Branching Paths of Pain: Trauma and Ecocriticism in Elif Shafak's *The Island of Missing Trees*

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Abstract

This paper attempts to explore the intersection of trauma theory and ecocriticism in Elif Shafak's The Island of Missing Trees, focusing on how human and ecological suffering are interconnected. It starts by contextualizing these two theories as a fitting approach to the discussion of the novel. The fig tree serves as a potent symbol of both environmental continuity and human trauma, being a witness to the historical and cultural displacements caused by the Cyprus conflict. By analyzing the generational trauma experienced by characters such as Ada, Kostas, and Defne, this paper demonstrates that nature becomes a vessel for memory, survival, and healing. The narrative unfolds through multiple perspectives, including that of the fig tree itself, which bears witness to their love, loss, and the trauma of conflict, war and displacement. Through the tree's unique viewpoint, Shafak emphasizes the enduring impact of war on both people and the land, highlighting the scars of intergenerational trauma. Shafak also highlights the inseparable link between human and ecological recovery, suggesting that reconciling with the natural world is essential for healing personal and collective trauma. The paper concludes by proposing further research, on the same theoretical framework, at the level of Arabic literature, which also intertwines with the same topics of displacement, conflict, and environmental change, to enrich the discourse on trauma and ecological resilience.

Keywords:

Trauma theory, ecocriticism, intergenerational trauma, environmental recovery, Elif Shafak's The Island of Missing trees.

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> **Now that you have come this far into our story, there is something else I need to share with you: I am a melancholic tree. I can't help but compare myself with the other trees in our garden...all properly native of Britain. I wonder if the reason why I am more inclined to melancholia than any of them is because I am an immigrant plant and, like all immigrants I carry with me the shadow of another land? Or is it simply because I grew up among human beings in a noisy tavern? (Shafak 189)**

Introduction

Elif Shafak (b. 1971) is an internationally renowned Turkish-British author, celebrated for her intricate, multilayered novels that explore themes of identity, memory, trauma, and cultural complexity. With a background in political science, Shafak frequently addresses the intersection of individual and collective histories, concentrating on marginalized voices and hybrid identities. Her works, such as *The Forty Rules of Love*, *The Bastard of Istanbul*, and *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World*, delve into the depths of memory, identity and belonging, both in human relationships and geographical settings and the inseparable relation between them.

In her 2021 novel, *The Island of Missing Trees*, Shafak skillfully intertwines history, trauma, and environmental consciousness, merging human experience with the natural world. The novel revolves around the love story of Kostas, a Greek Cypriot, and

Defne, a Turkish Cypriot, set against the turbulent backdrop of Cyprus's ethnic conflict in the 1970s. Their relationship blossoms in secret at a tavern aptly named "The Happy Fig," a place where the fig tree bears silent witness to their love and to the destruction of their relationship as a result of war. The novel alternates between past and present, tracing their lives through the aftermath of war and displacement, as well as the life of their daughter, Ada, who was born and raised in London, physically disconnected from her parents' history. Ada is 16 when the novel opens and her psychological trauma stems from the struggle her parents went through, even though she knows nothing about it.

A significant aspect of the novel is that half of the story is narrated by a fig tree that Kostas smuggled from Cyprus to London. This tree, rooted in both the couple's past and their current life, reflects on human and environmental suffering, demonstrating the inextricable link between humans and nature. Through the fig tree's narration, the novel explores themes of memory, trauma, and resilience.

Set against the backdrop of the Cyprus conflict, the novel follows the story of the couple- separated by war but connected by a fig tree- and their daughter, a second generation immigrant who inherits the trauma. Central to this narrative is the theme of nature and healing; the fig tree, both literally and symbolically, represents resilience, growth, and the connection between humans and the natural world. Shafak employs the tree as a metaphor for the intertwined fates of people and ecosystems, showing that true healing—whether emotional or ecological—demands both acknowledgment of the past and nurturing of new growth.

Contextualizing Theories: Why Trauma and Ecocriticism?

Trauma theory enables an exploration of the novel's depiction of the lasting emotional and psychological wounds caused by historical

events like war and displacement. This lens reveals how characters such as Kostas, Defne, and their descendants are shaped by personal and collective trauma. The novel's treatment of memory and intergenerational trauma illustrates how unresolved wounds can pass through generations, often reflected in the characters' relationships with their community and the environment.

