

The Aesthetics of Decay in Elif Shafak's 'The Flea Palace'

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Abstract

This study is an attempt to investigate the aesthetic of decay as a seminal feature in Elif Shafak's 'The Flea Palace'. It is to argue that decay operates not merely as an atmospheric backdrop but as a substantial critical lens through which memory, history, and sociocultural elements are apprehended. In 'The Flea Palace', Elif Shafak portrays physical elements which are metaphorically and symbolically in line with social, psychological and moral decay and decline. The study that foregrounds decay as a motif intends to trace how deteriorating environments, eroding memories, and crumbling institutions yield narrative contact zones and how voices reflect belonging, memory, and identity. Through close readings of symbolic and metaphorical decay, this interdisciplinary analysis reveals the writer's revalorization of decay as a productive archive rather than a mere sign of physical decline. The aesthetic of decay thus facilitates an ethical reflection, a social perspective and a psychological scrutiny on the notions of intergenerational responsibility, migration, and the destabilization of grand narratives of modernity. The findings which highlight Shafak's distinctive method of turning loss into an instrument of meaningful imagination, would contribute to contemporary debates on the aesthetics of ruin, narrative time, and the politics of place in world literature.

Keywords: Decay, Structure, Elif Shafak, Memory, Disintegration

1. Introduction

Arts and Literature are the presentation and expression of the underlying instances in life. Writers whether immersed in certain philosophical thoughts, regional specifications or exposed to many cultural, social and political developments have amplified the voices, either audible or unheard, through their stories' aspects and elements. Elif Shafak, the contemporary British Turkish award-winning novelist, has presented a variety of characters in her stories with the background of Turkish culture, society including the religious and traditional codes. Her incorporation of "various motifs from her own life story into her works" and her art and interest in connecting past, present and future have established her as a highly accomplished novelist (Parlak & Irgatoglu, 2026. P. 3). This has marked the burgeoning admiration in her works revealed through the numbers of her novels' translations which justifies her cosmopolitan identity (Dogangun, 2021. P. 2021).

'The Flea Palace', originally published in 2002, is rather a long novel casting a variety of characters who live in Istanbul. The building, formerly known as Bonbon Palace, was once grand and stately and, now, has lost the grandeur and is within the status of dilapidation. Each floor, apartment and resident has a story, and the building, itself, has become a character, alive and dynamic in creating meaning in/for people's lives. Turan (2019) underscores such dynamism combined with the different layers of the characters' psychological status as a microcosm of the whole society embodying political, economic, and social features.

Shafak's writing in 'The Flea Palace' is an affirmative hint at her profound understanding and observation of people's character in her society. Despite the novel's comic tone, polyphonic narrative form and its multicultural presentation, the phenomenon of decay having been placed at the center, has been overlooked. For Shafak, decay and deterioration is not incidental but it is thematically the organizing element that bonds and generates the physical and psychological features of the novel. Thus, this study intends to decode the novel's embodiment of decay not as a physical sign but as an epistemological addressing. The physical integration of materials represents the individuals' fragmentation and buried traumas. Here, the phenomenon of decay becomes a discourse and a narrative method that responds to the question of how the theme of degeneration, destruction metaphorically being prevailed in the novel could be the writer's aestheticization of decay of social and moral norms.

2. Review of Literature

The scholars' engagement with her works has fallen under depiction of Turkey's multicultural spirit, women's treatment and status and socio-cultural codes and encounters. Despite the growing interest among both readers and some leading Houses of Publication, the works reviewed show that Shafak's 'The Flea Palace' has not received the critical attentions adequately. Most research show women's marginalization and inferiority as the allegedly predominant themes in most of her novels. A study on one of her novels demonstrates the consequence of a religious society that silenced women and violated their rights. By highlighting the taboos, Shafak has criticized the becoming Turkey for forcing the women to be quiet because of their family's reputation and survival (Hussain et al., 2023). Gayas (2016) also discusses women's suffering because they are constantly controlled and dominated by men (P.13). The persistent "intergenerational trauma" is what is left for the victims even if they had not been directly affected (Saleem and Abbas, 2025. P. 327). In the same way, Nafea Al-Sammarraie (2019), connecting Shafak's background to her stories and characters, mentioned that Turkey's environment and culture influenced Shafak's depiction of otherness of the women (P. 660). Inevitably, Abou Adel (2023) argues that presentation of such violence can bring about a savage image of the Turkish Culture in the mind of non-eastern readers. Kokcu (2020) restated the same condition that the other would continuously suggest a convincing position for violence, prejudices and discrimination. Turkish stories of Shafak resonate the oriental stories in which the image of the east is visibly a cliché portrayal of people, culture and society (Ichim, 2022).

