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Waterful to Waterless

(जलसमृद्धीकडून जल अभावाकडे)

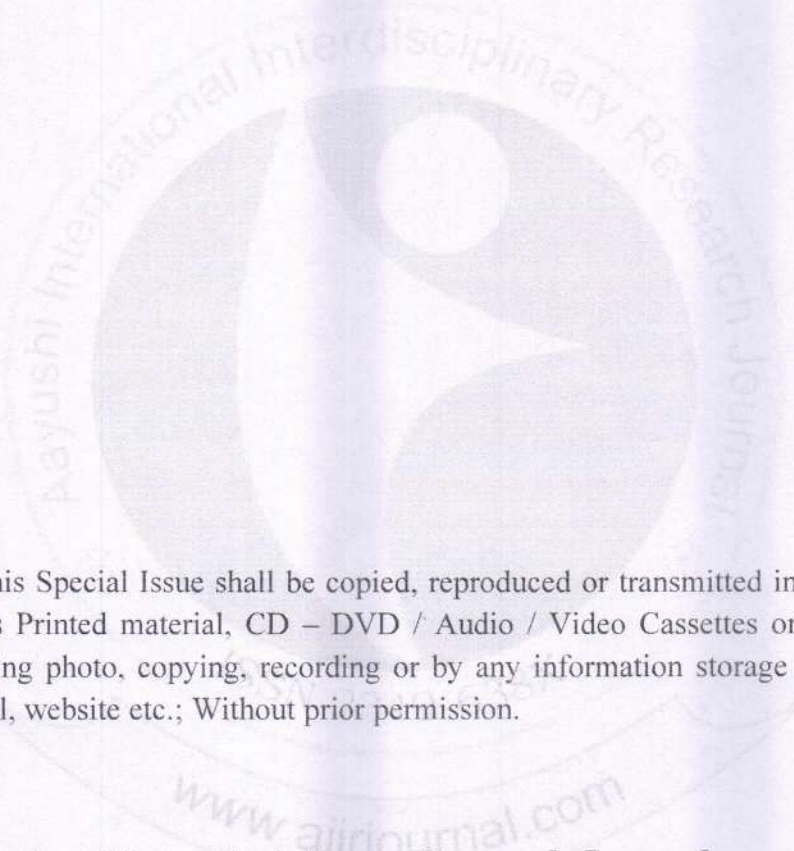
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Waters Of Memory : Exploring Migration, Exile And Roots in Elif Shafak's "There Are Rivers in The Sky"

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Abstract

This paper examines the motif of water as a structuring metaphor in Elif Şafak's novel There Are Rivers in the Sky. Reading the novel through the lenses of migration studies, exile theory, and memory studies, the paper argues that Şafak uses aquatic imagery and topographies of movement to negotiate questions of identity, belonging, and intergenerational trauma. The analysis foregrounds three primary trajectories migration, exile and roots and shows how they converge in narrative techniques that oscillate between fragmentation and continuity, rupture and flow. Elif Shafak's novel "There Are Rivers in the Sky" beautifully explores themes of migration, exile, and roots through the concept of water having memory. The story weaves together three lives across different timelines, connected by the rivers Tigris and Thames.

Keywords: vapor, Mesopotamian, genocide & Gilgamesh

Introduction

Elif Shafak is an award-winning British-Turkish novelist and the most widely read female author in Turkey. She writes in both Turkish and English and has published seventeen books, eleven of which are novels. Her work has been translated into fifty languages. *There Are Rivers in the Sky* is an ambitious, multi-perspective novel about the politics and preciousness of water ranges from ancient Mesopotamia to contemporary London. From the first page to the last, this novel is imbued with the essence of the water sign. It commences with a single raindrop and concludes with a deluge. Elif Shafak informs us that every droplet of water conceals the secret of infinity; water possesses memory and rivers are particularly adept at retaining it. The two rivers that are most prominently highlighted in this narrative are the Tigris and the Thames. Both rivers are nourished by various tributaries and numerous currents contribute to their flow. This is similarly true of the novel itself, which intertwines several distinct stories emerging from different eras and locations.

He who saw the deep.....

He saw what was secrete, discovered what was hidden,

He brought us a tale of the days before the flood.

