

The Suffering and Trauma of Fig Trees in Elif Shafak's *The Island of Missing Trees*

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Abstract

The article examines the Turko-British writer Elif Shafak's novel *The Island of Missing Trees* (2021) that depicts the butterfly island of Cyprus from 1974-2010 during which the civil war between Greek Christians and Turkish Muslims destroys the complex but the fragile ecosystem of the arboreal world and causes immense suffering to the non-human life forms such as the fig trees, leading to their generational trauma. The novelist's exploration of pivotal issues like civil war, intercultural love, colonialism, violence, partition, migration, etc. touch upon the domains of history and memory. The novel brilliantly succeeds in delineating the intercultural love between Kostas and Defne and, the interspecies love between humans and trees. Kostas Kazantzakis loves arboreal world, but he neither differentiates between human suffering and arboreal suffering nor gives priority to one kind of suffering over the other. Largely human beings are regarded as the cause of arboreal suffering and, the fig trees, possessing memory, pass on the painful memories of ancestors to their siblings. After Defne's death, Kostas migrates from Cyprus to London with their daughter Ada and a sapling of the fig tree from Nicosia. By implanting this sapling in the backyard garden of his house, Kostas tries to revive the infested fig tree and to save its memory. Ada, the third generation Cypriot migrant, digs up in her suffering, like the fig trees, the memory of her parents' life in Cyprus. Thus, the article concludes by drawing an interesting parallel between the history of civil war and the history of environmental destruction and trauma in Cyprus interwoven nonlinearly in *The Island of Missing Trees*.

Keywords: Arboreal; Civil war, Environmental destruction; Fig trees; History; Love; Memory; Suffering; Trauma;

"Memories are elusive and wispy as tufts of wool dispersed in the wind." (Shafak 2021: 314)

The Island of Missing Trees, the twelfth novel by Elif Shafak (1971-), published in English in 2021, is a story of losers which delineates the history of Cyprus from 1974-2010 in antilinear style. The plot of the novel shows its principal characters oscillate between Nicosia in Cyprus and London in England. Shafak, in her postcolonial novel, draws an important parallel between the history and the memory of civil war, violence and partition from the human perspective, and the history of environmental destruction and arboreal trauma from the planetary perspective. The destruction of the arboreal ecosystem, insurmountable suffering and the transgenerational trauma of the fig trees (*Ficus carica*) due to the civil war in Cyprus are depicted accurately by Elif Shafak. By focusing on the arboreal suffering of the fig trees, the present article examines the issue of memory by placing it in the context of the arboreal world and, argues for the serious study of arboreal trauma. It is appropriate here to note the scholarly pursuit of the psychological impacts of climate violence with reference to the noted dystopian films in E. Ann Kaplan's *Climate Trauma: Foreseeing the Future in Dystopian Film and Fiction* (2015). In contrast to the priority given to the human memory in the discipline of memory studies, we find the eco-feminist novelist Shafak demonstrating longer history and sharper memory of trees than that of humans. Shafak was already engaged in reading about nature and ecology, but the pandemic and the consequent lockdowns gave her the idea of the fig tree and encouraged her to think about the environment - trees and forests especially - and she wrote *The Island of Missing Trees* (2021) about the destruction of fig trees on the island of Cyprus (Anjum).

Motherland, Migration and Memory

Though Elif Shafak had multiple belongings which lead her to espouse cosmopolitanism than nationalism (Hindustan, as a writer and a person, she is drawn to her motherland, Turkey, and to her mother tongue, Turkish, and is led to talk about these roots in her novels. The experience of immigration in England, travels around the world and the artistic evocation of her roots makes the issue of memory intensely tense and powerful: "The voices of our motherlands never stop echoing in our minds. We carry them with us everywhere we go. Still today, here in London, buried in this grave, I can hear those same sounds, and I wake up trembling like a sleepwalker who realizes he has ventured dangerously into the night" (Shafak, 2021: 341). *The Island of Missing Trees* is aptly dedicated by Shafak: "To immigrants and exiles everywhere,/ the uprooted, the re-rooted, the rootless,/ And to the trees we left behind,/ rooted in our memories . . ." (i). The first generation immigrants talk about their dreams, aspirations