Ecocriticism, on the other hand, highlights the novel's portrayal of nature—especially the fig tree—as more than just a backdrop for human suffering. By involving nature as an active agent within the narrative, this approach emphasizes the intricate connections between humans and the non-human world. The fig tree, then, becomes not only a witness to human suffering but also a symbol of nature's ability to endure and even help heal the traumas inflicted upon both people and the land. Together, trauma theory and ecocriticism allow for a holistic analysis that links human trauma with ecological degradation and resilience, framing the novel's message of healing as one that encompasses both human and environmental recovery.

Thesis Statement

In *The Island of Missing Trees*, Elif Shafak intricately weaves together human trauma and ecological devastation, accentuating the profound interconnectedness between personal and generational suffering and environmental degradation. By applying both trauma theory and ecocriticism, this paper argues that the fig tree functions not only as a symbol of resilience and memory but also as an active participant in the characters' journey toward healing. The novel suggests that confronting historical wounds—whether human or ecological—requires a deep recognition of the past and a commitment to nurturing both the land and humans for genuine recovery to take place.

Trauma and Memory

One of the central themes in Shafak's *The Island of Missing Trees* is the exploration of trauma, both personal and collective, and its enduring effects on memory. Shafak delves deeply into how individuals and communities carry the scars of war, displacement, and loss across generations. Trauma, as explored in this novel, is not merely a singular, isolated event; rather, it is a force that ripples through time, leaving indelible marks on both the mind and the land.

Cathy Caruth, a prominent figure in trauma theory, argues that trauma is not a fully knowable event at the moment it occurs; instead, it is experienced belatedly, through the process of memory and narrative retelling (Caruth 4). This belatedness is evident in the characters of Kostas and Defne, whose lives have been shaped by the Cyprus conflict. Their daughter, Ada, also inherits this trauma, despite being physically removed from the conflict itself. Shafak's portrayal of trauma as an intergenerational experience resonates with Caruth's theory, as the characters' memories of the war are fragmented, elusive, and sometimes inexpressible.

Furthermore, the novel illustrates what Marianne Hirsch describes as "postmemory"—the transmission of memory from one generation to the next, particularly when that memory is shaped by traumatic experiences (Hirsch 106). Ada's connection to her parents' past is not built through direct experience but through the stories never told to her, silences, and inherited emotions passed down from her parents. As Hirsch notes, "Postmemory's connection to the past is thus not actually mediated by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation" (Hirsch 107). Ada's experience of trauma and memory is not her own, yet it profoundly affects her understanding of herself and her family's history and the world she lives in.

Ecocriticism and the Symbolism of Nature

Alongside trauma, Shafak uses the natural world—particularly the fig tree—as a symbol of memory, resilience, and healing. The fig tree functions not merely as a silent observer of human events but as an active participant in the narrative, echoing the principles of ecocriticism, which emphasize the interconnectedness between human and non-human life. Lawrence Buell, a leading figure in ecocriticism, posits that environmental texts often collapse the boundary between the human and natural worlds, suggesting that ecological degradation is tied to human suffering (Buell 7). This idea is vividly illustrated in Shafak's novel, where the fig tree not only bears witness to human trauma but also symbolizes the possibility of regeneration and healing.

Shafak's inclusion of the fig tree as a narrative voice aligns with Buell's assertion that "the environment is not merely a stage on which human history plays out, but an active force that interacts with and shapes that history" (Buell 10). The fig tree's ability to observe, remember, and endure speaks to the resilience of nature, even in the face of human conflict and destruction. Moreover, the tree's deep roots and ability to regrow from a single cutting symbolize the potential for both human and ecological recovery. This resonates with Greg Garrard's view that ecocritical narratives often promote "the idea that nature can recover, but only if humans acknowledge their role in its destruction and participate in its healing" (Garrard 14).

The connection between the natural world and human trauma is also reflected in the novel's portrayal of ecological degradation as an extension of the trauma of war. The fig tree, with its roots deeply embedded in the Cypriot soil, serves as a reminder of the land's own history of violence and division. As the characters struggle to come to terms with their own pasts, the land too must undergo a process

of healing. This ecological dimension of trauma underscores Shafak's message that healing—whether personal or environmental—requires both acknowledgment of the past and a commitment to nurturing new growth.

