

The Voice of Nature: A Gaian Study of Richard Powers' *Bewilderment* and Elif Shafak's *The Island of Missing Trees*

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Abstract

Amid current climatic crisis, it is imperative that people return to their earthly roots to bridge the gap between human existence and the forces of nature. Through employing James Lovelock's Gaia theory as a theoretical framework, the study explores contemporary fiction concerned with ecological issues and climate change to investigate how this fiction addresses man-nature intricate relationship. Through journeying in two cli-fi novels, the study contributes to the field of ecological discourse by giving nature greater attention. Richard Powers' *Bewilderment* (2021) and Elif Shafak's *The Island of Missing Trees* (2021) refocus human attention to the environment and address the interconnection of all living and non-living things on Earth. The study illustrates how both narratives treat nature as both a topic and an object of life. They address the concept of human downfall and the struggle to find refuge in nature. For readers, the connection between literature and climate change helps foster both our respect for nature and the significance of our coexistence with the natural world. Through the analysis of both novels, the study explores how both authors differently advocate for a more conscious approach to living in harmony with nature.

Keywords: Anthropocene, Climate fiction, Ecocriticism, Gaia, Nature.

صوت الطبيعة: دراسة غايبانية لروايتي "حيرة" لريتشارد باورز و"جزيرة الأشجار المفقودة" لأليف شافاق

ملخص البحث بالعربية

في خضم الأزمة المناخية الحالية، من الضروري أن يعود الناس إلى جذورهم الأرضية لسد الفجوة بين الوجود البشري وقوى الطبيعة. من خلال توظيف نظرية غايا لجيمس لوفلوك كإطار نظري، تستكشف الدراسة الرواية المعاصرة المعنية بالقضايا البيئية والتغير المناخي لتقصي كيفية تناول هذه الرواية للعلاقة المعقدة بين الإنسان والطبيعة. من خلال رحلة في روايتين من روايات أدب المناخ، تساهم الدراسة في مجال الخطاب البيئي من خلال إعطاء الطبيعة اهتماماً أكبر. تعيد رواية "حيرة" لريتشارد باورز (٢٠٢١) ورواية "جزيرة الأشجار المفقودة" لأليف شافاق (٢٠٢١) تركيز اهتمام الإنسان على البيئة وتتناول الترابط بين جميع الكائنات الحية وغير الحية على الأرض. وتصور الدراسة كيف تتعامل كلتا الروايتين مع الطبيعة كموضوع وهدف للحياة. وتتناولان مفهوم السقوط البشري والنضال من أجل إيجاد ملجأ في الطبيعة. وعلى مستوى القارئ، تساعد العلاقة بين الأدب وتغير المناخ على تحسين احترامنا للطبيعة وأهمية تعايشنا مع العالم الطبيعي. ومن خلال تحليل الروايتين، تستكشف الدراسة كيف يدعو الكاتبان بشكل مختلف إلى نهج أكثر وعياً للعيش في وئام مع الطبيعة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الأنثروبوسين، أدب الخيال المناخي، النقد البيئي، غايا، الطبيعة.

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Introduction

Nowadays, climate fiction has gained significant importance since climate change has become more evident, especially with new climate risks, and authors have become more interested in bridging the human-nature gap.

Although both Richard Powers and Elif Shafak belong to two different cultures, they wrote their novels concurrently in 2021. *Bewilderment* and *The Island of Missing Trees* share the concept of human-nature interconnection, examining how they mutually influence each other's existence and contribute to the development of ecological awareness. Even though the characters in both novels belong to different cultures, they share the care and sense of responsibility towards the environment.

According to AlRamahi and Al-Shetawi, Anglophone writers claim that human interaction with the natural world has recently undergone drastic transformation and that "plants and water become emotional, social, and cultural indicators and markers" (2024). However, this perspective is not limited to Anglophone writers as evident by the contributions of other writers like Elif Shafak.

Through integrating disciplines of science and fiction and journeying through both novels, the paper traces the human-nature relationship by examining the diverse backgrounds leading to this interconnectedness. The analysis reveals how both cli-fi novels raise one's eco-consciousness and one's potential for social and ecological sustainability. In their novels, Powers and Shafak present nature as a silent witness of human experiences. Alternatively, man finds solace in his retreat to nature. Through the presentation of human-nature interaction, the study explores how

both writers raise people's ecological awareness at a time when preserving nature is vital.

This study analyzes both novels from the lens of Gaia theory to emphasize the need for balance and interdependence in the human-nature relationship. The analysis traces the diverse impacts of human activities on the environment and, in turn, the environment on humanity to underscore the necessity of an ecological perspective of Earth and the need for a more harmonious mode of human-nature existence.