and the people they left behind to the trees and take tender care of the plants they brought from their motherlands by thinking that, “when you save a fig tree from a storm, it is someone’s memory you are saving” (24). The idea of memory is, thus, deeply interwoven in the novel’s exploration of central issues like the civil war, intercultural love, colonialism, violence, partition and migration. Shafak also pursued considerable amount of research for writing the novel *The Island of Missing Trees*, like numerous visits to Cyprus before the pandemic, meeting its people, listening to them and imbibing its rich oral culture in forms of superstitions, myths and legends on the island. Cyprus, ‘the vast and impenetrable region’ (1), situated at the crossroads of Europe, Africa and Asia, has vanished completely from the present maps of the world, which impels Shafak to define cartography as another name for stories told by winners (1) and therefore, reveals the unreliability of cartography in preserving the past memory of places: “A map is a two-dimensional representation with arbitrary symbols and incised lines that decide who is to be our enemy and who is to be our friend, who deserves our love and who deserves our hatred and who, our sheer indifference” (1). Shafak chooses the medium of literature, particularly fiction and, relies on legends, to tell the story of the losers of Cyprus, “to tell us what history has forgotten” (1). *The Island of Missing Trees* is considered the most significant novel of historical recovery and, as a historical novel, it dramatizes the historical forces in order to make clear the inevitability of the event and chooses its characters which help us understand how feudalism paves the way for capitalism (Ünlü-nen).

The Perspective of the Fig Tree

Finding the incompatibility between the linear human time and the cyclical arboreal time, *The Island of Missing Trees* adheres to the cyclical arboreal-time in order to write the history (47). The novel is also structured in six parts like a tree: burying the fig tree, roots, trunk, branches, ecosystem and unburying the fig tree. The perspective of the fig tree as the first-person narrator in the novel allows Shafak to tell the story of the losers of postcolonial Cyprus, partitioned between Cypriot Greek Christians and Cypriot Turkish Muslims. Ada Kazantzakis, the third-generation Cypriot migrant in England, who digs up, in her suffering, the memory of her parents’ life in Cyprus, asks a centripetal question to Aunt Meryem: “What I don’t understand is why my own parents never talked about the past even after they moved to England. Why the silence?” (313) Kostas’s promise to Defne of concealing the painful history from Ada for her good future makes him silent about their past and cuts their daughter’s access to it. Defining love as ‘a deceptive thing with a heartbreak in the end,’

(184) Shafak delineates two types of love in the novel: First, love between humans - the Greek Christian Cypriot Kostas Kazantzakis, a great evolutionary ecologist and botanist, and the Turkish Muslim Cypriot Defne, an anthropologist, and second, love between humans and trees (Anjum). Both love cause migration, suffering and the transgenerational traumas of both Ada and the fig tree in *The Island of Missing Trees*. As a close relative and silent witness to the Kazantzakis family, the fig tree furnishes Shafak with the role of a first person narrator.

Ada's Trauma and the Voice of Aunt Meryem

Kostas is accompanied by daughter Ada and a sapling of the fig tree, when he, after the death of his wife Defne, migrates from Cyprus to England. In his grief for Defne and love of the fig trees, Kostas plants the sapling of the infested fig tree, taken from *The Happy Fig* tavern, in the backyard garden of the London house. Ada's preoccupation with her family past springs from a humiliating incident in her school when her fellow students jibe at her and, later, when she screams aloud like a maniac in the class. In her response to the question about the project on migration and generational change posed by the History teacher Mrs Walcott at Brook Hill Secondary School (who tells her students: "History is a fascinating subject. Without understanding our past, how can we hope to shape our future?" (11) Ada answers that even men, like her father, cling to the past in the form of plants like the fig trees. A video of her screaming filmed illicitly by one of her classmates is shared publicly on the internet that goes viral and receives various comments that range from contempt and ridicule to sexual jokes and dirty remarks, pictures and emojis, memes, cartoons, etc.: "A woman in Iceland had recorded herself against a magnificent landscape, screaming to the top of her voice as a geyser went off in the background. Underneath was a hashtag that Ada noticed many others had also been using: #doyouhearmenow" (123).

Ada is tormented by these messages and comments received on her mobile which she has to read despite her father Kostas's warning about not using technology at night due to the risk of delaying circadian rhythms. As Kostas had promised Defne not to tell her of past, he told her only few things which didn't satisfy her, therefore he had to call Aunt Meryem from Cyprus to tell her 'everything': "Why burden our children with our past - or the mess we've made of it? This is a new generation. A clean slate. I don't want her to be preoccupied with a history that caused us nothing but pain and distrust" (71). Cyprus, which Ada saw only in pictures on the internet, had remained a mystery to her which she was trying

