

Rooted Kinship and Storied Matter: Relational Ontologies and the Ethics of Coexistence in Elif Shafak's *The Island of Missing Trees*

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Abstract—This article analyzes Elif Shafak's novel *The Island of Missing Trees* (2022) to articulate a stringent relational ontology and an ethics of coexistence that profoundly challenges anthropocentric and ethno-nationalist paradigms. Set against the backdrop of the Cypriot conflict and its diasporic aftermath, the novel foregrounds the interconnectedness between human identity, history, and the non-human world, primarily through the narrative voice of a fig tree. Grounding the analysis in relational philosophy, Indigenous epistemologies, and ecological phenomenology, this study contends that the fig tree functions as a materially embedded, agential, and ethical subject. Its longevity and capacity to archive trauma demonstrate that memory and healing are *intra-active* processes shared across species and generations. By operationalizing concepts such as *intra-action* and the *Honorable Harvest*, the research reveals how Shafak constructs a model of "rooted kinship" that prioritizes interdependence, reciprocity, and a non-human perspective on historical rupture and ecological survival. The novel, therefore, serves as a literary space for reimagining ethical accountability and trans-species coexistence in the context of global ecological and political fragmentation.

Index Terms—relational philosophy, ethics of coexistence, indigenous epistemologies, ecological phenomenology, memory and trauma

I. INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, escalating ecological crises and persistent social upheavals have necessitated a fundamental epistemological and ontological restructuring across academic disciplines (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2021). The prevailing Western frameworks, which typically privilege the autonomous human subject and maintain rigid dualisms such as culture/nature and human/non-human, are increasingly recognized as inadequate for addressing the complex, entangled challenges of the Anthropocene (SIPRI, 2021). This academic reckoning has spurred a literary shift, wherein contemporary fiction often challenges anthropocentric ontologies, exploring modes of ethical existence predicated on deep interconnectedness.

Elif Shafak's novel *The Island of Missing Trees* (2022) exemplifies this critical shift, presenting a worldview rooted in relational ontology that rejects individualism in favor of interdependence between diverse beings. The novel utilizes a split narrative structure and multiple timelines to tell the story of a forbidden romance between Kostas, a Greek Cypriot, and Defne, a Turkish Cypriot, set against the historical backdrop of the ethno-political conflict in Cyprus (1974) and its subsequent diaspora to London. The narrative is critically driven by the unique perspective of a fig tree, which accompanies the surviving family members into exile. The novel thus, explores the intertwined nature of human trauma, migration, and ecological degradation. Crucially, Shafak offers this reflection from the unique perspective of a fig tree. This arboreal narrator acts not merely as a symbolic presence or a passive witness, but as an active agent of ethical and historical reflection, inviting readers to consider pathways for coexistence that transcend dominant anthropocentric paradigms.

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Relational philosophy, which asserts that entities are fundamentally constituted through their relationships rather than existing as isolated, pre-defined units, provides the essential lens for analyzing Shafak's narrative. This view stands in stark contrast to traditional Western metaphysics, which privileges discrete and autonomous subjects (Ingold, 2011; Latour, 2005). This framework is significantly enriched by Indigenous epistemologies, which offer a holistic, reciprocal view of life, and by ecological phenomenology, which emphasizes the sensory and embodied engagement between human consciousness and the natural world (Abram, 1996; Kimmerer, 2013).

While critics acknowledge the novel's focus on interconnectedness, many analyses approach this theme from a metaphorical standpoint, failing to dig into relational philosophy as a stringent theoretical framework. The analytical gap this study addresses is the operationalization and synthesis of high-level relational concepts specifically, utilizing Barad's (2007) *agential realism* and the concept of *intra-action*, and translating Kimmerer's (2013) Indigenous ethics into a precise ethical framework through the *Honorable Harvest*. This synthesis is necessary to fully discover the deeper ontological and ethical implications of interspecies connectedness and to treat the fig tree as an ethical subject capable of moral influence, beyond its role in human narratives.

This study aims to examine *The Island of Missing Trees* through the integrated theoretical frameworks of relational ontology, indigenous epistemologies, and ecological phenomenology; analyze how the novel constructs ethical relationships among humans, animals, plants, and the environment; investigate the representation of trauma, memory, and migration in relation to environmental narratives; and contribute to ongoing debates in the environmental humanities on subjectivity and trans-species coexistence.