Shafak's characters reveal personalities and mentalities of some traditional layers of the society whose lives are influenced by the religious and cultural characteristics. This criticism includes questioning how power is exercised in the culture and how social codes sound subversive and outdated. Hanif et al. (2025) called this attitude a grotesque one in which women are marginalized and become oppressed. At the same time, women's tolerance, patience and resilience are said to be instrumental in shaping their identity and motivating them to continue their life and to adapt to their situations (Jarrar, 2014). The socio-cultural framework in Shafak's works can be addressed as a part of the individuals' experiences in everyday life in Turkey. Men and women are presented with their own gender point of view building "their Turkish identity" (Cheikosman, 2024. P. 3). Cheikosman (2024), further, makes an analogy between Shafak's settings and characters and a museum in which the construction of identity in association with the notion of gender is explored. A long with this generality lies the stereotypical idea that Shafak, as a woman writer, must write about the women who are not satisfied with their life because of the religious and geographical issues (Fox, 2023).

That the subjects and themes of spirituality, religion and divinity are predictably interwoven is undeniable due to the specific features of the region. The exploration of Sufism and its sophisticated association to love and self-awareness could be related to Turkey's atmosphere as well. Creating such themes and content is not her admiring craftsmanship since her utilizing of stylistic devices such as polyphony, linguistic constructions and narrative techniques, has multiplied her impact on the literary tradition (Abou Adel, 2024, Mudasir et al., 2025). Whether Islamic or non-Islamic, the work's search for self is a journey of understanding and discovering (Rahim, 2023). The love, in 'Forty Rules of Love' which has been studied researched on, found through the journey of searching for the self can be proclaimed as the one beyond transcendence and divinity. This true love, according to what Mukhtiar and Ullah (2025), is not the emotion defined and known corporally; it is, but, an awakening universally harmonious with the nature of the human being. In addition, the search for true love and true self are said to be the unique and unified philosophy that brings about meaning and faith (Sethi, 2017). Following the same idea, Fox (2023) pointed at the novel's style in which two potential readers explored the novel and the story within the novel. Depiction of women in Shafak's works is, furthermore, a part of spirituality; an earthly character whose presence and participation brings a sense of divinity into the narrative. Assadi (2023) has addressed the same idea by both referring to women and womanhood as the unity of spirituality and physicality and highlighting the essential role of women in challenging the patriarchal traditions and norms. Not only such traditions but personal mental problems can be overcome by women's spirituality. This according to Sidi Abdullah (2021) is because of the religion. The writer emphasizes the pivotal role of the religion in giving the women sufficient strength to take risks and to carry on in their lives.

Shafak's using of Istanbul, in most of her works, is more than what has been mentioned because a place might suggest more dimensions into people's lives. The Ottoman Empire definitely affected the modern Turkey's identity and its national culture

