Arboreal Entanglements and Symbiotic Kinship: A Study of Interconnectedness in Elif Shafak's *The Island of Missing Trees*

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Abstract

Interconnectedness is the basis of communication forging and sustaining kinship. Having witnessed the ravages of anthropogenic progress on the environment, the Twenty-first century has emerged to be ecologically conscious. It seeks to move towards arboreal engagements and reflect upon such human-ninhuman communion established throughout the centuries. This paper seeks to critique Elif Shafak's novel, The Island of Missing Trees establishing it in the Posthuman theoretical framework, while simultaneously analysing the political and personal nuances to trauma. This paper attempts to read the text as symptomatic of generational trauma and its relation with arboreal companionship. The meaning emerging from this correspondence subverts the normative notion of kinship and comradery, thereby, questiong both the ontological questions of being human and Nonhuman.

Keywords: Arboreal entanglement, trees, trauma, symbiotic kinship, posthuman

Throughout centuries of epistemological traditions, the most recurrent idea that has intrigued philosophers since is the onto-epistemological concerns subject-object dichotomy, for this forms the fundamental basis of further inquiry into agency, authority, and power. But before the discourse was initiated on the axes of power distribution in this dualism, it was imperative to segregate everything into distinct categories. Greek philosopher, Aristotle, for instance, stratifies souls into three categories where the lowest stratum is occupied by the vegetative soul, of plants, whose work was to merely grow and reproduce. A conflicting view emerges when his student, who subsequently became the father of Botany, Theophrastus, apart from delving into scientific study of the plant world, contends that plants have souls that are related to their beauty, positioning, and generosity. For the humans of ancient times, though plants were objects of curiosity, they perceived them in various ways. While the idea of *Scala naturae* (the Great Chain of Being) emerged during this time which designates plants as primitive based on the level of perceived complexity as compared to other organisms, they were simultaneously looked at as reservoirs of natural resources while providing ecosystemic services. However, before the rampant indifference to botanical beings and their existence, which James H.

Wandersee and Elisabeth E. Schussler calls “plant blindness” referring to overlooking the existence of the plant kingdom in the environment, botanist Robin Wall Kimmel notes in one of her public lectures that traditional ecological knowledge has practices in which humans exert a beneficial influence on the ecosystems. It is, herefrom, that plants too were coloured in the hues of theocentrism of the ancient times owing to their bountiful nature.

During the Enlightenment, the shift from the theocentric approach to humanism shifted the locus on the magnanimity of Man, particularly, a white Anglo-Saxon male, however, as a by-product this unleashed his exploitative predisposition. The discovery of sea routes for trade and territorial expansions which fuelled migration, the flora and fauna had been migrating for centuries for survival. While the expansionist approach propelled colonisation of foreign territories, history has been particularly sympathetic towards the sufferings of the colonised humans. However, neglected for the longest time, colonisation has been equally devastating for the nonhumans as well. Following the footsteps of skepticism, scienticism, and the ebullient period of the French revolution, the Romantic spirit redirected its gaze on nature. During this time contrastive theories pertaining to the natural world emerged. Jonathan Bates in his *Romantic Ecology* studies Wordsworth's outlook towards nature as a spiritual companion. Still, the approach was majorly anthropocentric where the untamed wilderness and picturesque lakeside presented an antithetical image to the soot-coated blackened city of London. At the same time the aestheticizing stood as a metaphor voicing against the human progress marked by the Industrial Revolution. However, in the aforementioned approaches the focus relied heavily on personal impression and subjective experience. The externalisation of emotions did not necessitate an internalisation or inclusion of the outside world. Both the gothic overgrown wilderness (as depicted by Coleridge) juxtaposed with the subsequent clearing of the indigenous flora by the colonialists indicated the slipping control from the grip of the *homo sapiens*. Furthermore, with the idea of progress trailing with technological advancement, modernisation, followed by wars and other human interventions, both scientists and humanists came together to concentrate on its repercussions on earth. As early as the 1960s witnessed Indian botanist J.C. Bose noticing the responses on *mimosa pudica (lajjabati)* to electrical stimulus, which Sumana Roy in *Plant Thinker of Twentieth Century Bengal* notes, basically, is seeking the unsaid *(abyakto)*. (Roy 17) Bose not only studies the plant lives for scientific discovery, his empathetic gaze is intact in his coinage of the “plant nerve”.

