

Elif Shafak's *The Island of Missing Trees* through the lens of Félix Guattari's *The Three Ecologies*

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Abstract: The words of Wordsworth (1789, lines 21-24) “One impulse from a vernal wood / May teach you more of man, of moral evil and of good, / Than all the sages can”, no longer find their way to human hearts as the world is becoming anthropocentric where nature is seen just as scenery and people forget that it is the healing power for the human spirit. The present article aims to highlight the dynamic relationship between humans and the natural world through Elif Shafak's novel, *The Island of Missing Trees* (2021), and Félix Guattari's theory of Three Ecologies, whose approach extends beyond traditional ecological thinking by incorporating psychological well-being and social engagement. The article highlights the three triadic models of ecological domains, such as environmental, social, and mental, and studies how personal trauma, collective memory and ecological consciousness are interwoven in the character's journey toward healing and inner balance. Shafak's choice of the fig tree as the narrator symbolises the deep-rooted connections between nature, identity and history and bridges the gap between individual consciousness, social cohesion, and ecological sensitivity, providing a literary embodiment of Guattari's vision and illustrating how reconnecting and rediscovering a relationship with nature leads to harmony.

Keywords: Guattari, mental ecology, social ecology, environmental ecology, trauma, memory

Introduction

In today's technological world, people often forget that their path towards self-progression is highly interlinked with preserving the ecological balance of the planet. While walking towards their modern pursuits, they tend to consciously or unconsciously forget how their careless walks destroy and disrupt nature's selfless services, which

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they ignore as collateral damage, without realising that they are causing damage not only to their mental health but also to their descendants. Elif Shafak is an acclaimed writer whose novels portray the existing problems in the human and natural worlds through stories and dialogues. As a British-Turkish author, she often challenges political sensitivity, and her passion for storytelling stems from knowing not only the people who are left unnoticed and hidden beneath the surface but also the natural world. In an interview with Samira Ahmed, Shafak accepts,

I am also drawn to silences-and the silenced. There is a part of me that wants to understand where are the silences in my society and who are the silenced. (Shafak 2024, par. 4)

Though Shafak (2021, 165) feels that this is “neither the right time nor the right place to carry on about plants and animals...” her novel *The Island of Missing Trees* (2021) is nothing but a desperate love letter to nature, which places “nature in all its forms and glory” (Ibid.). People see plants, trees and flowers as background scenery and forget that they also deserve a rightful place in the web of life. Shafak’s natural world is sentient, storied and is “based on true accounts” (Ibid, 381), which brings out the ecological sensitivity, environmental loss and emotional distress carried by the characters to reflect upon how the environment is deeply entangled with human life.

Methodology

The research article is an interdisciplinary approach to bring out the coexistence of humans and the natural realm through the theory of three ecologies by Pierre-Félix Guattari ([1989] 2000, 71), a French psychiatrist and philosopher who insists on “a sense of responsibility, not only for its own survival but equally for the future of all life on the planet”. His ideology perfectly aligns with Shafak, who believes that

... there was no hierarchy or there should be none between human pain and animal pain, and no precedence of human rights over animal rights, or indeed of human rights over those of plants, for that matter. (Shafak 2021, 359)

Guattari ([1989] 2000, 41) identifies three interconnected domains “under the ethico-aesthetic aegis of an ecosophy: social ecology, mental ecology and environmental ecology,” which explore the relationship between nature and humans, examine the structure of human institutions, highlight the consciousness and the trauma of the

characters. According to Guattari, this ecosophical study proposes a more harmonious and sustainable way of living within the labyrinth of the world and provides balance across environmental, social and mental existence. Shafak's *The Island of Missing Trees* will undoubtedly have a profound impact on the reader's mind in this ecocritical context. Her treatment of ecology with due respect and care will make people listen to the natural world and feel its grief and form a compassionate bond with nature and thus resonating with Guattari's theoretical base.

Environmental ecology

The novel is a blend of historical fiction, set against the backdrop of a war-torn Cyprus and cosmopolitan London. It draws attention to war, history, intergenerational trauma, displacement and the plea of the non-human world, which is intensely ecological both in form and content. The literary realm celebrates the significance of trees and nature as a living presence that shapes stories and human emotions. It elaborates on how trees act as a profound embodiment of wisdom and how "we humans encounter in our environment, language, and culture" (O'Neill 2024, 796). Richard Powers emphasises how the shared evolutionary origins between humans and trees remind readers that they are biologically connected. In the work *Overstory*, the narrator says,

You and the tree in your backyard come from a common ancestor. A billion and a half years ago, the two of you parted ways. But even now, after an immense journey in separate directions, that tree and you still share a quarter of your genes. (Markovits 2018, par. 6)

that deeply reflects the bond between nature and humans. These authors' views resonate with Shafak (2021, 97), who writes in her novel how trees "watched, waited and witnessed".