to solve by reading on the internet and by confiding to Aunt Meryem that the world had changed in such a way that there was nothing secretive or unquestionable for the youths of her times. This persuades Meryem, despite her suspicion of past, to reveal their past to Ada: "Everything [...] But no one knows that. Neither me, nor your father . . . we only grasp bits and pieces, each of us, and sometimes your bits and pieces do not match mine and then what's the use of talking about the past, it'll only offend everyone" (115). Ada's interview with Aunt Meryem not only helps her write an essay on migration and generational change and understand her own family past but also helps her reclaim her own roots through such memories: "I'll come to the island [...] I just want to meet islanders, like myself" (339). Kostas has promised Ada to take her to Cyprus. As advised by her father, Ada goes and flaps around the class like a hawk (336) and is not disconcerted in any way by stares, whispers, giggles or screaming in the class. She feels more pride than shame about Mrs Walcott reading about Aunt Meryem's life. Thus, the technological use of the recorder on the mobile aids Ada to preserve the voice of Aunt Meryem and the memory of her family in Cyprus. According to Sezen Ünlü-nen, the losers of history, about whose plight Shafak wants to talk about in the present novel, do not come into being as fully fleshed individuals, and they do not help us understand how the Greek Christians and the Turkish Muslims of Cyprus become each other's enemies and murder each other. The traumatic episode of Ada's screaming also turns out to be a "nonevent": "The project of giving voice to the losers of history turns out to be an empty promise that isn't delivered on. Yes, we hear the voice, but we still don't know what it's saying" (Ünlü-nen).

Transgenerational Trauma of Fig Trees

Like Ada's trauma, Shafak also delineates the transgenerational trauma of the fig trees in *The Island of Missing Trees*. From very childhood, Kostas feels an affinity with nature and is so sentimental about it that even a chick's death by a cat would make him keep mum for days. Though the scientists think that the trees are not sentient, Kostas tells them with confidence that the trees, especially the fig trees, can hear, smell, communicate and remember. During the outbreak of war, the love meetings between Kostas and Defne take place at the tavern called *The Happy Fig* in the centre of which has grown the fig tree. The tavern, "a place with history and small miracles" (87), is owned by the gay couple Yusuf and Yiorgos, whose entrance is covered with honeysuckle vines and whose cuisine is a mixture of centuries old cultures. The events of the civil war are narrated by this fig tree, which bestows the quality of memory upon the arboreal

world. *The Island of Missing Trees* delineates the environmental destruction by privileging the non-human forms of life and the memory of such destruction by them.

Just as human beings were killed by Covid-19, the fig trees also get affected and destroyed by the virus in Cyprus in the early 1970s. The civil war destroys the fig tree, which destroyed by the fire caused through the explosion of a bomb in *The Happy Fig* and, breaks down the entire arboreal ecosystem of the fig tree. The bomb technology destroys and disfigures the human and the non-human world in such a way that no links through history or memory may allow the older affinity to the place by any human possible. Yusuf and Yiorgos disappear in 1974, the two of thousands such missing persons for whom Defne has undertaken the task of exhumation by joining the CMP, as Kostas says, "something was strangling her – the past, the memories, the roots" (334).

The fig trees support the ecosystem and they can help the loss of biodiversity across the Mediterranean, but as Shafak informs, the lack of historical knowledge about the local ecosystem makes the bureaucrats plant the fast growing acacia trees from Australia and other invasive species such as eucalyptus. The fig tree in the foreign soil of England feels rootless: "I miss Cyprus too. Maybe because of the frigid climate, I can't help harking back to my days in the sun. I might have become a British tree, but some days it still takes me a moment to fathom where I am, on which island exactly. Memories come rushing back upon me, and if I listen intently I can still hear the songs of meadowlarks and sparrows, the whistling of warblers and wigeons, the birds of Cyprus, calling my name" (81). Wandering aimlessly in the Garden of Eden, Shafak revises the history of Genesis by stating that, Adam and Eve stumbled across a fig tree, wrapped themselves in its leaves and tempted to eat the aromatic luscious fig, the forbidden fruit, rather than the apple, which (the fig fruit) even after years of original sin, tastes like lost paradise: "Adam and Eve shared a tender, ripe, deliciously alluring, aromatic fig, splitting it open right down the middle, and as the fleshy opulent sweetness dissolved on their tongues they began to see the universe around them in a completely new light because that is what happens to those who attain knowledge and wisdom [...] As for the apple, I am sorry, it didn't even feature (32)".

Though, according to Shafak, most phenomena of nature possess memory, the fig trees are afflicted with everlasting memory, the enduring memory of centuries which is regarded as a curse. The Cypriot women consider memory as a curse and curse by saying: "May you never be able

to forget./May you go to your grave still remembering” (34). Kostas tells Ada that the trees can remember, especially the young trees who have ‘stored memory’ and therefore, get to know about the traumas through which their ancestors passed through. Meryem advises Ada not to worry about genetically inheriting her mother Defne’s mental health problems by saying: “Sorrow is to the soul what a worm is to wood” (176). Yet Ada cannot come out of her worries as her silly mistake of screaming was posted online and, this technological feature of the present world would make the past hover around her forever. Shafak draws a crucial difference between the human and the arboreal method of connecting and recollecting the past: “Humans, especially the victors who hold the pen that writes the annals of history, have a penchant for erasing as much as documenting. It remains to us plants to collect the untold, the unwanted. Like a cat that curls up on its favourite cushion, a tree wraps itself around the remnants of the past” (211). The trees do possess memory which they hand down to their offspring. When the plants are threatened, attacked or cut, they produce a chemical called ethylene which is like hearing stressed plants screaming. The rings of the tree reveal its age and its endurance of trauma. Stressed trees, and even those trees which have not passed through the experience of environmental or physical trauma, learn and make new combinations of DNA, new genetic variations, “to survive in a world that neither understands nor values us” (100). This is described by Shafak as transgenerational memory.