Climate fiction

At the beginning of the 21st century, especially with the increase in global warming and environmental catastrophes, authors began writing cli-fi, a genre of literature that tackles environmental issues. Climate activist, Dan Bloom, introduced 'Climate Fiction' (Cli-Fi) as a term in 2007 to refer to the literary genre that addresses climate change and its associated problems. However, the origins of cli-fi date back to Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (1854) and Ursula Le Guin's *The Lathe of Heaven* (1971) that address environmental concerns.

Cli-fi has had a growth of activity over the past decade, as anthropogenic global warming emerged as a real topic of speculation about how things might get worse, producing novels like Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003), and Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Water Knife* (2015) that vary in terms of the time in which they take place. Despite time diversity, cli-fi writings tackle nearly the same motifs of climate change, natural catastrophes, societal collapse, guilt toward the ecosystem, and the importance of survival.

While some critics have considered cli-fi as a subgenre of science fiction, it encompasses literary fiction as well. Ghosh claims cli-fi is "a new genre of science fiction" (2017, 72). It explores the impact of climate change in the coming period and the related responses at social or individual levels. Cli-fi mirrors deeper reasons for contemporary phenomena and focuses on

relationships between humanity, technology and climate. It is often concerned with themes of loss, displacement, and ecological grief. Axel Goodbody and Adeline Johns-Putra believe cli-fi “complements and informs political and scientific discourses” (2019, 245). Based on this perspective, modern cli-fi expands to speculate on potential futures shaped by human actions and their consequences on the environment.

The diverse manifestations of cli-fi make the genre debatable. For instance, some cli-fi works explore the connections between climate change and contemporary political, social, and cultural aspects, while others depict post-apocalyptic scenarios indicative of science fiction. Cli-fi can work in all genres: science fiction, dystopian fiction, thrillers and even romances (John-Putra, 2016, 267). It is often theorized in relation to the Anthropocene, ecocriticism and post-apocalypse.

Gaia theory

Gaia, a concept from ancient Greek culture, is the core of Earth system theory by James Lovelock. Lovelock says that living things interact with all aspects on Earth, demonstrating its overall health (Lovelock 1979, 2000). This idea has inspired a literary movement that explores how humans and nature are connected, seeing nature as a powerful force rather than just a resource (Garrard 2004).

Gaia theory posits the importance of a balanced relationship between human development and nature preservation. Although Maturana and Varela (2012) did not mention ‘Gaia theory,’ their ideas about self-regulation match the concept. Callicott writes, “Ecosystem health or the normal occurrence of ecological processes and functions is an objective condition of ecosystems, although the concept of ecosystem health allows some room for personal or social determination or construction” (1999, 363-364). He emphasizes that the ecosystem health, biological integrity and biodiversity are distinct, yet interconnected conservation standards. Thus, there is room for individual and societal interpretation in defining ecosystem health. The value of ecosystem health is

multilayered, including practical, aesthetic, and central aspects. However, it is inherently subjective and assigned by individuals.

Gaia theory proposes that Earth maintains the necessary conditions needed for life, it aims to inspire actions to ensure that Earth remains fit for human habitation. Lovelock asserts that Gaia is not an indulgent entity influenced by human actions. He further states, "If humans stand in the way of this, we shall be eliminated with as little pity as would be shown by the micro-brain of an intercontinental ballistic nuclear missile in full flight to its target" (1988, 212). Thus, she is austere and resilient, maintaining a hospitable world unless her established rules are challenged, in which case consequences are severe.

By the 21st century, 'Gaia' had gone from being a scientific concept to a popular idea in environmental literature. It has been explored in fiction, where nature is seen as an important part of being human. Tim Ingold suggests "The natural world provided an enduring backdrop to the conduct of human affairs" (2000, 20) which denotes that Earth is a living organism, accentuating the inseparability of human beings and nature.

Prior to analyzing both novels considering Gaia theory, it is vital to refer to the intersection between Gaia theory and ecocriticism. Ecocriticism intersects with Gaia theory, representing the connection between biological species and all life forms. It intermingles ecology with culture to explore how this connection can transform life. Thus, Ecocriticism is the intersection between ecology and cultural studies, or it is a representation of the interconnectedness between general systems, the ecological system, and cultural studies to understand more complex processes such as the Earth's climate. Integrating ecological perspectives with cultural contexts is essential for examining the relationship between Gaia theory and ecocriticism and understanding the cultural construction of the environment. Both Gaia theory and ecocriticism focus on how the connection between culture and ecology can change life. In fact, including scientific insights into fiction greatly broadened the scope of ecocriticism.