Ecocriticism which emerged as a field of study during the 1990s built its foundation forging the gap between geological reports and literary pieces. A significant contributor in this field is Arne Nais who with her concept of “deep ecology” seeks to grant equal authority to the environment that the human inhabits. Yet, the dichotomy of the human and its other- nature as opposed to culture, remained a contested field of enquiry as the fissures in the humanist thought became apparent. Summarising the contentions of Crosby, Worster and Cronton, Horn and Bergthaller in their book, *The Anthropocene* mention, “from 1970s onwards, however, ecology begins to figure as a historical agent in its own right”. (54) As the focus now shifted to the nonhuman, still, it was granted only referential significance with the human being the locus of discourse. Thus, breaking apart this hierarchisation, Posthumanism beckons a theoretical paradigm situating both the humans as well as nonhumans on the same platform.

Contrary to what the name might suggest, Posthumanism does not abandon the study of humans, but engages with the study of both humans and nonhumans, consequently studying their synchronous and symbiotic relationship formed as a result of coexistence. Now, Posthuman theorists like Haraway and Latour look at the crisis in the anthropocene as a fertile space to demolish the nature-culture duality and focus on actors and systems that they are a part of. Posthumanism further branches out into ANT (Actor-Network Theory) and Systems theory within animal studies and plant humanities.

But, does coexistence imply codependency? Humans need nonhuman animals, who need plants to survive by forming a functional ecosystem. Here, the signifying process of survival is physical and material. The other aspect of well-being is social interactions, and thus the cliché, ‘man is a social animal’; both of these contribute to what Timothy Morton refers to as “mesh”. In his book, *The Ecological Thought*, Timothy Morton defines the porosity of the boundaries between human and nonhuman, equating the shared relationship as a “mesh”. He defines this as "the interconnectedness of all living and non-living things". (28) Now, like every cog in a wheel, each component of this network has individual and apparently unique and inherent qualities. While humans are mobile, can use language for communication, can emote, plants have their own ways of performing these functions, still, the speedy impact of the former's attributes have historically granted them a superior position where the *home sapiens* have hitherto been the both the scrutineer and the scrutinised. This bias to speedy progress is challenged by the twenty-first century plant thinkers who distinguish between human time and ecological time, and by extension, plant time. Parallelly, the turn of the century saw many newer forms and philosophies of life emerging that counterbalance the extremities of exploitative lifestyles of the past century. Perhaps the extravagance of war, preceding it the patriotic fervour and a grave disillusionment following that, humans have lost faith in materialistic ways of life. The bizarre seemed to be the new normal followed by the desperate need to retreat to a simpler past. From J. C. Bose, whose interest in studying plant behaviour was propelled by the Bengali folk tales surrounding the *lajjabati*, it can be inferred that his investigation was a case of a man's relationship with plants that had left a significant impression since his childhood.

While the above scientific probe into the emotional valence of plants was done by botanists, during the last decades of the twentieth century Posthumanism as a theoretical paradigm began to question the hitherto monolithic agential narrative of the human species. As anthropogenic activities started showing debilitating effects on the earth: it revealed the unprecedented technological progress achieved by the humans and their sheer inability to redeem their habitat. Therefore, Posthumanism rethinks the human-nonhuman interconnectedness of existence that make up a major part of an ecological design. Gender Studies theorist, Jack Halberstam, therefore, explains

The posthuman does not necessitate the obsolescence of the human: it does not represent an evolution or devolution of the human. Rather it participates in re-distributions of difference and identity. The human functions to domesticate and hierarchies difference within the human

(whether according to race, class, gender) and to absolutize difference between the human and nonhuman. (Posthuman Bodies 10)

This paper argues that the greater design here is pointing towards a multilayered relationship humans have carved with the vegetative world. Here, the plant world is the other of the human. It can be divided into two categories: plants for utilitarian purposes, plants for spiritual association. Now, with the advent of Ecocritical posthumanism, the plant world can be read as the self. But, it is as complex as the rhizomatic roots of these plants. Mere anthropomorphisation of plants further relegate their existence as passive participants where voice is granted to the plant for its human emulation. Thus, for recognising the plant world, it is imperative to first recognise their strangeness, their *selfness* in the "mesh". Unlike their bipedal counterparts, trees are not mobile, their growth is slow, they do not communicate in verbal mode, but they spread, grow and live longer, and communicate in their own ways. Verily, the human vocabulary seems limited while describing the arboreal world.