Through the intertwined lenses of trauma theory and ecocriticism, Shafak's *The Island of Missing Trees* presents a powerful narrative about the interconnection between human suffering and environmental degradation. By drawing on critics such as Caruth, Hirsch, and Buell, this analysis underscores the novel's central themes of memory, trauma, and ecological resilience. The fig tree, as a symbol of both human and environmental endurance, serves as a reminder that true healing can only occur when we confront the past and nurture both the land and ourselves.

Intergenerational Trauma and Environmental Continuity

In her portrayal of Ada, Shafak intricately weaves the theme of intergenerational trauma which starts from her parents' past. Naming their only daughter "Ada"- which means "island" in Cypriot- conveys how heavily they had internalize the atrocities of war in their country and how intensely they miss their old life there. Ada's deep-seated emotional pain stems from their experiences of exile, loss and conflict in Cyprus. Trauma theorist Cathy Caruth emphasizes that trauma is "experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not fully available to consciousness until it imposes itself again" (Caruth 4). This notion is powerfully illustrated in Ada's uncontrollable scream during a history class: "It came out of nowhere, a scream so shrill and fierce it rattled the windows and reverberated down the corridors…so unpredicted and forceful and impossibly high-pitched." (26). This outburst, a visceral manifestation of Ada's inherited anguish, encapsulates the unspoken trauma passed down from her parents. Her scream is not merely a cry of rebellion but the surfacing of

years of silent suffering, an embodiment of the unresolved pain her parents have carried from the conflict in Cyprus.

Ada's mother, Defne, embodies the psychological scars of war, her trauma contributing to her eventual illness and addiction to alcohol. Her inability to fully confront or articulate the memories of her lost homeland gradually leads to her emotional and physical deterioration. As Dominick LaCapra observes, trauma that is not worked through "haunts the individual or group and makes them compulsively relive the past" (LaCapra 41). Defne's retreat into alcoholism becomes an attempt to numb these haunting memories of war and loss. In an effort to protect Ada from the trauma of her own past, Defne's silence ultimately leaves a void that exacerbates her daughter's inherited trauma. This echoes the experience of second-generation trauma survivors, as Marianne Hirsch describes in her theory of postmemory: "The children of survivors of cultural or collective trauma inherit catastrophic histories" (Hirsch 106).

In contrast to Defne's emotional withdrawal, Kostas, Ada's father, channels his trauma into a deep love for nature, particularly the fig tree that serves as a living connection to Cyprus. Kostas and Defne secretly transported a cutting of the fig tree when they fled Cyprus for England, symbolizing their desire to preserve a piece of their homeland amidst the chaos of war. Once in London, Kostas nurtures the tree with meticulous care, replanting it in the garden of their new home. This act symbolizes their attempt to build a life in exile while maintaining their roots in Cyprus, with the tree becoming a testament to resilience in the face of displacement.

Kostas' connection to nature, a legacy from his mother, becomes his primary coping mechanism in dealing with the traumas of displacement and loss. In a letter to her brother, Kostas' mother pleads for him to keep Kostas safe in England, having already lost one son to war and another to exile: "I have already buried one son

and lost the other to this cursed war. I cannot lose Kostas too. Please, keep him in England for me" (87). Her plea reveals how trauma extends beyond those who directly experience it, affecting the entire family as they attempt to shield Kostas from further harm. LaCapra's theory of trauma as a force that reverberates through families and communities is evident here, with Kostas' mother hoping to break the cycle of loss and trauma by sending him away.

Kostas' relationship with Ada becomes strained following Defne's death. His retreat into his work and research on plants creates an emotional distance that leaves Ada feeling abandoned. While Kostas immerses himself in the natural world, Ada reflects on his inability to address her emotional needs: "My father, the tree man, the man who knows everything about leaves and roots, but who doesn't know how to talk to his own daughter" (17). For Ada, her father's deep connection to nature becomes an escape from the pain of losing Defne, and his plants, which once symbolized love and sensitivity, now represent his emotional absence:

> What could she tell them about him? That he forgot to eat or even speak sometimes, letting whole days go by without consuming proper food or uttering a full sentence, or that, if only he could, he would probably spend the rest of his life in the back garden, or better yet, in a forest somewhere, his hands plunged in the soil, surrounded by bacteria, fungi and all those plants, growing and decaying by the minute? (16)

Ada's frustration deepens as she resents Kostas' preoccupation with botanic research: "He hides behind his plants, his books, his research, while I scream silently, waiting for him to notice" (18). This quote highlights the emotional chasm between father and daughter, as Kostas' silence in dealing with Defne's death only amplifies Ada's sense of isolation. The silence between them mirrors the unspoken traumas that haunt the family. In a poignant reflection, Ada observes: "Sometimes I wonder if he even

remembers that I'm still here, breathing, waiting for him to talk about her" (123). Kostas' retreat into nature, while an understandable coping mechanism, leaves Ada feeling invisible, contributing to the ongoing cycle of trauma within the family.