The *Island of Missing Trees* uses a fig tree as its narrator/protagonist. This technical choice enables readers to view human history through the eyes of nature. The tree's journey from Cyprus to London mirrors ecological and human displacement. To thrive, the tree has adapted to different conditions. Though no similar details are provided in *Bewilderment*, it explores the relationship between human and earth well-being. This supports the Gaia theory's principle of the importance of a harmonious life-environment relationship.

Despite the differences, both narratives challenge the notion of our exceptionalism and our superiority over nature. Both novels demonstrate how human conflicts and actions disturb the ecosystem stability. In applying the Gaia theory, we can vividly grasp the interwoven fates of humanity and nature. Both novels call us to consider ourselves as part of the planet and to reconsider the current effects of our actions on it.

Discussion

This study uses the Gaia theory to examine how Powers and Shafak use different narrative strategies to address contemporary ecological issues. Since narratives possibly "give rise to new ways of thinking and feeling about the planet we have inherited and the planet we will bequeath" (Nixon, 2018, 16), examining the social and historical factors in Powers' *Bewilderment* and Shafak's *The Island of Missing Trees* is noteworthy.

The American author, Richard Powers, is one of the leading figures in the field of Anthropocene literature and is renowned for intermingling fiction and science in his writings. Conversely, the Turkish British author, Elif Shafak is renowned for merging historical and cultural events with natural elements. Although their novels share the concept of ecological interconnectedness, they deploy different narrative strategies to examine this concept.

The similarities between both novels encompass environmental themes, healing through nature, non-human

perspectives and the workings of memory and trauma. However, they vary in their settings, narrative structures, scientific focus, cultural contexts and time spans. Both novels are based on Gaia principles, such as the deep sense of the interconnectedness of living things, the concept that Earth is a living being, the ways in which human actions affect that system and nature's symbiosis. Both novels acclaim the intricate human-nature relationship. They address ecological issues, the impact of humans' actions on nature and the ability of the natural world to adapt.

Although both authors address environmental themes, they use different narrative strategies to examine ecological interconnectedness. In *Bewilderment*, Powers relates the novel to the contemporary climate crises of the 21st century. Since human experience is defined by ecological concerns, the events presented through *Bewilderment* relate the novel to the term 'solastalgia' (homesickness at home). This sense of solastalgia results from an imbalance between humans and the ecological system.

Bewilderment centers on a widowed father-ailing son complex relationship in face of environmental catastrophes and personal losses. Both are committed to nature and share the aim of preserving nature while struggling with the challenges of the corrupt world. The novel focuses on environmental themes to abate climate change impacts. The two main figures in the novel grapple with the impacts of climate change and have a sense of responsibility for it. Furthermore, the novel presents scientific theories that help characters in illustrating climate change effects. In contrast, Shafak's novel employs the fig tree as a primary character to symbolize the ecological system and its degradation. Additionally, the historical context of the Cyprus conflict categorizes the novel as cli-fi, particularly as it is influenced by the environmental factors of deforestation.

Bewilderment has been described in a review in *The Guardian* as a novel concerned with "the larger tragedy of a world increasingly poisoned and abused" (Roberts, 2021), a world facing environmental collapse and societal disintegration. Furthermore,

Roberts comments on Powers' writing nature as "beautifully observed and evocative" (2021) registering the deep connection between the characters and the natural world.

The story centers on Theo Byrne, an astrobiologist, and his neurodivergent son, Robin, after the death of Theo's wife, Alyssa (a passionate animal rights activist and attorney), in a car accident when attempting to save the life of a possum. Theo has a hard time raising Robin solely. To medicate his son, Theo and Robin go to a cabin where Theo and Alyssa spent their honeymoon, enjoying nature and talking about the environment. Since Robin has several school problems, Theo sees if Dr. Martin Currier, a neuroscientist can help. Currier's experimental treatment is to add Alyssa's brain scans to Robin's which successfully helped him in regulating his social skills and emotions. This is obvious in both Robin's drawing talent that records pictures of endangered species and in his organizing demonstrations through which he has gained fame. Despite his illness, Robin is aware of the anthropogenic activities that lead to the extinction of various species. Conversely, Theo's colleagues and the government prioritize economic gains over empathy toward nature. Robin's health deterioration results from Currier's loss of his research fund which tragically costed Robin his life. This tragic end encourages Theo to accept Currier's experimental treatment of connecting the deceased Robin's brain scans to Theo's.