making the writers delve into the map of a city, Istanbul for instance, as the presentation of a character's thoughts and feelings (Turan, 2023). Orhan Pamuk, Joseph Kanon and Yasar Kemal are among other writers who used Istanbul as the setting to reveal the characters' life (Baykent, 2018). The city's complex map reverberates the human being's multilayered mind as the city's ancient and modern structure intertwined giving the notion of conscious, unconscious and subconscious mind (Uz et al., 2019). Negative attributions such as discrimination, poverty, hunger and loss are presented by Pamuk as the "principal emotion of Istanbul that unites its residents" which points at the writer's creativity in personification of a space (Akcan, 2006. P. 39). Evolving from a mere sense of the setting as the narrative's requirement, Istanbul does not stay the same and it changes with time and the character's development. The city's components contribute to making meanings. Istanbul, according to Hezam (2020), equals to Dicken's London or to James Joyce's Dublin where the readers feeling and thoughts are mingled with the presented culture and people. In the same way, Istanbul as the setting, plays an internal part in creating and transforming people's identity and culture. Each item in the city such as the bridges or turns and twists in the streets articulates certain features turning into a recurring theme (Furlanetto and Tufekcioglu, 2021). It highlights the fact that Shafak employs Istanbul as an active participant to her spatial narrative with the sense of identity. The neighborhoods, buildings and alleys become the threshold of mapping a character emphasizing the idea that such motifs have not been accidentally picked and drawn by Shafak in the novel. Decay, deterioration and degradation, though sound to be a natural consequence of time and environmental factors, play a pivotal role in "The Flea Palace" reverberating its shaping quality and adjusting theme.

3. Theoretical Framework

The concept of decay has been on and off within the realm of the Aesthetics. The aesthetic relation between the art, artist and environment built the base of modern criticism as well. Discussing aesthetics is historically philosophical and its method enables any critic or reader to "justify, order, and clarify" the way of interpreting a text (Abrams, 1971. P. 4). Such a definition according to Jacobs and Wilson (2024) resonates its entanglement with the concept of truth. When Aristotle stated that catharsis, the purification of pity and fear, is the ultimate aim of tragedy, he, distinctly, announced the aesthetic formula for legitimacy of poetical activity (Ferrari 1999). In other words, he created a definite taste for evaluation of the literary work. So the Greek philosophers were thorough dissectors because of the probable effects of a literary work on the audience. Looking at different literary periods afterwards, the aesthetic values were under various transformations because of ethical, social, political and cultural changes. How readers respond and acknowledge and appreciate a work of arts has influenced the aesthetic patterns. Although the surface meaning of aesthetics might not echo darkness, deterioration, destruction or degeneration in any senses, it actually can function as a framework to interrogate the situation.

Decay having whether physical or non-physical implications divulges how certain aspects and ingredients of novels in terms of themes, imageries, symbolism, narration, characterizations, etc., can exhibit the taste and the mood of the culture, society, morality and psychological characteristics of the characters. One thing that cannot be taken for granted is the inevitability of decaying and disintegration. Whatever comes to decay might have been the subject of displacement, repression, avoidance, unrecognition, disregard, fragmentation or unsettlement. To look at decay as a concept, aesthetically, undercuts the prevalent and accepted norms in a specific way because the minute proportion of weakening of a structure hints at a bigger picture. It functions as a metaphor which magnifies the aspects which might contribute to the content such as the elements that insidiously create a sense of familiar unfamiliarity. Decadence style glorified in "grotesque figures and artificial designs abstracted from nature" might suggest a void or be indicative of some repressed anger (Beverage, 2024. P. 10). This signifies the fact that finding decaying or decadent elements in a work of literature can be grasped "through close reading" of the text and being conscious of social, psychological and cultural features that are hidden in the text (Beverage, 2024. P.11). In other words, that decaying sense resonates through the items associated with the outside world and that could be the reason why, more often than not, it appears to sound vague and unknown. It happens and moves surreptitiously through the narrative.

Romanticism in the eighteenth century exhibited an intense inclination towards decay through the presentation of grotesque, sublime and interest of the past, ruins and gone. Abandoned castles and ruined cathedrals and buildings created fear, mystery and nostalgia. Romantics believed that imperfection was far better than perfection which became the Romantic aesthetics. The sense of fear could have been seen in the revival of Gothic aesthetic that the spectators "emotionally and imaginatively" experienced (Miles, 1991). The presentation of arts in this period could strike the readers by bringing intellectual and mental qualities together and by creating a sense of suspense. The writers' complicated imageries, symbolisms and themes illustrated how a particular mind could perceive everything beyond the accepted norms or criteria. Then, later on, the fin de siècle authors and French symbolists were aware of their fascination with corrupted aspects and showed the theme of decadence and decay in late 19th century and early twentieth century arts and literature. Their aesthetics demonstrated an admiring attitude "towards chaos and depravity, resulting in a cultural malaise characterized by ennui and nihilism" highlighting "existential despair, culminating in absurdist expressions of futility" (Sweetman, 2016). Encountering, recognizing and accepting decay in terms of despair and desolation could be profoundly dark and difficult; for, an individual must figure out how to be alive. The body is physically in the present time but the soul is trapped in a condition in which it is perishing and declining (White, 2011).