Shafak masterfully portrays how trauma can be both inherited and shaped by the environment, with Ada's emotional wounds stemming not only from her parents' experiences but also from the silence and evasiveness that permeates their relationship. The fig tree, serving as both a witness and a symbol of resilience, becomes a reminder of the family's connection to Cyprus and their collective trauma. The narrative suggests that true healing—whether personal or environmental—requires more than survival; it demands an active engagement with the past and a willingness to confront and acknowledge the deep-rooted pain carried across generations.

Cultural Heritage and Healing through Reconnection

Defne's sister, Mariam, plays a pivotal role in preserving the family's cultural heritage, especially after her sister's death. Mariam is deeply affected by the loss of Defne, carrying the weight of unresolved grief and the trauma of not only losing her sibling but also the broader dislocation caused by their family's exile from Cyprus. Unlike Defne, who sought to shield her daughter Ada from the painful past and rarely speaking about cypress, Mariam feels a profound responsibility to ensure that the family's traditions, stories, and memories are passed down. Her role becomes crucial in reconnecting Ada with the Cypriot identity that her mother had hidden from her, out of a misguided attempt to protect her from their shared trauma.

Mariam's relationship with Ada exemplifies the generational gap in how trauma and cultural memory are transmitted within families. Trauma theorists, such as Marianne Hirsch, argue that "postmemory" refers to the way the children of survivors inherit

memories that are not directly their own but are nonetheless deeply felt, as though they experienced them firsthand (Hirsch 106). Mariam understands the importance of confronting the past rather than silencing and hiding it. By teaching Ada about Cyprus—the island's history, traditions, cuisine, and untold family stories—Mariam seeks to fill the void left by Defne's silence. Her actions illustrate a key theme in the novel: that reconnecting with one's heritage is not merely an act of cultural preservation but also a potential avenue for healing intergenerational trauma.

Mariam's efforts to share their heritage with Ada are grounded in small but significant gestures: sharing recipes, speaking the Cypriot dialect, and recounting tales of the island's history and mythology. These acts, though seemingly mundane, carry profound meaning. They offer Ada a way to understand herself beyond the trauma that she has inherited, connecting her to something larger than her immediate experience of loss. As noted by scholar Eva Hoffman, "To transmit memory is, inevitably, to interpret it—to filter it through one's own subjective experience, concerns, and affective prism" (Hoffman 129). Mariam's retelling of Cypriot traditions becomes an interpretive act of love and survival, an attempt to reclaim not just the past but a sense of continuity that can anchor Ada in the present.

However, the process of reconnection is fraught with difficulty. Ada, initially resistant, struggles under the weight of a heritage she neither fully understands nor embraces. Her mother's secrecy about her past life in Cyprus, intended to protect her daughter, leaves Ada disconnected from the richness of her Cypriot roots, and instead, she is left grappling with the shadow of inherited trauma. In one of Mariam's attempts to bond with Ada, she shares the recipes Ada's granmother used to make, hoping to evoke a sense of belonging by describing the flavors and the scents and the emotions invoked by sharing these things with her. Yet, Ada's ambivalence toward these

efforts reveals the complexities of reclaiming a cultural identity marked by both beauty and pain and sealed in secrecy for years.

Mariam's role in Ada's life is a testament to the idea that cultural heritage can serve as both a burden and a balm. On the one hand, reconnecting with the past risks reopening old wounds and reliving the pain. On the other hand, it offers the potential for healing by providing a sense of identity and belonging and continuity. Mariam's determination to pass down the cultural knowledge that Defne withheld underscores the novel's exploration of memory and trauma as inherently tied to family and history. This is in line with Cathy Caruth's assertion that trauma is often transmitted through unspoken acts of survival and memory, which shape how descendants engage with the world (Caruth 7).