Gaia theory lies in the heart of Powers' *Bewilderment*. The novel presents Gaia through the interconnected relation of all organic life and the dreadful consequences of human actions on the environment. Theo believes that human actions are the reasons for environmental degradation. As an astrobiologist, he is concerned with studying the possibilities of life on other planets. This idea is not far from the Gaia theory; it stresses the idea of interconnectedness because it is a way to understand the universe, our position in it, and to extend the idea of interconnectedness beyond Earth. Thus, Theo views the ecosystem from a scientific

perspective. He believes that when you look at Earth from space, you realize how interconnected everything is.

Theo's connection to nature is not only intellectual, but also affectionate. His affection for his environmentalist wife deepened his appreciation of the natural world to the extent that Theo and Robin, explored the wilderness. They go on hiking expeditions to observe the lives of certain species and explore the arboreal life. So, Theo's interconnectedness with the natural world is not only shaped by science and technology but also through the influence of his deceased wife, Alyssa, who, prior to her death taught him how to appreciate nature. He declares, "I do remember the day I learned about it from the woman who became [Robin's] mother" (Powers 2021, 192). Alyssa's death is not just a private tragedy. Her attempt to avoid hitting a possum echoes the Gaian ethic of balance. Theo and Robin are touched by Alyssa's death, in a way that they can't let her go. Their lives revolve around her memory, and Theo seeks her wisdom to help him parent. They cannot think about the future without Alyssa. Even during times of grief, Theo connects his grief to nature, his scientific understanding of it, and his attachment to his deceased wife. He informed Robin that his mother "went back into the system. She became other creatures. All the good things in her came into us. Now we keep her alive, with whatever we can remember" (Powers 2021, 59). Thus, Theo's scientific training, his mourning for his wife's death, and the lasting pull of her teachings on how he sees the natural world enrich the novel's central theme: the ways people are dependent upon nature and how they seek solace in nature after loss.

Theo and Robin represent the principle of self-regulation in different ways. They demonstrate environmental awareness and a connection to nature. Robin's artistic portrayal of the endangered species reflects this awareness. Robin's care about all living things appears when he informed his father that the world's corals will die in a six-year time (Powers 2021, 150). This perspective sides with the Gaian view of the negative impact of human activities on our ecosystem.

Robin's means of interconnection with the natural world through his empathy toward endangered species and his emotional responses to environmental degradation inspire his father to perceive the world from the perspective of other organisms. Robin does not just observe nature; he observes nature's hurt, as he told his father that over half of avian migrators use the river, but they no longer can because they have been robbed of habitat. He adds that water pollution resulting from spraying agricultural chemicals on crops and discarding toxic material into water endanger both the amphibian life cycle and the fish population (Powers 2021, 182). This environmental destruction underscores the importance of promoting ecological consciousness towards saving the health of our ecosystem. Thus, Robin's artistic portrayal and his sympathy toward nature criticize our social activities that unsettle the natural balance.

Robin's sympathy toward endangered species and ecosystems mirrors the Gaia hypothesis of the intricate relationship between all forms of life and the destruction that will occur if any decline in biodiversity happens. Robin's responses highlight the Earth's suffering and the importance of a healthy and stable human-ecology connection.

Theo and Robin correspond to one of the quotations in the novel, which delineates two categories of individuals on earth: "those who could do the Math and follow the science, and those who were happier with their own truths" (162). This quote aligns with the characters, placing Theo in the former group and Robin in the latter. Here, "do the Math" might not necessarily refer to calculations, but might rather refer to scientific understanding in its broader sense. However, the reason for referring to this quote is to invoke its symbolic value of a way of thinking that relies on evidence and logical reasoning.

The concept of interconnectedness is conveyed through Theo's scientific knowledge and empathy for the natural world. Theo endeavors to find equilibrium amidst the surrounding

disorder. Through Theo, *Bewilderment* serves as a compelling illustration of the paradigm shift from anthropocentrism to ecocentrism. Theo's research project and his attempt to educate people clearly demonstrate that "the creatures of this state do not belong to us. We hold them in our trust. The first people who lived here knew: all animals are our relatives. Our ancestors and our descendants are watching our stewardship. Let's make them proud" (Powers 2021, 56). This proves that we are part of a larger system of existence beyond ourselves. We need to see how we fit into it with fellow creatures on this planet and protect it for those who are to come. This deepens the novel's messages of ecological awareness and the necessity of seeing our position as part and parcel of the ecosystem.

