THE EVER-SURPRISING ELIF SHAFAK: "THERE ARE RIVERS IN THE SKY"

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Abstract: Elif Shafak's new novel, the story of a lost poem, published in 2024, surprises the readers again. Not only does it focus on a host of historical-cultural issues, but it also creates a very subtle, complex narrative structure. The time span encapsulated in the novel astonishes by its vastness: the novel starts with Arthur's birth on the banks of the River Thames during Queen Victoria's reign. The other two narrative threads, closely interwoven with the former, jumps to our times, 2014 and 2018, by the River Tigris and the River Thames, unfolding Narin's and Zaleekhah's life stories, respectively. This article aims at following the intricate design of the three storylines, while trying to reveal the versatility and rich imagery of Shafak's truly amazing prose.

Keywords: Thames, Tigris, Gilgamesh, Yazidi, lamassu

Elif Shafak, for sure one of the greatest prose writers of our times, award winner, advocate for women's rights and LGBTQ rights, holder of the prestigious title of Chevalier des Arts et des Lettres, author of seventeen novels, each and every one uniquely complex and refined in its own way, works wonder anew with her last novel. "There Are Rivers in the Sky" stands out for a host of reasons: the narrative structure, the historical and aesthetical background, the intercultural overarching topics, the abundance of colorful, illustrative images, but also its humanitarian appeal to freedom and equality - and this at a time of great turmoil, dissention, and tragedy across the world. Shafak showcases three remarkable interconnected stories within the frame story of a lost tablet on which a fragment of the "Epic of Gilgamesh" was inscribed.

The novel opens with a 'prologue' titled "Raindrop". By the River Tigris, in Niniveh, in olden times: *a place like no other: the world's largest and wealthiest city. Built on a spacious plain on the eastern bank of the Tigris, it is so close to the river that at night babies are hushed to sleep not by a lullaby but by the sound of the waves lapping at the shoreline, (Shafak, 2024:4)* the master of this grand place, Ashurbanipal, the *Emperor of the Four Quarters of the World, The* Librarian *King, The Educated Monarch, The Erudite Ruler of Mesopotamia (Shafak, 2024:5)* proudly admires the opulence of his city, ignoring echoes and warnings heralding the burning to the ground and disappearance of the magnificent city.

When it arrives on earth, the Raindrop falls on the Emperor's head; this is the beginning of the journey of the Drop of Water from the sky to the earth and back to the sky – a journey which will connect the stories of the three protagonists: *Yesterday I was a river. Tomorrow, I may return as a raindrop. (Shafak, 2024:182)* We are all entangled in this never-ending circle of life.

Ashurbanipal's proudest creation is his Library *his lifetime's ambition, an achievement unrivalled in scope and scale. (Shafak, 2024:7)* The entrance to the library is flanked by two lamassus, sculptures which have the head of a man, the wings of an eagle and the body of a bull or a lion. These protective spirits will act as a second connecting piece in the broader structure of the novel. Thousands of years later, in England, by the river Thames, Nen, an artist and tattooist shares Ashurbanipal's fascination with the legendary mythic hybrid creature, the lamassu.

In youth Ashurbanipal studied philosophy, history, oil divination, languages and literature, thus ascending to the throne as a highly cultured ruler. The poem he knows by heart

in its entirety is the "Epic of Gilgamesh". The gem of the Emperor's Library is a brightly-colored tablet of lapis lazuli on which these lines are carefully incised:

He Who Saw the Deep…
He saw what was secret, discovered what was hidden,
He brought us a tale of the days before the Flood. (Shafak, 2024:10)

This tablet will be the third element aligning the three storylines around the core theme of the novel: the humans' strife for knowledge, freedom, dignity irrespective of status, race, nationality, religion, time. Sadly, all three protagonists face hardship, disappointment, suppression, violence, death: Arthur Smyth loses his life, Zaleekah reconsiders her whole life, while Narin flees her country and witnesses the genocide of the Yazidi community by the Islamic State – and the death of her own grandmother.

The threefold saga, while recounted parallelly and alternatively, is harmoniously interwoven by the presence of the two rivers, the life-giving water. When defining water as three atoms joined to form water – H-O-H – she summarizes "There Are Rivers in the Sky": *Three characters connect across borders of time and place, and together they make this story…(Shafak, 2024:19)* Wherever they are, whatever they do, Shafak's characters' lives are inextricably linked to rivers, to water. Narin's grandmother, Besma, a healer, has the amazing ability to detect underground sources of water: *She can discern the locations of lost rivers, hidden canals and forgotten creeks – aquatic sources tucked away in the most unlikely places, even under barren hills…The water inside us communes with the water outside us. (Shafak, 2024:96)* Narin also finds out from her grandmother the rivers have personalities. Thus, some are winding calmly across fertile plains, others flow aggressively, surging with anger. The River Tigris has always been 'swift' and 'mad', while the Euphrates takes its time to run calmly towards the sea. They are both born in the depth of the Taurus Mountain, run parallel along their course until they disappear in the Persian Gulf, but have so very different 'personalities'. Besma, the water dowser, listens to the sounds of the rivers and interprets their aquatic language. She knows that in Mesopotamia *the one true ruler is water. (Shafak, 2024: 184)*

The River Tigris especially is depicted almost as a living organism. It is an old river and has a 'liquid memory'; the Ancients called it 'the tiger', and it is believed to have flowed out of the Garden of Eden, *it gleams with unearthly light, frightening and beautiful and mysterious, nurturing life above and below the ground. (Shafak, 2024: 312)*

Paradoxically, the Yazidi community, living in the village of Hasankeyf, on the banks of the Tigris River, are forced to leave, as their homes will be engulfed by water when the new dam is finished. The living and the dead will be affected by this man-made flooding: *Our houses and grapevines and fig groves, even Grandma's pistachio trees will drown…(Shafak,2024:142)* Both the graves of Arthur Smyth and Leila, Narin's great-great-grandmother, the young woman Arthur fell in love with, will be condemned to eternal oblivion. In the hands of fiendish, power-thirsty people, the same water of the holy Valley of Lalish, where Narin has to be baptized, becomes a dismal instrument of destruction.