Through these characters, Shafak illustrates that intergenerational trauma is not only a psychological inheritance but also a cultural and familial one. It is passed down through silence, fear, and unresolved grief, manifesting in different ways for each family member. Ada's inability to fully comprehend her emotional outbursts and Kostas' silent suffering show how trauma can connect family members through shared but unspoken pain. Mariam's efforts to bridge the gap between Ada and her Cypriot heritage represent the possibility of healing through reconnection with one's roots. Yet, as the novel reveals, this healing is not automatic or simple—it requires both an acknowledgment of the past and a willingness to confront the complexities of memory and identity.

Environmental Continuity and Cultural Memory

In The Island of Missing Trees, the fig tree functions as both a living witness to the trauma of the characters and a symbolic connection between the past and the present. Lawrence Buell, a notable figure in ecocriticism, argues that in literature "nature is not merely a setting but an active presence", shaping human

experiences and memories (Buell 8). Shafak's fig tree epitomizes this notion, representing environmental continuity and acting as a vessel for cultural memory. Its roots in both Cyprus and England illustrate the persistence of cultural identity, even in exile. As Kostas reflects, "The fig tree was my only link to my homeland, to the memories that had shaped me long before I even knew who I was" (Shafak 66).

Kostas' inseparable relationship with nature, inherited from his mother, is a key aspect of his coping mechanism in the face of traumatic displacement. His mother remarks in a letter to her brother, "Kostas was always different from the others. Even as a boy, he would talk to the trees and whisper to the wind. I think it's the only thing that kept him sane when his brothers left us—he had the plants to talk to" (Shafak 150). This sensitivity to the natural world allows Kostas to draw strength and solace from the fig tree in London, which thrives despite being uprooted and replanted in foreign soil. As a silent witness to the family's trauma, the fig tree embodies both the resilience of nature and the endurance of cultural memory.

The tree's significance extends beyond its role as a comforting presence for Kostas; it serves as a bridge between generations, carrying the memories of the island to Ada, even though she has never set foot in Cyprus. In her work on ecological thought, Timothy Morton emphasizes the "interconnectedness of all life" (Morton 16), and Shafak's fig tree exemplifies this concept by uniting the characters' traumatic histories and their attempts at healing across time and place. In London, the fig tree symbolizes environmental and cultural continuity, serving as a reminder to Ada of the heritage she has inherited, despite her parents' silence about the traumatic events of their past.

Through the fig tree, Shafak explores the idea that nature itself can bear the weight of human suffering and act as a conduit for the

transmission of cultural memory. Just as the fig tree endures the hardship of being uprooted, the characters must also survive and adapt to new environments, while still carrying the scars of their traumatic past. Shafak suggests that to process trauma and reclaim one's identity, one must reconnect with both the natural world and the cultural memories that reside within it.

The Fig Tree as a Witness to Historical Trauma

The fig tree in The Island of Missing Trees is not merely a backdrop; it is an active observer and participant in the lives of the characters, holding the secrets of their trauma. As a silent witness to the violence and displacement caused by the Cyprus conflict, the tree's roots symbolize both memory and the continuity of history across generations. Its connection to Kostas and Defne's forbidden love during the Turkish-Greek war, and its transplantation to England, carries with it both beauty and pain.

In parts of the novel, the fig tree narrates the story, offering an omnipresent perspective that contrasts with the human characters, who often suppress or misremember their trauma. This omniscient role transforms the tree into a repository of memory. As the tree observes, "I have been here long before they were born, and I will remain long after they are gone" (Shafak, p. [xx]). This idea aligns with trauma theory, where objects, places, or symbols like the fig tree act as carriers of intergenerational memory. Having witnessed wars, violence, and migration, the fig tree represents the historical scars that remain in the land and in the hearts of the characters, particularly Kostas, who repeatedly returns to the tree as his connection to the past.