Bewilderment provides a lesson concerning the importance of shifting from anthropocentrism to ecocentrism. Theo's reflection, "we watched for millions of years. Microbes bumped up against their limits...Every time life tried to break loose, the planet twirled, beating it back down to extremophiles" (Powers 2021, 15) illustrates this. This episode serves as a testament to the resilience of microbial life forms. It highlights that throughout history, there have been challenges and limits. Moreover, the survival of all living things depends on the rules of Earth. Instead of being impressed by how resilient microbes are, this moment shows how Earth can stop things from getting out of hand.

Through Theo's use of technology for the environmental sake, Powers highlights the fact that technology is not always harmful but can sometimes be a protector. Theo accepts to employ a technological device to establish a neural connection between Robin and his deceased mother. Theo asserts, "The same mother whose death sent the boy into a downward spiral has returned to nurse his spirit into health" (Powers 2021, 202). This shows how psychological and emotional balance can be positively reinforced in a way that mirrors Gaian balance. This technological therapeutic application resonates with the Gaian notion that human ingenuity, when synchronized with ecological functions, can attain equilibrium on the planet. This asserts Caracciolo's argument that

in *Bewilderment*, the uncertainty of neuroscience and that of the ecological crisis intertwine (2024, 183). This means that technology, exemplified in neural therapy, is a method of human-nature reconnection and, thus, does not always imply destruction.

The world in which Robin and Theo live, however, is marked by loss. The novel tries to render this loss tangible. It attempts to restore the human/non-human bond and interlink it before and after the death of either. Both Robin and Theo achieve self-regulation; Robin achieves self-regulation through his father's implementation of a form of neural therapy to assist him in managing his anxiety. In addition, being an astrobiologist, helps Theo in the self-regulation process. His interest in exploring other ecosystems is a means of escaping from the Earth's reality and the destruction it faces. Furthermore, Theo's attachment to nature is a means of self-regulation since it strengthens the father-son bond. Thus, interconnectedness and self-regulation lie at the heart of the narrative as well as the characters.

Bewilderment explores features of self-regulation, interconnectedness, and the vital need for human awareness toward nature. Through Theo and Robin, Powers presents diverse ways, exemplified in science and spirituality, through which humans can connect with nature. It is through science and spirituality that both Theo and Robin share the same quest for meaning and interconnectedness with the natural world. Both are in the initial stages of exploration; "both are mystified by time. Both are forever starting out" (Powers 2021, 64). This proves how science and spirituality are in parallel to arrive at a similar understanding of our position in the natural world. Whether people resort to science or spirituality, there will be a continuous quest for keeping attached to environment to lead a balanced life.

Put simply, *Bewilderment* is a narrative portrayal of Gaia theory, demonstrating the way human consciousness, technology, and emotional intelligence help the Earth to self-regulate. Powers advocates for an ecocentric world perspective, in which empathy,

awareness, and responsibility are necessary for life. The novel reflects Gaia's central principle that the planet and its inhabitants' health cannot be disentangled.

Shifting focus to Shafak's novel, it is "a captivating tapestry of love, identity, and history" (Flint 2025). It tackles the complex relationship between humanity, politics, and the natural world in Cyprus during the time of the Greek Turkish division. A fig tree in Cyprus is the primary character and narrator in the novel. It is a silent witness to the memories and secrets of a Greek Turkish Cypriot couple who came to seek refuge under this tree. The human-like qualities given to the fig tree reflect the deep human-nature connection.

Shafak depicts diverse scenes of environmental degradation. For instance, she draws pictures of the consequences of the Cyprus civil war exemplified in landscape and forest destruction, tree uprootedness, field abandonment, wildlife damage, and pollution. As a narrator, the fig tree has witnessed past events and has moved with the events across generations. It has witnessed the suffering, silence and resilience of nature over time. Through this technique, Shafak explores the lasting effects of historical events on the present. This is presented through the parallel structure between human conflicts and environmental destruction.

Shafak's novel clearly aligns with Gaia principles. In her novel, she intermingles natural elements with the history of Cyprus and focuses on the humanity-environment connection by employing a fig tree that witnesses human conflicts and life events. In a review for The Irish Times, Éilís Ní Dhuibhne describes Shafak's skill at intertwining history, botany, and human character, declaring that the author "knits the strands of her work ... with the powers of a real magician, to produce a compelling, eminently readable, fascinating novel" (2021). This storytelling mode reflects the Gaia theory's focus on the interconnectedness of all components of Earth.

Shafak's novel employs two narrative structures, one set in Cyprus in the 1970s and the other in London in the 2010s. Through

the relationship between Defne, Kostas, and the fig tree, the first part of the novel travels through the intricate human-nature relationship. Although Defne and Kostas belong to the two opposing sides of Cyprus, their love unites them, and the fig tree witnesses this love and unity.

