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Shafak mentions that depression was common among the women on this street, tearing into their souls as fire tears into the wood. “No one ever used the word though. Miserable, was what they said to describe them” (Shafak 125). By addressing this gap, the research provides a thorough examination of the human experience on the periphery of civilization, ultimately pushing readers to consider the limits that both define and imprison individuals.

Prostitution can be seen as a brutal result of male lust and coercion, where women were compelled to give up their virtue and were continually exploited and abused in the sex trade. The explicit and implicit analyses of male power shed light on the ways in which men, both as individuals and as a group, exercise dominance and control over social institutions. It frequently results in the exploitation of women. The abuse appears in interpersonal relations, where men utilize their ability to control and marginalize women, as well as in more extensive social designs that propagate and support these elements (Hanmer 7). Leila is driven into the prostitution because of her dire conditions, which are exacerbated by cultural disregard and the manipulative actions of men around her. As Shafak mentions the Article 438 of the Turkish Penal Code that rapists who could demonstrate that their victim was a prostitute would have their sentence reduced by a third. The item was defended by lawmakers using a claim that “a prostitute’s mental or physical health could not be negatively affected by rape” (Shafak 307). This intensifies the systematic abuse that women like Leila experience, having a profound effect on her identity by reiterating her marginalization and dehumanization in a culture that upholds her vulnerability and enslavement. She is continually exploited and abused once she enters the brothel, demonstrating male power dynamics and societal disregard place women in vulnerable positions.

In Elif Shafak’s *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in this Strange World*, marginalized women are rendered powerless in the brothel setting, echoing the subaltern state outlined by Gramsci and later elaborated by the Subaltern Studies Group. According to Gramsci, “those who are never permitted to take part in the power formation process that restricts them, contrary to it; they bring them to heels” (Hussain 484). These powerless entities are always forced to rely on the dominant class. They are never free to be who they really are and stand up for what is right. Subalterns continue to be ruled by the upper class as per their status of being low class. The novel portrays the women confined to the brothel as a representation of this oppressed class, caught in a vicious circle of reliance on the dominant forces of society, especially male authority and social conventions. As Shafak portrays their state; “they were punished in whatever way their families saw fit; how they could never fully become part of society again, humiliated and disgraced, a hollow cast to their youthful features” (Shafak 92). As these women are not allowed to speak up for themselves and their territories, their bodies and souls, they continue to be seen as others in this heterotopic space. This place functions as a microcosm of the larger societal systems that keep individuals voiceless and powerless, while isolating and exposing them.

Leila’s transition into the heterotopic space marked by her forced entry into prostitution forces her to see her life through the lens of marginalization. Her only chance to survival remains to be isolated in a brothel. The brothel becomes a crucible where her childhood ends not merely through physical maturation but through a profound realization of her outsider status. “She yet understands that the end of childhood comes not when a child’s body changes with puberty, but when her mind is finally able to see her life through the eyes of an outsider” (Shafak 44). Her experiences in the brothel expose her to the systemic and institutional forces that perpetuate her otherness, making the brothel a tangible manifestation of her newfound perspective on life. Thus, Leila’s shift from innocence to outsider awareness is deeply intertwined with her experiences in the brothel. The heterotopic nature of the

brothel highlights her marginalized status and reinforces the theme of othering, illustrating how physical spaces and social conditions shape and deepen her self-perception.

## Conclusion

Leila's life goes through a "passage," which denotes a displacement and an ongoing, unfinished process of change. Her marginal status, which originates from the rites of separation, leads her to an abnormal state outside of society that differs from the typical social structure and its norms. Here, she begins interacting with Istanbul's multicultural society by assuming the identity of "Tequila Leila" (Bhat 62). Nevertheless, she was forced to endure the harsh realities and cruelty of her life as an "outsider" as a member of the brothel. The novel *10 minutes 38 seconds in this Strange World* delves into the experiences of a woman navigating the heterotopic world of brothel culture, where they face limitations and silence in both public and private domains.

This research explores brothels as spaces between real and utopian spaces that isolate and penetrate the undesirable bodies within the urban environment. Heterotopias, as defined by Foucault, are spaces that are othered, mirroring and yet upsetting what is outside. The brothel, as a heterotopic space, is both isolated from standard society and penetrable through unambiguous entry sections, establishing a deviant space with its norms and values. The study, thereof, contributes to the depiction of the brothel by examining the intricacies and contradictions inherent in these heterotopic contexts by going beyond simple physical space.

These outcast bodies struggle and are challenged within this intricate social framework. People confined in these heterotopic spaces yearn for independence, "to remember the sweetness of, and to yearn for, freedom" (Shafak 121) but are restrained by standards that dictate their silence to prevent upsetting the status quo. These bodies struggle to fully express their experiences and viewpoints, "too frightened to bolt and too lame to dare" (Shafak 120) because structures and societal norms marginalize their identities, making it difficult for them to fully express their aspirations. Thus, Shafak depicts Leila as a heterotopic being on the edge of two realms, isolation, and penetration, being in neither but having connections to both.

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