In *The Island of Missing Trees*, Shafak's storytelling strategy extends beyond the human realm to a non-anthropocentric narrator, the fig tree, which helps reshape people's understanding of ecological consciousness and memory. In the novel, the fig tree takes root in "The Happy Fig" (Ibid, 98), a secret tavern in Nicosia run by Yiorgos and Yusuf, Greek and Turkish Cypriots. The tavern is a neutral zone and a space of unity amid a city torn apart by conflict. The novel centers around a Greek Cypriot, Kostas Kazantzakis, and a Turkish Cypriot, Defne, their teenage daughter Ada and the fig tree. The relationship between Kostas and Defne grows in the tavern where the fig tree

serves as a witness to their forbidden love. The fig tree's narratives unfold in a non-linear manner, moving back and forth between the past and the present, between London and Cyprus, between home and migration, which connects the three ecologies. Angeline Nikita and Dr. Mary Vidya Porselvi rightly observe,

The structure becomes all the more crucial in its relevance to the contents of the novel as the process of burying the tree can represent the repressing of trauma and memory associated with the conflict, while the process of unburying the tree can represent the act of digging up the past in order to understand the present. (Nikita and Porselvi 2024, 151)

The concept of memory or remembering is central to both Shafak's novel and Guattari's ecosophy, in which he calls for reclaiming repressed desires. As Guattari believes the tree is a living ecosystem, Shafak also describes how the fig tree, once a sapling, has now gradually grown into a powerful listener of the island. It narrates the division of the island and how, "in the eyes of the entire world" (Shafak 2021, 151), it becomes "an international crisis" (Ibid.), expressing its sorrow at the loss of harmony. David Souter finds that,

The Cyprus problem has been a source of international tension in the eastern Mediterranean for more than thirty years... repeated clashes between the island's Greek and Turkish communities culminating, after the Turkish invasion of 1974. (Souter 1984, 657)

This partition turns the island into a war zone, symbolising the island's unending conflict and colonial legacy. The fig tree expresses its sadness that they have completely forgotten how, in 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. (Shafak 2021, 211-212)

This emphasises that the destruction of nature is also the destruction of culture and memory. Through the fig tree's association with the other forms of nature, Shafak insists that nature is always in harmony, unlike human beings, as the fig tree says,

It matters to me ... 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. (Ibid, 212)

Shafak highlights the interconnectedness of nature and strives hard to blur the line between humans and the environment. Each natural being carries a unique tone in the ecological chorus, yet they bring a collective environmental awareness. The fig tree speaks tenderly of butterflies, which “can fly for an impressive 2500 miles” (Shafak 2021, 289). Though “humans regard butterflies as fragile” (Ibid.) and compare the butterflies with the generational migration experience of the people passing on to their heirs, Shafak decentralises the human perspectives, stating that “what mattered was not the final destination but to be on the move, searching, changing, becoming” (Ibid, 290). Even if it dislikes the mosquitoes, it respects the ecological existence of mosquitoes as “humankind’s nemesis”. (Ibid, 301) It also talks about ants, which are “resilient and hard-working” (Ibid, 320), and honeybees, which are “tireless foragers” (Ibid, 327), and mice, which safeguard themselves in the basements and claim it as their kingdom. It draws a comparison to the immigrant experience of Cypriot people who serve as quiet witnesses, having migrated to other continents due to war and its devastating impacts on the island.

Social ecology

According to Guattari, ecological deterioration disintegrates the social bonds and shared identities. The novel opens with the fig tree as a reflective voice, not only as a witness but also as a bearer of intergenerational memory. The fig tree mentions how it was displaced from the home island of Cyprus and the painful memory it carries. It says,

It has been many years since I fled that place on board a plane, inside a suitcase... adopted another land, England, where I have grown and thrived, but not a single day passes that I do not yearn to be back. Home. Motherland. (Shafak 2021, 7)

The novel disseminates the themes of how migration, displacement and generational trauma impact the lives of people who leave their motherland and exile themselves to countries far away to survive and mask their memories deeper inside their minds. In Cyprus, love between a Greek and a Turkish Cypriot is not only frowned upon but also forbidden. Though Kostas and Defne’s love defies the boundaries drawn by politics, ethnicity and tradition, when their relationship is discovered, the world outside is unkind. Panagiota, Kostas’s mother, strongly disapproves of the relationship between them, as she upholds

the social and ethnic divisions and does not empathise with Kostas's feelings or question the injustice of the divided society. She forces him to leave the island where hundreds and thousands of people die every day, as she has already lost her husband and two sons.

