

Rivers in the Landscape of War: Changing Waters in Homer's *Iliad* and Elif Shafak's *There Are Rivers in the Sky*

In *Iliad* 21, Achilles engages in battle with the river Scamander after desecrating his waters with the bodies of felled Trojans. Previous scholars have discussed the larger implications of this scene, often focusing on the contrast between the unconfined and destructive aspects of nature and the human need to dominate and control. In my paper, I aim to compare both the altercation between Achilles and the Scamander and the larger relationship between humanity and water in the *Iliad* to particular scenes and characters from Elif Shafak's *There Are Rivers in the Sky* (*TARITS*), in order to uncover a more nuanced understanding of the role water plays in an epic landscape defined by warfare. In these examples, the nature of water becomes truly fluid, adapting to an ever-evolving landscape under duress and forging a new identity.

Shafak explores the relationship between humanity and water through the perspective of four vastly different characters. One such character is nine year old Narin, a Yazidi girl living in Turkey in 2014, who falls victim to the brutality of ISIS after she and her family are displaced from their ancestral home on the banks of the Tigris. Throughout the work, Shafak brings to the forefront three distinct observations about the nature of water: 1) that water is life-giving and purifying, acting as a source of nourishment and as a birthplace for the characters of her story; 2) that water can facilitate death when used in warfare, both as a tool for entrapping victims and a disposal site for their bodies; and 3) that water is in constant renewal, returning to earth in a continuous cycle that transcends time and, for this reason, innately becomes a vessel for human memory.

Both Homer and Shafak provide instances where rivers are intrinsically connected to human birth and lineage. Simoesius, for example, is famously born on the banks of the Simois;

and Lycaon and Asteropaios, whom Homer highlights in Book 21, reference the rivers of their homelands: the former the Satnioeis, when begging for his life, and the latter the Axios, of which he claims direct lineage. Similarly, in *TARITS*, the future archaeologist Arthur Smith is born on the banks of the river Thames in London under less than ideal circumstances. Moreover, Narin and her family are defined by their ancestral relationship to the Tigris river and to its ancient settlement Hasankeyf. We are introduced to Narin at her baptism at the Tigris and later told how her grandmother feels a kinship with the river due to her spiritual position as a water dowser and healer.

When integrated into the landscape of warfare, rivers become points of danger for humanity. Achilles uses the Scamander to trap fleeing Trojans, forcing them to choose between Achilles and the rushing waters. The Scamander becomes the final resting place for the dead soldiers as their corpses dam the river, angering the god with their pollution. When Scamander later floods the plain, his waters displace the dead, causing them to float. Like the Trojans, the Yazidi people find themselves trapped between an oncoming force and a river (here the Tigris): those who do not drown in the waters made deep by melting snow are killed as they seek refuge; and as Narin travels with her grandmother along the Tigris, bodies begin appearing in the water at a rate that corresponds with disappearing locals and causing visible pollution.

Lastly, both narratives view water as sentient and therefore comparable to humanity in uniquely different ways. For Homer, the river Scamander is personified as a god, given agency as he engages in battle with Achilles over the treatment of his waters. For Shafak, the foundation of her story is that water holds memory of human events as a result of its perpetual cycle of renewal. This is demonstrated at the close of the work, where Shafak supplies a table that tracks the journey of a single drop of water, showing how it touches each character and carries the

memories of pain and loss across generations. For both authors, the water recognizes its own desecration and grieves.

Shafak's work highlights how the function and human association with water evolves in tandem with the narrative character of the landscape and the culture that inhabits it. The identity of water becomes truly fluid in nature as it changes from implying nourishment and purity into a boundary point imbued with danger due to the understanding that water has sentience and can react to the injustices placed upon it. *TARITS* and Shafak's discussion of water provides an interpretive lens that can be used to inform our reading of the water/human relations of Homer's *Iliad*.