Shafak's decision to grant the fig tree the privilege of narration highlights the deep intertwining of human and environmental experiences. The fig tree's narrative voice, reflects not only on its own existence but also on the human events surrounding it. That

tree which sometimes gives Ada 'the creeps,' because of how close her father is to the tree, is the narrator of half of this story. It reflects not only what it feels like to be a tree, and but also on being able to fill in gaps in the humans' story (Shafak 189). Moreover, the tree hosts many other other creatures, animals and insects both in its wellness and sickness. As a narrator it interacts with them with the same sensitivity it does with humans, it narrates the personal histories of each creature, particularly parrots and pats, and to what degree it was affected by the war. Thus, like her creator, the tree stresses that human actions, especially in times of strife and war, leads to the destruction of the natural world. Through this role, the tree transcends its botanical identity, taking on a perspective of understanding and wisdom regarding both human actions and ecological experiences.

Shafak uses the fig tree to explore the idea that nature is both a witness and a participant in human affairs. The fig tree bears the weight of memory, standing at the intersection of human love, war, and destruction. Situated in "The Happy Fig Tavern", its roots are entwined in the very place where Kostas and Defne meet and nurture their innocent love. The same tree that once sheltered their love also witnesses the destruction of their world as the war tears through Cyprus. As the tree recounts:

> But on an island plagued by years of ethnic violence and brutal atrocities, humans were not the only ones that suffered. So did we trees – and animals, too, experienced hardship and pain as their habitats came to disappear. It never meant anything to anyone, what happened to us. It matters to me though and, so long as I am able to tell this story, I am going to include in it the creatures in my ecosystem – the birds, the bats, the butterflies, the honeybees, the ants, the mosquitoes and the mice – because there is one thing I have learned: wherever there is war and a painful partition, there will be no winners, human or otherwise (190).

The fig tree's reflection here deepens the novel's central theme: the inseparability of human and environmental well-being. As the fig tree observes the suffering caused by war, it also underscores how such conflict ravages nature thus linking the personal, emotional trauma of human characters with the ecological trauma experienced by the environment, showing that both are bound by the same events.

This interconnectedness is further emphasized when the fig tree, like a human narrator, acknowledges its subjective perspective: "No storyteller is completely objective. But I have always tried to grasp every story through diverse angles, shifting perspectives, conflicting narratives. Truth is a rhizome – an underground plant stem with lateral shoots. You need to dig deep to reach it" (189). Here, the fig tree recognizes its own limitations in narrating the truth, revealing a complex understanding of storytelling itself. The tree, much like a human, forms opinions and exposes its version of events shaped by experience.

In one particularly poignant scene, the tree describes the devastation of a bombing at the tavern, noting the suffering it witnessed and the loss of lives within the café. One of the café's owners, Youssef, comes to rescue the burning branches of the fig tree, showing his deep connection to the tree as a part of the place he cherished. This act demonstrates the fig tree's symbolic importance, not just as a silent observer, but as a beloved entity woven into the fabric of human life.

In addition to the tree, the parrot Chico plays a significant role in reflecting the novel's overarching theme: trauma affecting all forms of life—both human and non-human. Chico lives in "Happy Fig Tavern" and is treated like a family member by its owners; when the tavern is destroyed and abandoned due to the violence of war, Chico's behavior dramatically changes. He begins plucking his own feathers—a distress signal in parrots that often points to anxiety,

fear, or the aftermath of a traumatic experience. The physical manifestation of Chico's trauma parallels the emotional scars humans bear in the aftermath of conflict. This parallel emphasizes the point that war leaves no creature untouched, and its ramifications ripple across all living beings. The fig tree reflects on Chico's suffering, underscoring the shared experience between the natural world: "The parrot that once mimicked the sounds of the tavern now sat in silence, plucking its feathers, one by one. Each feather that fell seemed to mark a memory lost, a voice silenced. Its colors, once so vibrant, were fading with every pluck. (89)" The image of Chico losing his feathers symbolizes the gradual erasure of the past, as both the natural and human worlds mourn the lives and histories destroyed by violence. The parrot's silence, once a lively mimic of the tavern's sounds, mirrors the destruction of a place once full of life, laughter, and human connection. This silence resonates with the post-war landscape, where not only human voices but also the voices of nature are silenced by destruction.

Moreover, Defne's relationship with Chico adds another layer to this theme of trauma and healing. After the war, Defne returns to visit Chico, bringing him biscuits every day after the owners of the tavern disappear and are later found killed. Her small acts of care reflect a kind of fragile attempt at healing—both for herself and for the parrot. In the aftermath of violence, the bond between humans and nature, represented here through Defne's care for Chico, becomes an essential part of the recovery process. Chico's survival and his interactions with Defne demonstrate that trauma can be shared, and that healing, even if slow and incomplete, is possible through these connections.