The cracks in trunks, unhealed splits and the autumn coloured leaves suggest the signs of traumas experienced by the trees. Kostas proves the notion of environmental trauma through his research experiments on a trip to Australia after the devastation of forest through wildfires and heat-waves. Focusing on the species *Eucalyptus grandis*, he discovers that the trees whose ancestors had experienced hardship reacted more swiftly and produced extra proteins, which are then used by them to protect and regenerate their cells. Likewise, Ada’s screaming in the class which prompts her to dig into the past, is a case of genetical inheritance of trauma faced by her parents and grandparents. She cannot just belong to Britain, but, like the butterflies, has to inherit migration and trauma from her ancestors in Cyprus. Juxtaposing families with trees, Shafak poetically describes the respective traumas of Kazantzakis family and the fig trees thus: “If families resemble trees, as they say, arborescent structures with entangled roots and individual branches jutting out at awkward angles, family traumas are like thick, translucent resin dripping from a cut in the bark. They trickle down generations” (128).

Human and Arboreal Suffering

Despite the transgenerational traumas faced by the humans and the fig trees alike, Shakaf, like her hero Kostas, does not make any discrimination between human and arboreal suffering. Nobody notices the suffering of trees like the pines and the cedars which are burnt down during the civil war. The border with iron posts and gates is erected in Nicosia, partitioning Greeks and Turks, and hence, even a prickly pear cactus has to grow through the barbed wire fence. After the end of war, Defne carries out the exhumation activities for the Committee on Missing Persons (CMP) in Cyprus and organizes several meetings with the immigrant families which are overshadowed by a feeling of mistrust between them. She found that either the grandmother or father showed keenness to talk only in the absence of other family members and that no other parts of the human body, except hands, were most honest in answering even uncomfortable questions. Hence, through Defne's anthropological encounters, Shafak describes the memories as "elusive and wispy as tufts of wool dispersed in the wind" (314). Defne also came to notice the rifts in the three generations of the survivors of war: the first older generation expressed the memories of pain, the second generation suppressed these memories and the third generation, like Ada, was eager to dig and unearth the silences and, had the oldest memory. Defne did not want Kostas to tell Ada about their past by thinking: "Once it's inside your head, whether it's your own memory or your parents', or your grandparents', this fucking pain becomes part of your flesh. It stays with you and marks you permanently. It messes up your psychology and shapes how you think of yourself and others. [...] Just promise me, that's all I ask. If we want our child to have a good future we have to cut her off from our past" (317). To keep this promise, Kostas tells Ada only bits and pieces of past, invites Aunt Meryem from Cyprus to England to reminisce the family past, and most importantly, never cries inside the house so that Ada cannot see his suffering. Kostas's illimitable love for the arboreal world does not make him discriminate between human and arboreal suffering. Defne considers the human suffering paramount; while for Kostas the human existence, "though no doubt precious beyond words, had no special priority in the ecological chain" (325). According to the fig tree, "Most arboreal suffering is caused by humankind" (45). For example, the flower farmers use the trick of turning on lights in the middle of the night in order to deceive the chrysanthemums into blossoming by believing it to be sunlight and, in this way; they use the knowledge about such plants to manipulate it for their own profits.

Conclusion

To conclude, Elif Shafak in *The Island of Missing Trees* depicts both the history and the memory of civil war and partition, and the history of environmental destruction in Cyprus. The intertwined histories of the humans and the environment are filled with transgenerational suffering and trauma. From the perspective of memory in the digital age, Ada's trauma is accelerated and cured through the intermediation of modern technological and digital tools like mobiles, internet and the recording device in phone. The technological tools like the bomb also destroy the halcyon memories of the human and the non-human world and even, the inseparable bonds of kinship between the two. The transgenerational memory in the trees is observed and proven scientifically by the botanist and naturalist Kostas in showing the suffering of the arboreal world and the trickling down of arboreal trauma to their future generations for the sake of better survival. Finally, the elusive and painful nature of memory forces Defne to take promise from her husband Kostas to cut their daughter Ada from past for her better future in England.

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