The phrase "rivers in the sky" refers to atmospheric rivers, which are long, narrow bands of moisture in the atmosphere that transport water vapor, particularly outside the tropics. It can also refer to Elif Shafak's novel, *There Are Rivers in the Sky*, which explores themes of memory, water and interconnectedness through characters from different time periods. The story follows different characters 19th century Mesopotamian, a Victorian Londoner and a contemporary character whose lives are connected through time by a single drop of water. Elif Şafak's fiction frequently engages themes of displacement, hybridity and memory. In *There Are Rivers in the Sky*, water is not only a recurring image but a conceptual system that unites the novel's concerns with mobility and home. This paper reads the novel as a meditation on how migratory histories are narrated, remembered and transmitted across generations. It places Şafak's work in conversation with theoretical approaches to exile and Diaspora and argues that the novel reframes rootlessness as a condition that simultaneously erodes and generates belonging.

As water scarcity grows, sea levels rise around the world and scandals over the illegal dumping of sewage into our rivers and seas continue, a novel about the politics and preciousness of water is timely. *There Are Rivers in the Sky* begins with an appealing magical realist proposition: it will follow the lifespan of a raindrop, as it is consumed, subsumed and transformed across continents and centuries. Here, we commence our journey in ancient Mesopotamia. A droplet descends into the hair of the tyrant Ashurbanipal. An "erudite king," who oversees an exceptional library that houses the Epic of Gilgamesh, Ashurbanipal is acutely aware of the transformative power of storytelling. Fast forward, albeit somewhat abruptly, to the

grimy mid-Victorian London. The raindrop has transformed into a snowflake. We encounter it resting on the tongue of the urchin Arthur Smyth, as his mother a destitute mud lark gives birth to him on the banks of the Thames.

*Later when the storm has passed,
everyone will talk about the destruction it left behind,
though no one, not even the king himself,
will remember that it all began with a single drop.*

In the ancient city of Nineveh, located along the banks of the River Tigris, King Ashurbanipal of Mesopotamia, both learned and merciless, established a magnificent library that would eventually decay with the conclusion of his rule. Yet, from its remnants arose a poem, the Epic of Gilgamesh, which would intertwine the fate of two rivers and connect three lives. In London, in the year 1840, Arthur is born next to the foul, sewage-laden River Thames. With a father who is abusive and an alcoholic, and a mother suffering from mental illness, Arthur's sole opportunity to escape poverty lies in his exceptional memory. When this talent secures him an apprenticeship at a prominent publishing house, Arthur's horizons expand far beyond the slums, and one particular book piques his interest: Nineveh and Its Remains.

In Turkey, in 2014, Narin, a ten-year-old Yazidi girl, receives a diagnosis of a rare condition that will soon lead to her deafness. Before this occurs, her grandmother is resolute in baptizing her in a sacred temple in Iraq. However, with the escalating threat of ISIS and the devastation of their ancestral lands along the Tigris, Narin finds herself racing against time. In London, in 2018, Zaleekah, a hydrologist recently divorced, relocates to a houseboat on the Thames to flee from her husband. Orphaned and brought up by her affluent uncle, Zaleekah had resolved to end her life within a month, until a fascinating book about her homeland alters her perspective entirely.

Arthur's relationship with the Thames symbolizes his struggle against the surrounding turmoil and his desire for clarity and connection with the past. The Thames, as a polluted and stagnant river, represents the societal decay and the personal burdens he carries. Its restoration parallels Arthur's own journey toward healing and understanding his identity. Memory surfaces in the lives of Arthur and Zaleekah as both characters grapple with their pasts. Arthur's memories of family and loss motivate his quest for knowledge, while Zaleekah's connection to her family's stories informs her understanding of water's significance. For both, memory acts as a driving force, urging them to uncover truths and seek healing. This is her latest publication, which centres on the concept of water possessing memory that a single drop of water could exist multiple times over the years, could recycle itself repeatedly, and connect with various individuals across different eras and locations on Earth. We trace the journey of a drop of water through several cycles of its existence, spanning ancient Mesopotamia, the banks of the River Thames in the 1800s; back to what is now Iraq and Turkey in 2014 and finally returning to London in 2018.