As the fig tree notes, Chico's abandonment in the tavern mirrors the abandonment of other living creatures during times of human conflict:

> I could hear the parrot squawk in the tavern's remains. It had been abandoned there, left to its own devices as the humans fled. What they didn't realize was that it, too, was suffering. It was not just their loss but our loss – of all living beings who had once thrived in this place. (120)

Chico's role in the novel enhances Shafak's portrayal of how deeply trauma pervades both the human and non-human worlds. Chico's physical deterioration, its silence, and its eventual recovery through his relationship with Defne all serve as a reminder that the scars of war are borne by all living things. Chico, the fig tree and all its inhabitants whether animals or insects, through their shared observations and experiences, underline the novel's central theme: trauma knows no species boundaries, and healing, however fragmented, is achieved through the bonds between humans and nature.

Environmental Memory and Trauma

The fig tree also functions as a symbol of "environmental memory," bearing witness to not only human conflict but also environmental degradation and survival. Just as the tree grows and thrives in England, it carries the memory of its Cypriot roots, embodying the resilience of nature in the face of displacement. In an ecocritical context, the tree's roots are a metaphor for the deep scars of war and trauma: "The scars in the bark, the roots twisted with pain, are not just the marks of time but also the marks of all that has been forgotten and hidden" (Shafak, 220). This echoes the notion of environmental memory, where nature itself holds the imprints of human history and trauma. By exploring the fig tree's symbolism, Shafak suggests that nature and humanity are intertwined in their experiences of trauma and healing. The characters' connection to the tree highlights the idea that recovery from trauma often involves

reconnecting with the natural world, which retains the memories of the past.

Nature as a Site of Healing and Reconciliation

Throughout the novel, characters like Kostas seek solace in their connection to the fig tree, finding peace amidst their personal and collective traumas. After Defne's death, Kostas' care for the tree becomes not just a way of remembering his past with his beloved wife, but also a path toward healing. The tree serves as a symbol of recovery and resilience, even after immense loss, displacement and death. As Kostas reflects, "In the silence of the garden, with only the tree for company, I find some measure of comfort" (167). This connection between nature and healing reflects the ecocritical perspective that recovery from trauma is often intertwined with a reconnection to the natural world.

The fig tree's survival and ability to regenerate after being uprooted acts as a powerful metaphor for resilience, not only in nature but also within the human spirit: "Even when uprooted, the tree clings to life, sending out shoots and roots wherever it can, a symbol of hope amidst the ruins" (183). The tree's ability to adapt and thrive mirrors the characters' journey toward healing from their traumatic pasts. Through both trauma theory and ecocriticism, Shafak illustrates that recovery is possible when individuals reconnect with the natural world and the memories it holds.

The Symbiotic Relationship Between Human and Ecological Trauma

Human Actions and Ecological Destruction

Elif Shafak intricately intertwines human conflict with the destruction of the natural world, highlighting their deep interconnection. The political conflict in Cyprus between Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots forms the novel's historical and religious backdrop, where war not only scars the human population but devastates the land. Shafak employs the fig tree as a symbol of

the long-lasting environmental damage caused by human violence, displacement, and cultural and religious strife.

The war in Cyprus, which forces Kostas and Defne to flee, represents how human actions destroy not only personal lives but also ecological spaces. By smuggling the fig tree to England, Kostas and Defne carry a fragment of their homeland's natural and cultural history. This displacement mirrors the loss of homes, families, and cultural heritage caused by the war. The trauma of displacement extends beyond humans to the flora and fauna of Cyprus, as the novel comments on the destruction of the island's landscape: "The land had been parched and barren for too long, scarred by bullets and fires, but still, the fig tree clung to life in the rubble, a silent witness to all that had been lost" (198).

Here, Shafak underscores how the devastation of war extends beyond human suffering, affecting the natural environment, which, like its people, endures the consequences of human-made chaos. The fig tree, with its deep roots in Cypriot soil, stands as a testament to the natural world's resilience amid such destruction. The tree's symbolic value becomes intertwined with the loss of heritage and fractured identities caused by the conflict.