Zaleekhah Clarke, one of the three protagonists, is a hydrologist fascinated by the mysteries of water. She brings a scientific perspective on the preciousness of water, and its crass mistreatment in modern times. She knows that water *is the oldest and most common substance ever known (Shafak, 2024:115)* It is older than the earth and even the sun or the solar system itself. She also knows that water is still mysterious, still to be discovered. She also knows that it is a miracle that in spite of heavy pollution, overpopulation, acidification and biodiversity loss the Raindrop survives again and again ever since the beginning of time.

Significantly, Zaleekhah moves to a houseboat, bearing a symbolical name, 'She Who Saw the Deep', a slightly changed quote from "Gilgamesh", hoping to overcome a major crisis in her life. Like Besma, the Yazidi healer, she knows how to listen to the murmurs and whispers of water, but she also knows that rivers got lost all through history. They were pushed away by expanding cities, hiding underground, where they still live. The Bievre is nowadays buried deeply under the capital of France, but used to be an important waterway until it was heavily polluted when they covered and forgot about it.

The reader finds out that there are lost rivers all over the planet. Tokyo, for instance, used to be a city of water in the past. Researchers have found out that more than one hundred streams and canals were filled in to give way to the building of networks of roads and pavements. Also historically, Athens – suffering today of a chronic lack of water – was crisscrossed by three rivers, which are now buried under layers and layers of cement and concrete. All these 'dead' rivers and streams are still there deep down under the surface and wait to be back in the open air because *they are still part of us, all those ghosts that we thought we'd buried deep inside, and, if we don't face up to them, they'll continue to haunt us. (Shafak, 2024:165)*

Arthur Smyth, the third leading character of the novel is born during Victorian times, in 1840, on the murky, muddy banks of the River Thames. His mother, Arabella, a tosher, who together with fellow toshers is in search of anything useful in the muck on the bank of the river, unexpectedly gives birth to a boy she does not want: *Chuck the baby into the water. I cannot take care of him. Let the Thames take care of my son. (Shafak, 2024:* 26*)* This is how the little boy, who will be called by the toshers Arthur of the Sewers and Slums, comes into the world on the muddy secluded edge of the Chelsea waterfront: *A child of the river he is, and so he will remain all his life. (Shafak, 2024: 29)* While he suckles milk from his mother's breast, it starts to snow. The eternal Raindrop has now taken the form of a snowflake. It is the same Raindrop that passed through the Emperor's palace, his library, the luxurious gardens and fountains. Burdened with memories of its previous lives, among which Ashurbanipal's dream of eternal glory, the Raindrop-Snowflake alights on the face of the newly-born baby. The drop of milk and the snowflake melt in his mouth. This taste will stay with him for ever. Later on, when he is asked what snow tastes like, his answer will be: *Like mother's milk. (Shafak, 2024: 30)*

Miraculously, this unwanted baby boy is born with an incredible gift: a brilliant memory, the ability to acquire any amount of knowledge, to discover and innovate, to persevere in his endeavors. A book he is fascinated by, "Niniveh and Its Remains" teaches him how to read cuneiform, a logo-syllabic script used by ancient civilizations, and sends him across the world in quest of 'the lost poem', a fragment of the "Epic of Gilgamesh, carved on the lapis- lazuli tablet, the most precious piece in Ashurbanipal's library. He sets out to find the missing lines of Gilgamesh buried in the sand, in the ruins of the formerly magnificent Niniveh. Although in doubt about the success of his pilgrimage, he *yearns, with a force he cannot resist, to follow the siren call that has been summoning him since he was a boy. Three magical syllables: Ni-ni-veh. (Shafak, 2024: 265)* Arthur's expeditions to Asia lead him to Narin's Yazidi ancestors, whom he starts knowing better and whose language he learns. The budding love story between the Englishman and Leila, the Yazidi young woman ends tragically; they will lie side by side in the graveyard soon to be flooded; Arthur and Leila are united aquatically, both of them 'children of the river'.

As demonstrated, characters and subplots in "There Are Rivers in the Sky" are connected through recurring, often symbolical, motifs and thematic parallels. The three main plots, therefore, are interconnected, glued together by illustrative and symbolical elements. Nonetheless, despite the colorful, tremendously rich imagery and the multiplicity of themes and motifs, "There Are Rivers in the Sky" is a glorifying of Water.

This article cannot come to an end before mentioning that Elif Shafak, while writing a historical epic, is also deeply concerned about contemporary humanitarian issues like climate change, pollution, parental abandonment, dire poverty, persecution, taboos, and above all, ethnical cleansing and the danger of violence – more specifically the genocide of the Yazidis by the Islamic State.

Finally, Shafak confesses in the very last page she did not only put her mind in the novel but also her heart, and she even let her heart lead the way. The result is exquisite poetic prose, a page turner, a book you do not want to finish. The very last sentence is a reiteration of the all-embracing theme: *This novel is my love song to rivers – those still living and those that are long gone. (Shafak, 2024:483)*

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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