By employing a non-human narrator and emphasizing the interconnectedness of different species, Shafak's novel challenges dominant narratives about identity, memory, and agency. It offers a model of coexistence based on reciprocity, shared vulnerability, and ethical responsibility, transcending the boundaries between species and cultures. In this way, *The Island of Missing Trees* aligns with a burgeoning literary and theoretical movement that seeks to redefine human subjectivity and ethics within a broader ecological and cultural context (Bennett, 2010; Tsing, 2015).

The central thesis is that Shafak employs the fig tree as a nexus for synthesizing relational ontology, Indigenous epistemologies, and ecological phenomenology, thereby constructing a radical ethics of coexistence that destabilizes Western concepts of identity, memory, and political agency, positioning arboreal life as integral to cultural and ecological survival.

A. Research Questions

The following research questions guide this study:

1. How does *The Island of Missing Trees* represent relational ontologies between human and non-human actors?
2. In what ways does the novel challenge anthropocentrism through its narrative structure and its use of non-human narrators?
3. How do relational ontologies and ethics of coexistence inform a reading of intergenerational trauma and ecological coexistence in the novel?
4. What implications does the novel offer for reimagining an ethics of care that includes non-human entities and contributes to ecological and social recovery?

B. Research Objectives

1. To examine how the novel *The Island of Missing Trees* addresses the concept of relational ontology, by analysing the interaction between human and non-human characters to highlight the challenge the novel poses to the notion of separating nature from humanity.
2. To investigate how literary narrative strategies, particularly the use of a fig tree as a speaking character, contribute to deconstructing human-centric perspectives and highlighting non-human subjectivities, thus challenging the anthropocentric view prevalent in literary narratives.
3. To explore how the novel's focus on relational ontologies and interspecies ethics contributes to providing a framework for understanding the reciprocal relationship between human memory, history, and environmental continuity.
4. To analyze how the novel fosters a broader ethic of care that includes non-human beings, and proposes a more comprehensive ethical and psychological framework for the recovery of the environment and society.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The Island of Missing Trees has garnered significant critical attention for its multilayered examination of historical trauma and interconnectedness, yet a precise, rigorous relational reading remains underexplored.

Scholarly analyses have thoroughly explored the novel through the intertwined lenses of diaspora, migration, and memory. Work by Sumer (2022) highlights the fragmented histories and dislocations experienced by the characters. Specifically, Zehra and Mohsin (2023) argue that Shafak portrays identity as a product of fragmented histories and migrations, demonstrating how the younger generation, particularly Ada, struggles to understand her family's homeland and its landscape, a disconnect that is not merely emotional but also spatial and ecological. This scholarly focus confirms

the necessity of viewing the fig tree as a central agent in re-establishing ties with the natural world that witnessed and bore the trauma.

Further critiques often utilize ecofeminist and postcolonial perspectives, linking the oppression of the female body and the natural world (Fottouh, 2025; DeLoughrey, 2019; Huggan & Tiffin, 2010), while others have affirmed that memory resides in organic forms. Sabbah and Ayuningtyas (2022) explore the novel's Multicultural and Ecocritical elements, confirming a crucial connection between the issues of diaspora and displacement with the health of the natural environment.

Additional studies into the novel's structure support its relational ontology. Sabbah and Ayuningtyas (2022) note that the novel adheres to a cyclical arboreal time, which contrasts with linear human chronology. The structure of the novel, divided into six parts named after the fig tree's life cycle (roots, trunk, branches, etc.), allows the arboreal time to govern the human narrative and write history from a non-anthropocentric viewpoint (Sabbah & Ayuningtyas, 2022). This foregrounding of the fig tree's own temporal structure reinforces the novel's core relational framework (Barad, 2007).

The novel's pioneering narrative form has also been discussed as a crucial ethical strategy. Scholars argue that fictional narrative form provides a unique advantage in representing the subjectivity and interiority of non-human entities, thereby constructing an explicit "ethics of otherness" that facilitates reader empathy and multiplies understanding of the non-human world (Li, 2025).

The engagement with the "arboreal turn" is relevant, with O'Neill (2023) emphasizing the novel's contribution to "Generating new epistemologies and ontologies for the human" (p. 8) and its role in encouraging "New ways of being responsible for nature" (O'Neill, 2023, p. 17). Comparative works (Powers, 2018; Ghosh, 2021) further position Shafak's novel within a movement that centers non-human protagonists and critiques environmental violence. Additionally, extending the political reach of Indigenous epistemologies, scholarly work highlights that the exclusion of Indigenous and local communities' deep spiritual and cultural values toward nature often leads to inadequate policy and unsustainable development (Sangha et al., 2019). This research reinforces the article's ethical framework by validating the importance of incorporating reciprocal, non-utilitarian relationships like the 'Honorable Harvest' into broader conversations about global ecological governance (Sangha et al., 2019).