The second part of the narrative introduces the Cypriot couple's daughter, Ada, who resides London. She wrestles with her identity and her past which her parents have kept hidden from her. The fig tree describes Ada's emotions when she states, "So many times in the past she had suspected that she carried within a sadness that was not quite her own. Was it possible to inherit something as intangible and immeasurable as sorrow?" (Shafak 2021, 28). It is after Defne's death that Ada confronts both her family's history and her sense of dislocation.

The novel's dual narrative presents the impact of human actions on the environment and relates the arboreal perspective to Gaia theory. This idea is evident in the depiction of the fig tree's experiences of sorrow. It is through historical and environmental trauma that the concepts of belonging, and interconnectedness are formulated. Both narrative structures point out how "personal tragedy developing into collective tragedy is not limited to one generation, rather passes to the next manifesting into many subtle and obvious ramifications" (Chaudhary and Munawar 2023). They investigate the complex relationship between silence and intergenerational trauma in the novel and argue that personal tragedies can become collective traumas that affect generations to come.

As a powerful literary device, the fig tree connects the human and natural worlds. According to the fig tree, "It remains to us plants to collect the untold, the unwanted. Like a cat that curls up on its favorite cushion, a tree wraps itself around the remnants of the past" (Shafak 2021, 252). These words observe the ways plants hold onto history and memories. Furthermore, Defne and Kostas, believe that "the fig has witnessed everything" (Shafak

2021, 350), which reflects the deep connection between nature and human beings portrayed through the human-like qualities given to the fig tree. In making the fig tree human-like, the author highlights the fig tree's ability to hold life experiences. The ability of a tree to wrap itself around an object is a physical manifestation of the way it cloaks past realities. The couple who lived in Cyprus were convinced that, for all its disappointment and loss, the fig tree was a witness to everything — not silenced by the boundaries of language but writing itself on human history. This perspective encourages readers to appreciate nature and draw a connection between human consciousness and the natural world.

By giving voice to nature, Shafak stands against environmental destruction. One of these environmental destructions is the deforestation in Cyprus since people were cutting down the trees, one by one, as if they were trying to erase the past and silence memories. The deforestation phenomenon is reflected through the sadness of the fig tree when it states, "I braced myself for the fall as I heard my roots strain and snap, one by one" (Shafak 2021, 50). This practice of deforestation symbolizes the erasure of identity, history, and memory. Moreover, the uprootedness of the trees from the land resembles the characters' loss of connection with their homeland. Shafak, thus, establishes a connection between the loss of nature and the loss of the homeland, memory, history, and identity. From a postcolonial perspective, Zehra and Mohsin assert, "Rootless identity is shaped by historical narratives, power dynamics, and the lingering effects of colonialism" (2025). They focused on rootless identity, which serves as a foundation for the characters to encounter their identities following colonization and globalization. They talk about detachment from cultural, geographical and historical roots, and how that rootlessness shapes the characters' sense of belonging and identification.

The fig tree symbolizes continuity and resilience amid surrounding historical, cultural, and environmental traumas. Trees have their means of communication and resilience. They send messages through the air, via scent, and send messages to the

underground through their roots. The fig tree declares, "I was tall, robust, self-confident and, surprisingly for my age, still laden with rich, sweet figs, each giving off a perfumed scent" (Shafak 2021, 73). It is a powerful symbol of resilience and continuity, surviving the hardships of history, culture and environment. It best illustrates resilience in connection with human actions and the intertwining of plant and human life within the same space.

Ada's quest for rootedness and identity resonates with that of the fig tree. Ada is uprooted from her Cypriot origins and growing up in London felt like being torn. She usually questions the reasons why her family and her relatives do not exchange visits to which her parents "had given her a whole host of excuses" (Shafak 2021, 23). Despite their uprootedness, both Ada and the fig tree have the enduring power to survive. Through the presence of the fig tree in London, Shafak highlights the idea of bridging cultural gaps and human-nature gap. Thus, the root implies a double meaning, the literal meaning lies in its true nature and function as a means of survival, while the symbolic meaning refers to heritage.

Shafak's narrative suggests that identity formation is a process that is always in the making, shaped by both our multi-layered senses of heritage and material realities and the conditions of the here and now. As the tree achieves such magnificent height in London, it serves to represent and bridge the cultural gaps. Thus, the novel is not only an immigrant narrative; it offers a nuanced perspective on the immigrant experience highlighting the ability to thrive and flourish in one's environment, despite not being familiar with it.