Accordingly, while modernization might sound to be communicative of inevitable space changes, it is about dissolving bonds and causing the isolations of the subjects. The changes become the source of disorder and chaos in cognitive process because even the sheer amount of anxiety can be perceived as a threat to the former harmonious situation. The sense of losing the identity that originates from losing a place, or from losing the sense of familiarity with the place, show an individual's fear of abandonment and threat. Thus, decay representing some sort of existential concept, implies more than what it simply means and it reinforces complex crumbling experiences. The idea of a residential building's gradual ruining resonates one's moments of observing self-agony, self-deterioration and self-disintegration. To witness the decaying elements and collapsing aspects of a place is to become conscious of inner weakening self. It becomes something of ruin of self that an individual realizes by observing the external and environmental factors.

'The Flea Palace' stages a building in terminal decline. Shafak, however, refuses to treat that decline as mere setting. The leak, the odor and shadow, the garbage, the objects that pass between flats carry the weight of lives of the individuals already half-forgotten. It is precisely through these diminishing disintegrating material facts that the novel performs its most serious work. To call something decaying in this text is to register a structured loss of coherence alluding to eroding meanings, hollowing out purposes, giving away functionality. The aesthetic that Elif Shafak has intended, constructs around this process. It is one of deliberate imperfection and impermanence, in which the fragmentary, the worn, and the obsolete are not obstacles to narrative but the actual medium. What the building holds together is the whole novel itself. The inhabitants' interconnection depends on shared deterioration rather than shared aspiration. Reading and mapping the phenomenon of decay aesthetically means analyzing how Shafak transforms the minor and the marginal into structuring principles.

4. The Flea Palace's Decay

Elif Shafak's 'The Flea Palace' (2002) is built around a single apartment building called Bonbon Palace and the ten residents who inhabit it. Each chapter belongs to a different tenant making the implied meaning of the apartment hold them together. Before having been built, the land belonged to "two ancient cemeteries...neglected... surrounded by ivy-covered fences and shadowy hills (Shafak, 2005. p. 19). The plan of constructing an avenue caused chaos among "those who had loved ones" (p. 21). The complications having been taken place during moving and transferring the deceased to the new cemeteries are parts of mismanagement and people's decline of logical actions. The apartment, whose land had been a graveyard, is a crumbling, flea-infested building in Istanbul that was once erected by an emigrant and has been falling apart ever since. These emigrants from "Crimea" were a couple whose lives entangled with Istanbul. When the wife looked out to see Istanbul, she saw the city "under a heavy fog" and "she stated and stared without a blink at the silhouette of the city" but she could not see a bright colored view of it (p. 39). Istanbul is portrayed as a city of "wickedness" that force those who do not belong "to run away" especially after they lost their child (p. 53). The descriptive words show a sense of frustration and uncertainty. The cemeteries, Istanbul and the apartment set the solemn tragic tone of the narrative. The image of deteriorating corpses in the graves or the bones is a reminder of obsolete environment decaying and decomposing. Yet, it is not just the physicality of the presentation of such places. These are the organizing principle and the theme through which the writer has explored social fragmentation, superstitions, psychological conditions, and the quiet failures of urban environment.