However, a recurring deficit in existing scholarship is the tendency to recognize interconnectedness metaphorically rather than leveraging stringent theoretical-philosophical frameworks. The failure to utilize the complex tools of *agential realism* (Barad, 2007) or *semiotic cognition* (Kohn, 2013) prevents the full realization of the fig tree's identity as a true ethical subject capable of agency and moral influence. The present study intervenes by providing this missing theoretical rigor, moving the analysis from thematic observation to ontological proof, strictly within the parameters of relational philosophy, ecological phenomenology, and Indigenous ethics.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: SYNTHESIZING ONTOLOGY, PERCEPTION, AND ETHICS

To rigorously analyze Shafak's novel, it is imperative to establish a robust theoretical foundation drawn from relational thought that validates the fig tree's active narrative and ethical role. The three core theoretical domains below are mutually dependent: Relational Ontology defines what exists (entanglement), Ecological Phenomenology defines how that existence is perceived and communicated (cognition), and Indigenous Epistemology defines how we should act within that existence (ethics).

A. Relational Ontology: Agential Realism and Intra-Action

Relational ontology fundamentally posits that identity and being are not inherent properties of isolated entities, but rather emerge dynamically through mutual relationships and co-constitution (Barad, 2007; Latour, 2005). This approach emphasizes interconnectedness and dynamic becoming (Coccia, 2020).

Barad's (2007) agential realism asserts that reality is differentiated by internal interactions, thereby challenging the conventional notion of interaction (which assumes separate agents). Instead, Barad introduces the concept of "Intra-action" (Barad, 2007, p. 141). Intra-action recognizes agency as a "Dynamism of forces" in which all entities are "Constantly exchanging and diffracting, influencing and working inseparably" (Barad, 2007, pp. 133, 141). Entities do not precede their relations; they emerge from them. This framework is essential for establishing the fig tree not as a passive backdrop, but as a material, co-constitutive force in human history and trauma.

B. Ecological Phenomenology and Non-Human Cognition

Ecological phenomenology explains how subjectivity is tied to sensory engagement with the natural world. Abram's (1996) work demonstrates that human consciousness and a sense of belonging arise through profound, embodied interactions with the immediate ecological context. This ethical framework emphasizes that human perception is fundamentally inseparable from the environment (Abram, 1996).

This view is powerfully augmented by Kohn's (2013) work, which argues that non-human life forms, including forests, engage in semiotic processes; interpreting and responding to signs thereby, expanding the scope of cognition and subjectivity beyond human language. Kohn's concept of an "ecology of selves" is crucial, as it suggests that individuals, both human and non-human, are defined through their relationships via sign interpretation. Shafak's fig tree operates within this domain, providing the necessary evidence for non-human cognition to ground the novel's ethical claims.

C. Indigenous Epistemologies and the Ethics of Kinship

The relational and phenomenological insights establish that entanglement exists; Indigenous epistemologies provide the prescriptive ethical foundation for how to honor it. Indigenous scholars emphasize a holistic, relational view of life, promoting an ethics founded on respect, responsibility, and profound interconnectedness between human beings and the land (Kimmerer, 2013; Simpson, 2017). Central to this ethical framework is Kimmerer's (2013) concept of the 'Honorable Harvest' a sophisticated ethical protocol based on mutualistic reciprocity. The principle demands asking permission before taking, only taking what is needed, and offering a gift in return, ensuring that human actions are based on kinship and respect for the agency of non-human beings (Kimmerer, 2013). This perspective inherently challenges the colonial and anthropocentric structures that view nature as inert property (Plumwood, 2002; Watts, 2013).

The tragic backdrop of ethno-nationalist conflict in Cyprus, characterized by colonial partitions and ecological destruction, fundamentally represents a profound failure of the Honorable Harvest a "dishonorable harvest." Kostas's observation that the land "Was not the verdant paradise he remembered. The absence of trees was a powerful rebuke to the dreadful mistakes of the past" (Shafak, 2022, p. 198) materializes this ethical failure. The environmental degradation, symbolized by the missing trees, is not merely an ecological phenomenon, but also a moral one. The trees become symbols of presence and absence, of memory and loss. Their disappearance reflects the historical violence inflicted upon both people and the land. Shafak's novel highlights this rupture, offering a perspective that encourages reflection on the ethical dimensions of environmental degradation and calls for reconciliation with nature (Kimmerer, 2013).