Shafak employs a technique of drawing upon actual historical events to predict the future for those who disregard the numerous climate crises of their time. Consequently, 'There are Rivers in the Sky' serves not only as climate fiction but also as a record of the Yazidi genocide, a narrative about the romance of early archaeological digs, and an exploration of the intricacies of human existence, appealing to a wide range of reader interests. This thematic and descriptive maximalism is characteristic of Shafak's literary style. However, at some point in what the author refers to as her 'love song to rivers', the use of water metaphors becomes overextended, and the frequent connection of various events and narratives to water often appears contrived. The narrative highlights the significance of storytelling and remembrance as vital instruments for cultural preservation and resistance to historical erasure. It asserts that narratives, whether conveyed through oral tradition or written texts, act as legacies that pay tribute to past experiences and guarantee that voices and histories are not forgotten over time.

Water..... the strongest chemical, the great mystery.

With two hydrogen atoms at the tips, each bounded to single oxygen

At the centre, it is a bent molecule, not linear, if it is linear, there would be no life on earth

..... no stories to tell.

Water as Memory: Motif and Metaphor

Water in 'There Are Rivers in the Sky' functions on multiple symbolic levels. It is:

Mnemonic

Bodies of water, rain and rivers trigger recollection, functioning like an externalized archive where memories sediment and resurface.

Transportive

Seas, rivers and flights enable movement that characterizes migration as physical relocation and psychic passage.

Connecting and Dividing

Water bridges distant geographies but also marks borders (coasts, sea routes) that structure dangerous journeys and separations.

Migration: Routes

Şafak's characters move across cities, nations and emotional states. Migration in the novel appears both as a deliberate act and as an imposed condition. The narrative treats journeys as layered: immediate travel longitudinal family migrations and internal migrations. The paper highlights how Şafak destabilizes linear migration narratives by using non-chronological storytelling: past and present fold into one another like tides.

Exile and the Ethics of Longing

Exile in Şafak's novel is experienced both as physical displacement and as existential estrangement. Characters express a double consciousness a simultaneous attraction to and alienation from places called home.

Water imagery deepens the sense of exile:

The sea at night can represent the unknown future; rain can both baptize and erode. Exile's temporality is also intertwined with water: prolonged waiting is like being held in a tide pool suspended between shores.

Roots: Remembering and Re-rooting

If migration and exile dissolve fixed attachments, the novel persistently returns to motifs of roots genealogies, family stories and culinary practices that anchor identity. Roots in Şafak's narrative are not simplistic returns to origin; they are active processes of negotiation. Rootedness emerges through storytelling practices, language, food and the ritualized passing of objects. The novel suggests a reparative model of roots rather than insisting on authenticity or purity, re-rooting is about patching, weaving and creating continuity despite rupture. Water metaphors support this re-rooting: like river deltas that disperse into the sea yet nourish the land, diasporic communities scatter but create new fertile spaces.

Intergenerational Transmission and Memory Work:

A significant thread in the novel is how traumatic and formative memories pass between generations. Şafak explores mechanisms of transmission direct storytelling, inadvertent hints and embodied habits.

Key Themes**Water as Memory**

The novel highlights water's ability to remember, symbolizing the continuity of life and experiences. This theme is reflected in the quote, "Water remembers. It is humans who forget."

Migration and Displacement

The stories of Narin, a young Yazidi girl, Arthur Smyth, an Assyriologist and Zaleekhah Clarke, a hydrologist, showcase the struggles of migration and exile. Their experiences are intertwined with the Epic of Gilgamesh, emphasizing the universal quest for knowledge and connection.

Roots and Identity

The novel explores the importance of understanding one's roots and heritage. As Şafak writes, "Home is where your absence is felt, the echo of your voice kept alive."

Interconnectedness

Through the characters' stories, the novel demonstrates the interconnectedness of human experiences across time and space.

Symbolism of Rivers**Tigris and Thames**

The two rivers serve as a backdrop for the characters' journeys, symbolizing the flow of life, history and memory.

Water's Dual Nature: Water is portrayed as both a source of life and a harbinger of death, reflecting the complexities of human experiences.

Conclusion

There Are Rivers in the Sky stages a complex interplay between water, memory and movement. Safak's aquatic metaphors perform critical work: they make visible the flows that constitute diasporic life and offer languages for re-rooting in the aftermath of dislocation. The novel does not resolve the tensions between exile and belonging; rather, it models how literature can hold those tensions and offer provisional forms of repair. Overall, "There Are Rivers in the Sky" is a thought-provoking novel that explores the human condition through the lens of water, memory and migration by examining the interconnectedness of human experiences. Shafak's work encourages readers to reflect on their own relationships with their past, present and future.

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