As Shafak calls for interconnectedness with nature, she also calls for a cross-cultural understanding. She connects both ideas together through the fig tree's words, "Trees are never lonely. Humans think they know with certainty where their being ends, and someone else's starts. With their roots tangled and caught up underground, linked to fungi and bacteria, trees harbour no such

illusions. For us, everything is interconnected” (Shafak 2021, 42). This perspective emphasizes both the importance of interconnected relationships among all living beings to lead a harmonious life and the importance of being attached to one’s own roots. In a review for *The Spectator*, Susie Measure notes that “nothing happens without a reason in this meticulously plotted tale of love, grief, and memory set in Cyprus and London in the aftermath of the 1974 civil war” (2021). This could serve as evidence for Shafak’s fiction indicating the interconnection of things and events, a fundamental principle of the Gaia theory.

It is through the fig tree that Shafak calls for a harmonious relationship with the ecosystem and urges ethical consideration of nature. The idea of uprooting and implanting the fig tree reflects human harshness toward nature because this process takes place for the sake of human beings rather than nature. It is because of this process that the fig tree comments, “Wherever humankind has fought wars, turning fertile lands into battle fields and destroying entire habitats, animals have always moved into the void they left behind” (Shafak 2021, 363). This statement reflects nature’s persistence, mirrored in animals who adopt and reestablish themselves in areas that humans have vacated following conflict. This metaphor leaves readers contemplating repercussions of human nature on nature itself and inspires them to strive for a better relationship with the ecosystem. The fig tree perspective motivates readers to change their old, socioeconomic, anti-nature, narrow-minded behavior.

Shafak’s novel resonates with the Gaia principle of self-regulation. She makes use of a natural element as a memory-keeper that allows the reader to see the world through non-human eyes. For instance, during hard times, Kostas wished “the fig tree must have witnessed everything” (Shafak 2021, 331) and he wished he could find a way to converse with the tree. The fig tree functions, as mentioned in many ways as a keeper of memory, giving us a perspective of the ontology of the tree, spanning generations, juxtaposing the constancy of the environment against the changes of humankind, suggesting new ways to look at the past, new ways

of knowing and remembering those deceased, all the while echoing sentiment of the linked practices between humankind and the rest of nature. In addition, this literary technique widens the horizon of the narrative as it invites readers to experience the story simultaneously on different levels.

Furthermore, the Gaia concept of self-regulation is presented through Shafak's use of three main characters to highlight the importance of interconnectedness: Kostas, Defne, and Ada. Kostas' care for the fig tree symbolizes his respect and care for nature. In addition, Defne's continuous resort to fig trees asserts that people usually find solace in nature. Ada's attachment to the fig tree underscores her connection to her roots, particularly after discovering her parents' appreciation for it.

To assert the importance of the interconnected man-nature relationship, Shafak uses personification and descriptive imagery to highlight how everything in nature connects. Shafak does not only use the fig tree but also uses many other living beings, like "Fruit bats, honeybees, wild goats, grass snakes," they communicate with a huge diversity of sounds as "some screech, others squeak, yet others caw, chatter, croak or chirp" (Shafak 2021, 404). In addition, Shafak uses inanimate objects like the salt lakes that tell stories, the fields that chant and the citrus orchards that recite verses to youth (Shafak 2021, 404). This perspective is consistent with the Gaia nature of self-regulation since nature is an integrated, sophisticated system. The use of human-like adjectives for non-human elements asserts that all nature has a mind and can socialize, even if the human being cannot always perceive this.

The novel reflects not only concepts of interconnectedness and self-regulation, but also resilience. The fig tree exemplifies remarkable resilience through its journey from Cyprus to London and sharing stories of the fires they have endured, claiming "if you want to emerge stronger and kinder from your trials, find an aspen to learn from a tree so tenacious it can fend off even the flames that aim to destroy it" (Shafak 2021, 390).

Whether in Cyprus or in London, the fig tree plays the same role resembling characters' dislocation. Shafak, through presenting the human-like fig tree, highlights the necessity of nature during moments of despair and loss. Drawing a comparison between the fig tree and the land underscores the idea of endurance and how the ecosystem is trying to adapt despite the imposed human activities. The fig tree travelled with its memories with resilience. It survived the war, the journey from Cyprus to London, displacement, and transplantation.

Shafak also refers to the resilience of some other living beings, such as cats, dogs, and birds. For instance, Kostas's dog represents the past and his nostalgic feelings and longing for home. Defne's attachment to cats mirrors her deep attachment to the islands. Birds resemble freedom and hope to survive and overcome their boundaries. In other words, Shafak's presentation of natural elements emphasizes the Gaian principles of interconnectedness, self-regulation and resilience. Shafak uses animates and inanimates as symbols of nostalgia, attachment, freedom, and resilience. This proves that we are all connected from Gaia's perspective. We are all interdependent, adaptable, and self-regulating.