Under the crushing weight of inherited prejudice and radical ideologies, the social ecology disintegrates. After Kostas leaves for London, Defne discovers that she is pregnant, but chooses not to reach out to Kostas; instead, she handles it on her own with the help of Dr. Norman. However, she decides to give the baby to the English couple for adoption. But unfortunately, the child dies of "acute respiratory distress caused by the insect-borne parasite" (Shafak 2021, 304), which forces her to get into the habit of smoking and drinking. When Kostas returns to the island after "twenty-five years" (Ibid, 219), as a botanist immersed in the world of plants and trees, he meets Defne, who has become a successful archaeologist. They both identify that the love once forbidden still lingers inside them. They begin to speak again, to trust again, to remember again how they have come all this way over the years, carrying the weight of their past. Choosing each other again is not an easy decision, but when they revisit "The Happy Fig" (Ibid, 98), a symbolic site of their youthful love and find that it still survives despite all the odds and scars, their love for each other is rekindled. They decide to start their life together in London.

Kostas carefully wraps the fig sapling in his suitcase to carry it to London. It becomes the symbol of his longing to preserve the past. The fig tree says, "I liked my new home in London. I worked hard to fit in, to belong" (Shafak 2021, 65). They plant the fig tree in the garden; it grows with the unborn baby of Kostas and Defne, carrying both memory and hope. One can understand why Ada, their daughter, gets the intergenerational trauma when the fig tree says, "They thought they were bringing only me into England, unaware that they were also bringing their unborn child" (Ibid, 40). They are overwhelmed, but at the same time, Defne feels frightened and experiences recurrent dreams of getting lost in the forest, and fears, "What if it turns out I'm a terrible mother? What if I fail?" (Ibid. 334) She becomes quite happy when she realises Ada and the fig tree are "healthy and growing" (Ibid., 335), but that does not last long, as she says, "...pain becomes part of your flesh. It stays with you and marks you permanently" (Ibid, 351-52) which clearly shows that she is not able to heal herself from the social exclusion from her native island.

The novel reveals how silence and secrecy act as undermining forces of social ecology. Kostas and Defne decide not to share their past trauma with their daughter, as Defne says,

I don't want Ada to be burdened by the things that hurt us. I want you to promise me, Kostas. You won't tell her much about our past. (Shafak 2021, 351)

When Kostas goes on a research trip to Australia with a team of scientists, Defne dies in London, and her "time in London primarily portrays her continual remembrance of her homeland through a lens of gloom and sadness" (Zehra and Mohsin 2023, 399). Thus, Shafak exposes how environmental degradation and social systems result in the exclusion and repression of the characters.

Mental ecology

According to Guattari, mental ecology addresses the subjective experiences of an individual's psychological well-being and existential experience. It explores anxiety, alienation and identity crises in the face of modernity as a fragmenting force of an individual. The death of Defne makes Kostas seclude himself not only from society but also from his daughter and he turns to trees, which offer him "solace" (Shafak 2021, 358). Ada and Kostas become distant after the death of Defne, as Kostas always gets lost in the "cloud of lethargy" (Ibid, 360). He avoids speaking about his past or her mother's life in Cyprus.

Through the character Ada Kazantzakis, Shafak maps out the resilient reinvention of empathy and reconnection. Ada struggles with her broken identity and digs into her family's past through Meryem, Defne's sister and the fig tree. Ada's family secrets are the primary reason for her psychological collapse, which erupts in the present timeline of the novel. She questions, "What I don't understand is why my own parents never talked about the past even after they moved to England. Why the silence?" (Ibid, 347) Shafak portrays Ada as a victim of intergenerational trauma and shows how she screams in the class uncontrollably, "So unpredicted and forceful and impossibly high-pitched was her voice that other students fell quite" (Ibid, 33). After this incident, some of her classmates posted record snippets of her scream and tagged her in a hashtag stating "#doyouhearmenow" (Ibid, 138), tormenting her emotional breakdown by publicising it on social media.