Ecological Trauma and Recovery

Despite the trauma inflicted upon the fig tree and the Cypriot landscape, the novel presents nature's remarkable capacity for regeneration and resilience. The fig tree, uprooted and transplanted to London, thrives in foreign soil, much like the human characters who rebuild their lives after war and displacement. This regeneration serves as a metaphor for the novel's central theme of recovery, both human and ecological.

Ecocriticism emphasizes the power of nature to regenerate despite human-induced trauma, and Shafak reflects this theme through the

fig tree. The tree's ability to grow and send out new roots and shoots embodies hope and renewal, even in the face of destruction. Kostas reflects on the tree's resilience, stating: "Even in the face of death, the tree reaches out for life, refusing to give in to the destruction around it" (245).

Moreover, the novel critiques an anthropocentric worldview that perceives nature as separate from human experience. Shafak illustrates the entangled relationship between human and ecological trauma: the scars left on the land mirror the scars left on its people. The political and cultural strife in Cyprus—rooted in struggles for power and identity—leaves both the island's landscape and its inhabitants permanently marked by conflict. Yet, just as the fig tree survives, so too does the possibility of healing and reconciliation, both for the island and its people. The marriage of Kostas and Defne, each belonging to a different sect of the confliction Cypriot community, reinforces the idea that a re-union will always be possible if the conflicting parities are willing to accept one another.

Kostas' deep connection to nature emerges as a means of coping with personal trauma. After Defne's death, his work on plants and botany becomes a way of avoiding the pain of his loss. His research allows him to immerse himself in the natural world, which serves as a form of solace and healing: "Kostas buried himself in his work, studying plants with an intensity that allowed him to forget—at least for a while—the emptiness left behind by Defne's absence" (173).

In The Island of Missing Trees, Elif Shafak masterfully intertwines human and ecological trauma, demonstrating how the scars of conflict extend beyond the human realm into the natural world. Through the fig tree, Shafak presents a potent symbol of both trauma and resilience, showing how nature retains the memory of past sufferings while also offering the potential for healing and regeneration. Using the lenses of trauma theory and ecocriticism, the novel reveals the deep connections between human suffering

and environmental degradation, ultimately suggesting that recovery is possible through resilience, reconnection, and renewal for both humans and nature.

Conclusion

In *The Island of Missing Trees*, Elif Shafak masterfully weaves together the themes of trauma and ecological resilience, with the fig tree serving as a powerful symbol of both human suffering and environmental recovery. The novel illustrates how intergenerational trauma shapes the lives of Ada and her parents, while the fig tree stands as a silent witness to the historical and ecological traumas of Cyprus. Beyond representing survival amidst war and displacement, the fig tree symbolizes nature's regenerative power, suggesting that healing is possible for both humans and the environment.

Implications of the Analysis

The intersection of trauma theory and ecocriticism in this analysis illuminates the novel's broader message: human recovery is inextricably linked to the recognition and healing of the trauma inflicted upon the natural world. Shafak posits that true healing requires a reconciliation with the environment, reflecting the novel's central theme of interconnectedness. This interdependence between human and ecological resilience emphasizes that recovery, whether personal or communal, necessitates an acknowledgment of the natural world's role in fostering holistic healing.

Future Directions

Future research could expand on this analysis by exploring other literary works through the combined lens of trauma theory and ecocriticism. For instance, novels like Richard Powers' The Overstory or Barbara Kingsolver's Flight Behavior offer rich

ground for examining how ecological degradation and trauma intersect. Beyond Western literature, a fruitful area for exploration lies in Arabic literature, where themes of displacement, war, and environmental transformation are also deeply embedded.

Works by authors such as Sahar Elmougy The Hill's Musk, Ibrahim Nasrallah **Time of White Horses** or Raja Shehadeh **Palestinian Walks** provide insightful connections between land, memory, and trauma, particularly in the context of conflict and colonial displacement. Similarly, the novels of Hoda Barakat or Elias Khoury reflect on how war-torn landscapes shape collective memory and cultural identity. Analyzing these works through the lens of ecocriticism could uncover how ecological trauma mirrors human suffering, especially in regions deeply affected by political strife and environmental change.

Further studies might also explore how contemporary Arabic postcolonial literature navigates the intertwined themes of displacement, migration, and environmental crises, shedding light on the shared experiences of exile and ecological disruption. Such research would enrich our understanding of the role of nature in healing personal and collective traumas and contribute to a broader literary conversation about the interdependence of human and ecological resilience.

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