The plant world has been a question of botanical inquiry for its historical positionality as a referential object with reference to the human world. Owing to a different set of semiotics involved in plant communication, scientific observation of their world evidence the patterns shown by them. Yet, the world of fiction poses a fertile ground of imaginative possibilities rendering an agential voice to the wildlife both literally and metaphorically. The expansive purview of the novel appears to provide a perfect canvas for the narrative unfurling of plant lives. In his book on ecological crisis, *The Great Derangement*, Amitav Ghosh expounds on the facilitating quality of storytelling in highlighting the marginal voices of the environmental world. He says, "Nowhere is the awareness of non-human agency more evident than in traditions of narrative" (86). These narratives often employ fresh storytelling techniques like nonlinear structures, multiple points of view, voices of the nonhuman, along with fantastical elements. This further shows the limitations that undergird the conventional formal techniques. Although saving some canonical postcolonial writers like Ghosh himself, Rushdie, and Marquez, who have sharply constructed and contributed to the genre of magic realism, there has been little importance given to genre-bending fiction. The flexible contours of such formal narratives give space for hitherto silenced voices. Turkish-British author, Elif Shafak's 2021 novel, *The Island of Missing Trees*, is such a genre-bending novel where the narrator is a fig tree. In this context, physicist and ecological activist, Vandana Shiva calls for a quantum way of thinking thereby suggesting that the very notion is based on interconnectedness of lifeforms, which constitute the basis for consciousness. This fluid consciousness forms the core of such divergent accounts of fiction. Richard Powers' *The Overstory* (2018), Numair Chaudhary's *Babu Bangladesh!* (2019) are such examples where personal and political history have weaved together the narrative structure involving active participation of nonhuman agents like trees, snakes and buildings.

Shafak engages with the history of the region in *The Island of the Missing Trees* as she does in her other novels. In most of her novels she has dealt with the history of mainland Turkey from the period of Ottoman rule to the present time and often alluded to the longstanding conflict between the Turkish Muslims and the Armenian Christians. In Cyprus, however, since its

independence from the British rule in 1960, and the creation of the Republic of Cyprus, the conflict has been there between the majority Greek Christian population who wanted *enosis*, that is, to unite with Greece and the minority Turkish Muslims who wanted *taksim*, that is division of the island. Initially, a power sharing model of proportional representation of the two communities was worked out, and under the Treaty of Guarantee, three countries, Turkey, Greece and United Kingdom were given the duty to protect the 'sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity' of Cyprus. However, in July of 1974 the Greek military government organized a coup against the Cypriot government. Pre-empting Greek annexation of the island, the Turkish government invaded Cyprus and managed to capture thirty six percent territory of Cyprus. This led to movement of the Greek Cypriots from the Turkish controlled area to the Greek controlled area and the Turkish Cypriots moved from the Greek controlled area to the Turkish controlled area. This way Cyprus was divided and the two communities were separated. (Bebler) The only crossing point between the two sides was the divided capital city, Nicosia. Elif Shafak contextualizes this historical event in her novel.