The building's deterioration is rendered in precise, unglamorous detail. The constant smell of garbage accumulated near the building made the residents question if they deserve it (p.71). It is mentioned that "they do come and collect the garbage regularly, though at the wrong hour" (p. 93). The current smell of the building is a constant reminder of the sense of decline. Moreover, picturing the old women whose habit had been searching among the garbage is a reference to the injustice, poverty and the declining social system. The sense of suffocation as a result of the increasing smell is the typical topic of conversation. The smell does not diminish because some of the residents have the habit of collecting and storing garbage. Shafak has associated Istanbul and Bonbon apartment with what is put in the garbage when she stated that the city was what remained "from what rat nibbled on, the seagulls picked to shreds..." (p. 117). This is a shattering image of Istanbul highlights anxiety and fear that "was everywhere like air and almost as intangible" (p.120). The plants "withered away", "the fish in the aquarium also suffered huge losses over time" and "a new canary" never chirped (p.121).

The building's condition and the characters' inner lives are inseparable. Madame Auntie who is an aging aristocrat living in apartment number ten, clings to a world that no longer exists. Her nostalgia as a kind of emotional stagnation and her refusal to let the past go as it must be considered as her deterioration. Even though she is accepted longing for what has gone by, her feelings and thoughts stand for self-decaying. As an elderly, she resembles the old Istanbul which has flown away. Her conceptualization of the city as a pregnant woman who "had put on far more weight than she could carry" can justify her static condition (p. 295). The Firenaturesons living in flat number four complains about "being watched" by people because the apartment windows could receive the "stealing glance" of people in the street (p.109). To prevent that, this resident constantly uses thick dark curtains making it "impenetrable" (p. 110). This character, having been "dismissed from the State Water for taking bribes" is presumably an example of moral decay in the society (p.114). Another character, a compulsive cleaner who lives in apartment number one, wages a private war against the rot and her obsessive rituals. This reveal how individual

psychology can mirror environmental disorder even while trying to resist it. Representing the working class and standing as a contrast to the refined residents of the building, one may find the cleaner struggling in her life to survive. Her efforts of performing all sorts of cleaning activities are not fulfilling because the building is constantly infested and pungent. The girl with the lice precipitates feelings of revulsion and everyone at flat number three “shuddered from top to toe” (p. 130). Carrying the infestation and talking about how it started, points at people’s expecting it as a general incident. The narrator who live in flat number seven admits that Bonbon apartment is assumed to be “a perfunctory, transitory dwelling” discouraging him to have a sense of belonging (p. 151). “The garbage writings” project of the narrator is an accepted topic of conversation and everyone could understand its reference (p. 430). These characters are figures whose inner states have been shaped by the place that they inhabit and who, in turn, have contributed to its decline.

The portrayal of people’s “proclivity to pessimism”, peeling walls, broken infrastructure, mounting garbage, persistent infestations is among the visually decaying features (p. 125). Shafak, however, does not seem interested in decay for neither its own sake nor demonstrating how time can affect a building. The physical rot of Bonbon Palace works as an index of accumulated neglect which can be regarded as profoundly suggestive. Decades of indifference, delayed maintenance, and unresolved conflict made visible in plaster and filth. This idea reflects her similar concern with some other Turkish writers who presented Istanbul as a city that is soaking. Yet, she pushes this understanding further by making decay an active agent and force rather than a story background. Shafak doesn’t just reflect the characters/residents within their lives and decisions; she has attempted at reflecting the fact that how the building shapes them. Every aspect of the decaying appearance of Bonbon Palace is regarded as an indication of a falling feature in a human being.

The novel’s treatment of waste and infestation is particularly mordant. The piled up waste and garbage around the building, and the flea problem becomes a shared concern and anxiety that inflames and intensifies tensions among residents. Though it becomes a common topic, the filth is never only literal. It, metaphorically, symbolically and surprisingly, externalizes what the tenants refuse to recognize, confront and deal. Shafak has wrapped up their old resentments, sins and the sense of guilt, unspoken failures, things pushed to the margins of consciousness within this concept. Her use of abjection here, similar to what Kristeva argued, appears to be deliberate. Dirt, stench and infestation blur the lines between self and other, order and chaos. The characters’ responses to the building’s decay reveal how they manage, or fail to manage, those boundaries and how they are conscious of their resemblance to the building’s condition.