Finally, Shafak challenges the anthropocentric view by providing healing power to nature. Characters usually find solace in nature. For example, whether in Cyprus or London, the fig tree is an eyewitness, a secret keeper, and a source of tranquility. Furthermore, Defne's attachment to the island aids her in coping with trauma. Despite the trauma that the characters and the fig tree experienced, the novel ends with a call for hope and resilience:

But I know and I trust that, any moment now, my beloved Kostas Kazantzakis will come out to the garden with a spade in his hand ... and he will dig me out and pull me up, holding me gently in his arms, and behind his beautiful eyes, engraved in his soul, they will still be there, the remnants of an island at the far end of the Mediterranean Sea, the remains of our love. (Shafak 2021, 406)

The hopeful expectation of the fig tree of being unearthed by Kostas symbolizes resilience and the enduring power of love and memory, embedding the Gaia principle not only in nature as a setting to human existence, but also as a dynamic force in the healing process.

In brief, though Powers and Shafak are concerned with the emerging understanding of the planet and our place there, when viewed through the Gaian concept of the environment as a living entity, Shafak's story is much more established and engaged on a cultural level than Powers' story. Shafak presents the fig tree as a metaphor for life, memory, and ecological continuity. It illustrates the Gaia theory's focus on the connectivity of all life forms. The novel's different settings show that the world is connected, and the occurrence of environmental disturbance will lead to human conflicts. In contrast, *Bewilderment* focuses on the father-neurodivergent son bond, employing science and ecology as narrative mechanisms. Salami and Asaadi discuss the representation of the protagonist's neurodiversity against the background of ecocriticism. They contend that the character's singular perspective serves as an innovative framework for examining the human cognition-environment connection that resonates with Gaia theory's focus on earth's system (2022).

Although *Bewilderment* embraces themes that resonate with Gaia theory, the fragility of ecosystems, the consequences of environmental abandonment, and the emotional resonance of the natural world are considered subordinate to the story's personal and psychological dimensions. Referring to exoplanets and planetary simulations contradict the Gaia theory's focus on Earth-based, self-regulating systems. This speculative aspect of the novel abstracts away ecological questions rather than rooting them in lived experience.

Furthermore, *Bewilderment* does not have the cultural and historical depth that *The Island of Missing Trees* weaves together. Shafak's book intertwines personal trauma, political history, and

ecological degradation providing a more inclusive vision of Gaia theory in action and its consequences. Powers' framing of environmental and human narratives underscores individual experiences, which limits the novel's ability to tackle the broader global scope of Gaia theory.

In brief, while both novels serve as evidence for the core principles of Gaia theory, *The Island of Missing Trees* engages the planet as a living, interrelated system in a deeper way. While thematically consistent, *Bewilderment* is in its focus and depth less engaged with Gaia theory.

Thus, the analysis implies that *Bewilderment* uniquely expresses the Gaia philosophy through a portrayal of how human lives are integrated with the Earth's ecosystem. Through the protagonist's journey and the novel's environmental imagery, Powers accentuates how much human actions affect this planet and how much the conditions of this planet affect humanity.

Conclusion

Reading both Powers' and Shafak's narratives from a Gaian perspective aids in visualizing the human-nature interwoven relationship which, in fact, paves the way toward environmental critique. *Bewilderment* emphasizes the importance of ecological awareness and taking the accurate measures to address climate change, while *The Island of Missing Trees* calls for preserving nature and fostering relationships with the environment.

The aim of this paper is not to narrate and visualize personal experiences, but to call for taking actions in favour of environmental preservation. Reading both novels from a Gaian perspective asserts that both cli-fi novels engage directly with everyday ecological issues. Both texts assert the importance of the understanding of modern societies to human-nature interconnection, focusing on the mutual benefits between both. This interconnection requires more humane reactions than technological advances. Both novels spotlight the environmental

crisis, using personal narratives to illustrate broader ecological issues.

Reading both texts from a Gaian perspective is pivotal, since these novels, among many others, reflect the negative impact of modern science and technology on nature. Moreover, reading these texts paves the way toward bridging the current gaps exemplified in the loose man-nature relationship. Furthermore, reading both novels offers an opportunity for future focus on further eco-narratological texts to explore themes of sustainability and the welfare of our planet. Cli-fi should be a powerful reminder for all human beings to preserve their relationship with the natural world to achieve universal balance and equilibrium. The study assumes that cli-fi has a significant role in inspiring readers to engage in environmental activism and adopt sustainable practices to preserve nature.

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