The plot of Shafak's *The Island of Missing Trees* can be read as primarily revolving around a pair of star-crossed lovers, Kostas and Defne. But, it can also be read as the story of love, grief, belonging and relocation, shared by the pair and their companion, the fig tree (*ficus indica*). The narrative constantly shifts between 1970s Cyprus and 2010s London. The novel opens with a picturesque description of the butterfly island of Cyprus, as a sought-after landscape for its breathtaking beauty. But strikingly, this is juxtaposed by the cartographic image of its partitioned capital Nicosia, the only divided capital city in the world. Ironically, the natural beauty that made the land a delight for the eyes, insinuated towards its attractiveness to the marauders due to the same reasons. As the fig tree reminisces the stories of the landscapes, nostalgia and grief are palpable. At a superficial reading it might seem to be a fantastical storytelling of a fig tree, however, it demands serious attention from the readers in her role as a narrator for she too is a migrant expatriated from her land like her human companions, Kostas and Defne.

The image of the fig tree as the narrator evokes a sense of "bewilderment" (Halberstam), thereby shaking the readers from their complacency, by inducing the strangeness that unsettles the hackneyed compositions of the human centred world by moving towards a shared anthropocene. In this context, Ghosh opines-

So the real mystery in relation to the agency of non-humans lies not in the renewed recognition of it, but rather in how this awareness came to be suppressed in the first place, at least within the modes of thought and expression that have become dominant over the last couple of centuries. Literary forms have clearly played an important, perhaps, critical part in the process. (88)

The novel form bears in itself the legacy of flexibility and accommodation of diverse modifications. Itself, a hybrid progeny of erstwhile travelogues, diary writing, novel as a creative genre has been expanding its boundaries ever since its inception. The "prosthetic

imagination" of the novel arranges for a dwindling between mind and matter, with a contestation "between being like something and being that something itself". (Boxall 16)

The anthropomorphisation of the fig might be a point of contention, yet it is this very approach of personifying it that seeks to destabilise the normative and exploitative approach of humankind. The title of the island of missing trees directly refers to climate change as a consequence of human action. The fig tree notes the nonchalance of these human agents who are no more than utilitarian consumers. For instance, in the early 2000s when Kostas visited Cyprus again, he encountered poachers capturing indigenous birds for trade by laying sticky traps which injured and sometimes killed them. As he tries to save these birds he is attacked by these poachers. This further connotes that both people and wildlife who remain in a place of conflict are faced with violence. This stands in stark contrast to the symbiotic harmony that the tavern, "The Happy Fig" symbolised before the ravagings of the civil war.

The interactions between humans, nonhuman animals and plants further highlight the local microcultures or global megacultures that they constitute. The place of cultural assimilation, merrymaking, and healthy camaraderie, "The Happy Fig" tavern, symbolically represents harmony in the midst of dissimilarities. Although a demographically divided island between Greek Christians and Turkish Muslims, this was a microcosm of the sociopolitical zeitgeist of Cyprus. Not only did it house the gigantic ficus indica, it was host for many "others"- Chico, the resident parrot, and the home to the interfaith homosexual couple and owners, Greek, Yourgos and Turkish, Yusuf.

In love with the fierce Turkish Muslim girl Defne, is a gentle and sensitive boy Kostas Kazantzakis, who is essentially a nature lover. Manifesting his intimacy with nature, he urges his mother to refrain from pickling songbirds, a common delicacy prepared in Cyprus. His relationship with any natural being is that of symbiosis where he establishes a special kinship with every natural agent, thereby vouching for his intimacy with the fig tree. As the civil war exacerbated, Kostas was forced by his mother to leave for London where he later grew up to be a botanist. Although well established in his field he never quite forgets his past in Cyprus and his love for Defne. Therefore, he visits Cyprus after almost two decades to find her. But Defne's direct ordeal through the civil war and Kostas' memory of leaving behind his homeland are never experientially compatible. Hence, as Kostas is able to start life anew with Defne, in London, Defne is never fully recovered from her trauma. Also, Kostas finds solace in the company of trees, they are his patient listeners, but in the case of Defne, her vocation as an archaeological excavator never leaves her from the clutches of the past.