Structurally, the novel implicitly mirrors what it describes. Its fragmented narration and the chapter-by-chapter form echoes the physical fragmentation of the building itself. It suggests that decay here isn’t linear and it is not expected to be moving toward a single collapse. Decay, disintegration, collapse or ruination takes place over time and accumulates gradually. Bonbon palace holds memories and secrets the way it holds dust, and time in the novel feels falling apart rather than sequential. This is one of Elif Shafak’s more unexpected formal choices that she has made. She has created an architecture in her narrative which is compatible with the architecture of the building. Both architectures embody deterioration in the same way, slowly, surreptitiously and from within.

Yet Shafak does not treat decay as purely destructive. Living in a failing building forces the residents into contact with one another. More often than not, the residents of a building avoid each other but in Bonbon palace, inconvenience, hopelessness, rejection, anxiety, and embarrassment are shared. These feelings create unexpected moments of intimacy and solidarity. Paradoxically, the building’s dysfunction becomes a condition for people’s connection. This ambivalence is the vigorous characteristic of Shafak’s fiction as she resists the clean moral of collapse and, instead, insists on the coexistence of deterioration and vitality, fragmentation and unexpected cohesion.

In addition, Istanbul itself functions as a larger version of Bonbon Palace. The city that is described by Shafak depicts is caught between historical grandeur and infrastructural neglect. It involves both cosmopolitan aspiration and entrenched inequality. The building’s management disputes and the tenants’ collective inability to address shared problems mirror broader failures of governance and civic responsibility. Bonbon Palace, according to such a perspective, is both a metaphor and metonym. It can be addressed as a structure that is collapsing under the weight of unresolved histories, much like the city around it.

Ethical decay, furthermore, runs alongside the physical and psychological deteriorations. Shafak’s characters repeatedly choose individual convenience over collective care and responsibility which shows how they are consciously acknowledging their detachment from the building while practically living in it. It is this pattern of small disengagements that has allowed the building to reach its current dilapidating state. But Shafak does not seem to moralize it judgmentally. She presents the residents’ ethical failure as a product of social pressure, economic strain, and emotional isolation. She aims to express something relational rather than inherent. Shafak’s presentation of decay, in this sense, is what happens when connection wears away and erodes.

5. Conclusion

What makes ‘The Flea Palace’ distinctive is how thoroughly it integrates these registers. Physical rot, psychological stagnation, ethical disengagement, and urban dysfunction are the highlighted themes running alongside each other. They are

regarded as the same phenomenon viewed from different perspectives. The building is the novel's argument. It exhibits the accumulation of neglect which reflects how and the environments and people shape each other. It is also a strong indication that the line between a crumbling apartment block and a crumbling community is thinner than anyone living inside one. In other words, decay does not play as a peripheral feature but as the novel's central organizing principle and theme which is a multivalent force that simultaneously destroys and reflects, reveals, erodes and exposes. What amplifies the aesthetics of decay is that Shafak's narrative visualizes the crumbling architecture of Bonbon Palace through which the deteriorating bodies of its residents, the fragmentation of collective memory, and the decomposition of social, psychological and moral order in Istanbul, a city that intertwines tradition and modernity. It states that the urban identity and the human condition are related and Shafak has metaphorically transformed the physical rot into a sophisticated literary and philosophical inquiry. The space has externalized the interior status highlighting the building as the protagonist of the novel. In addition, past seems to be an inseparable aspect of the residents of Bonbon Palace. Haunted by the past, displacement, migration and personal griefs, these residents find it difficult to articulate what they have been suffering from. For them, memory is about rots, leading others to dissolve into confusion and silence. Shafak's tone of irony and dark humor in terms of the presentation of grotesque exaggerations and her carnivalesque narrative contribute to the complexity of the novel. Here, decay becomes a medium for social critique because the rottenness of Bonbon Palace points at the rottenness of the social order that produced it. Corruption, hypocrisy, and moral cowardice are shown to be as much a part of the building's atmosphere as its physical stench. The decay shown in the building removes pretension and exposes people's raw conditions of life. *The Flea Palace* thus makes a significant contribution to contemporary world literature's engagement with urban modernity, postcolonial identity, and the aesthetics of ruination. *The novel* is not a novel of despair but of unflinching witness, and its literary achievement lies precisely in its refusal to look away from the rot at the heart of things.

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