As Ada was born in London, she has no access to the cultural roots of her parents' family. Her unprocessed mourning for her mother, confusion, isolation and inherited trauma result in ruptured mental ecology. She

experiences the tension between past and present, between motherland and the new land because she appears to be in constant search of a missing part of herself. (Sabbah and Ayuningtyas 2022, 65)

Meanwhile, the emotional breakdown at school is a symbolic event representing the grief that she has been carrying. Shafak believes,

You carry a place in your soul, even through the stories you were not told. You can sense the void. The past matters because it shapes us, whether we know it or not. (Cooke 2021, par. 5)

Through Meryem, Ada learns why her parents never told her about Meryem or the history of Cyprus. Meryem acts as a bridge between generations and geographies, bringing back the familial warmth, the unspoken truth of her mother's death and the cultural significance of the family. Meryem says,

Kostas was the love of her life. Your mother adored your father. They both paid a heavy price, though. You grew up without seeing your relatives. (Shafak 2021, 156)

through which Ada finally begins to realise the burden of Kostas and Defne and the reason behind their silences. With Meryem's support, she becomes more confident in facing the bullying in the school. As Meryem says,

But girls your age should not be worrying about such things. Sorrow is to the soul What a worm is to wood . . . Look everyone has done something silly in their youth that they thought was beyond repair. Maybe you feel lonely right now. You think your classmates laughed at you and maybe they did, but that's human nature . . . But my point is, you'll come out stronger. One day you'll look back and say, why was I even worried about that? (Ibid, 196)

Guattari emphasises that mental ecology thrives on sustained connections across generational memory and rootedness in the place where one belongs, fostering psychological balance. The fig tree itself plays a significant role in restoring the interconnectedness between the natural world and the human mind and thus provides the mental stability in the characters. Though it acts as a silent companion in the initial stage, witnessing her grief and remaining disconnected, much

like her parents' history, when time progresses, it provides healing to Ada and Kostas. Gardening becomes his meditative act, a nonverbal way of reconnecting with memory and emotion. Ada understands the affinity of her father with the fig tree as Ada says, "No matter the time of the day, her father seemed to prefer the company of trees to the company of humans" (Ibid, 17). Kostas listens, nurtures and learns from the fig tree. It is evident that he loves the "arboreal world, but he neither differentiates between human suffering and arboreal suffering nor gives priority to one kind of suffering over the other" (Raval 2024, 165). When Ada asks him, "you bury a tree, does it feel pain?" (Shafak 2021, 50), Kostas replies,

We're only just beginning to discover the language of trees. But we can tell with certainty that they can hear, smell, communicate - and they can definitely remember. They can sense water, light, danger. They can send signals to other plants and help each other. They're much more alive than most people realize (Ibid.)

which shows the in-depth bond between him and nature. It acts as a surrogate mother to Ada and a soulful companion to Kostas when their inner selves encounter existential crisis due to their emotional bereavement. Kostas reconnects with her daughter, saying,

Your mother loved you very much, more than anything in this world. Her death has nothing to do with the absence of love. She was blooming and thriving with your love, and I'd like to believe with mine, too, but underneath, something was strangling her-the past, the memories, the roots. (Ibid, 368)

At the end of the novel, he promises to take her to Cyprus. Ada's statement, "I'll come to the island... 'I just want to meet islanders, like myself,'" (Ibid, 374) is a kind of return to nature to heal, to coexist and proves how,

In the most surprising ways, the victims continued to live, because that is what nature did to death, it transformed abrupt endings into a thousand new beginnings. (Ibid, 359)

Conclusion

Every tree is a living testament of time, but people pass it like passersby. The text chosen for the study, *The Island of Missing Trees*, illustrates how silenced ecocritical voices and the destiny of humankind are intertwined. As the novel foregrounds the principle of ecosophy, Shafak employs the fig tree's narrative to explore the complex lives of human characters and the lost knowledge of

ecological awareness. The modern world, which is filled with digital noise, urban alienation and socio-political conflicts, estranges people from the environment. As people drift further from the rhythms of nature, they are losing not only the balance but also a vital part of humanity. Shafak's novel teaches how rekindling and rediscovering the relationship with nature leads to harmony and inhabiting the world with compassion. In chasing the future, people often forget the roots from which they were once grounded. An analysis of this novel through Guattari's triadic model comprising environmental, social and mental ecologies reveals that Shafak's narrative transcends the themes of life and death and emerges as a vision of a moral, ethical, relational and interconnected mode of existence.

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