To further establish the interconnectedness through an apparent discontinuity from the conventional humanist narratives, Shafak contrasts the temporal scalar effect by juxtaposing the brief love story of Kostas and Defne with the migration of the fig tree. By foregrounding the polarised nature of the perceived lifetime of the plant world and the humankind, Shafak seems to accentuate the seamless blending of both the worlds. Through the myth of Defne, who was turned into a laurel for defying Apollo's romantic advances, she lives on as a symbol of endurance for eternity. Likewise, Defne transmorphoses into the fig tree thereby situating

herself into the cyclical deep time of the plant world. It seems to signify that though a human has the ability to terminate her life in order to avoid pain, the trees are great reservoirs of grief, and as its surface teem the accretion of rings, it shall continue to hear and narrate the history of sufferings that, the tree along with its human counterparts have undergone. Further, Defne is often shown to be connected with the fig tree; as her body changes during pregnancy so does the fig tree evolve in the new frosty environment of London. Like it, she was uprooted from her native land, and the trauma never leaves her. This is obliquely suggested when Kostas presents his research in Australia examining how trees store traumatic memory intergenerational, wherein his case points out that trees that have witnessed fire, their offsprings respond differently to similar dangers. This is similar to their daughter, Ada's traumatic outburst of intergenerational trauma.

The Oxford English dictionary defines grief as a great sadness, especially at the death of someone. Grief can be individual or collective and is accompanied by acute pain. Before revealing the cause of Defne's death, Shafak goes on to show the psychosomatic manifestation of grief shared by Defne and Kostas's daughter, Ada and the fig tree. Ada's prolonged unnatural scream stands in contrast to the silent suffering of the fig tree. Yet, bridging the spatial distance between them Ada is able to feel the fig tree being buried inside the earth. As it is, the burying of a tree during winter indicates a culturally esoteric practice which is aimed at preserving both the life and the memory of the tree. Although it emphasises the human propensity to eschew traumatic memory, and the arboreal character of carrying the generational trauma in the offspring, Ada assumes within herself the fig-consciousness thereby letting out her trauma in the form of the scream. A second generation migrant herself, she is not familiar with the annals of her motherland, but her interconnectedness with the fig tree enables her as a keeper of stories and trauma of the shared past. Further, Ada's spoore-like quality by which “she could detect other people's sadness” highlights her own dormant grief, likening herself to the fig tree's disposition. As the fig tree says, “I had never been good at optimism anyway. It must have been my DNA”, an internal, perhaps, familial connection is established between her and Ada, sharing the same behavioural traits. Still in her responses to pain the fig tree appears to be more resilient and contained. In his article, AMA Elgamal links Ada's experience of trauma with Marian Hirsch's concept of “postmemory”- "the transmission of memory from one generation to the next, particularly when that memory is shaped by traumatic experiences” (Hirsch as quoted in Elgamal 5)

While traditional literature has employed plants as metaphors, yet the personification of the fig tree is suggestive of plant sentience. Plant thinker and botanist, Paco Calvo contends, “It always has to make a compromise among different things. It needs some kind of valence, a higher-level perspective. And that’s the entry to sentience”. Therefore, it's subjective experience as a witness to violence distorts the ubiquity of genocide and hostility towards heteronormative sexuality. Contrary to its role as a passive spectator, it bears witness to the forbidden love of Defne and Kostas, and the brutal murder of Yourgos and Yusuf. Even, on the fateful night of the second attack in the tavern, the fig became the safe haven to carry out Defne's abortion which was ultimately averted. Perhaps as a consequence of losing its companions, Yourgos and Yusuf, and the fig too, started dying internally. It became host to deadly ants that were

eating it up. As Kostas, cut off a branch of the old fig to replant it with him in London, the immigrant fig is nothing less akin to a human migrant. Mapping the aligned growth of the shoot fig in London, with the baby in Defne's womb, the fig assumes a new life in a new land with the memory and time of the old. Thereby, giving itself as the host for Defne's departing soul, finally the fig was a home away from home. For the immigrant, migrating to a new land is coupled with nostalgia where she is swinging between a longing for the past and a reconstruction of the same in the new locale alongside adapting to its peculiarities. According to Calvo, these botanical beings possess what he calls “phenotypic plasticity,” enabling them with the capacity to interact and live in harmony with multiple species of plants and animals, and if need be, they can well survive in isolation too. This ensures an interconnected existence of all the human and nonhuman entities of the world that bear impressions upon each other, share experiences, interact and strive to live in peace.

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