This relational perspective compels an ethical expansion, extending moral concern beyond the human community to encompass the non-human world (Plumwood, 2002). Haraway's (2008, 2016) work, which champions the practice of becoming-with and the call to "make kin" across species, provides a foundational argument for a relational mode of existence based on mutual care and interdependence.

The fig tree's suffering embodies this shared moral significance. When the tree reflects that "It was not just the people who had suffered; the land had, too. And the trees. And the animals. Everyone suffered" (Shafak, 2022, p. 190), the narrative aligns with an environmental ethic that recognizes shared vulnerability. By granting the fig tree moral influence and narrative authority, Shafak performs a literary extension of ethical philosophy, contributing directly to debates concerning ethical accountability for non-human entities (Aspoy, 2024; Levinas, 1991).

IV. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative and interpretive methodology, drawing on a literary analysis grounded in ecocriticism and relational philosophy. The primary approach is a close reading of Elif Shafak's novel *The Island of Missing Trees* (2022), paying particular attention to narrative structure, symbolism, character development, and the use of non-human narratives, most notably the fig tree, a key voice in the novel. The theoretical framework integrates the insights from relational ontology, Indigenous epistemologies, and ecological phenomenology to explore the interconnected webs of existence represented by the novel, in which plants, animals, humans, and landscapes exist in dynamic interdependence. A contextual analysis is applied by reading the novel against the backdrop of the Cyprus conflict and diasporic identity, enriching the interpretation of political and environmental concerns. This interdisciplinary approach enables a nuanced reading of the novel that highlights the ethics of coexistence and the importance of supra-human perspectives in literary narrative.

V. INTEGRATED ANALYSIS

Shafak's *The Island of Missing Trees* (2022) interrogates conventional concepts of ownership and identity, encouraging analysis through the framework of relational philosophy. The novel examines life, death, and the interconnectedness of living organisms. By featuring a fig tree that articulates perspectives on humanity, the narrative foregrounds the relationship between humans and the natural world. Employing relational ontology and ecological phenomenology, Shafak contrasts human suffering with ecological distress resulting from anthropogenic activities, highlighting the reciprocal effects of these interactions. The fig tree, as a narrative device, advances a relational ontology that situates humans and nature within a network of interdependent relationships. In the context of environmental crises, this approach facilitates a nuanced understanding of emergent forms of nature and underscores the imperative for ethical coexistence.

This section integrates the application of the synthesized theoretical framework to the novel's text with a comprehensive discussion of the findings and their broader implications for trans-species coexistence and societal critique.

A. The Intra-Active Materiality of Storied Memory

In *The Island of Missing Trees*, Shafak intertwines human lives with nature, thus creating a concept of interconnected materiality, where memory is not confined to the human mind or narrative, but is embedded in living entities, particularly the fig tree, and emerges through them. Drawing on Barad's (2007) theory of *intra-action*, which emphasizes the interconnectedness of all things, the novel demonstrates that memory is not confined to human consciousness, but is distributed throughout all entities, both human and non-human. The fig tree, transplanted from Cyprus to London, serves as a tangible symbol with profound meaning, reflecting both personal and collective suffering. As O'Neill (2023) explains,

the tree is not merely a symbol, but a “character” that actively participates in the narrative, blurring the boundaries between the animate and inanimate, and between what speaks and what remains silent.

The fig tree functions as a dynamic, storied matter and a “multi systemic archive of trauma and regeneration.” Its move from Cyprus to London reflects the characters’ diasporic journeys and speaks to relational ontology; the view that beings do not exist independently, but are defined through their relationships. “A tree always knows that it is linked to endless life forms and that its existence is not isolated happenstance but intrinsic to a wider community” (Shafak, 2022, p. 100). The tree’s memory processes provide compelling textual evidence for relational ontology (Barad, 2007) “Across history we have been a refuge to a great many. A sanctuary not only for mortal humans, but also for gods and goddesses” (Shafak, 2022, p. 178).

Memory is a material-discursive phenomenon, not exclusive to the human brain. The memory of conflict is physically constituted *through* its organic engagement with the earth, defining intra-action. The tree’s roots are literally entangled with the “Sinews of history, the ruins of war nobody came to win, the bones of the missing” (Shafak, 2022, p. 211). This material entanglement makes the fig tree a co-constitutor of this history (Barad, 2007). This ontological foundation immediately informs the environmental ethic (Plumwood, 2002). Because the fig tree’s memory and being are intra-actively constituted by human trauma, its suffering is not peripheral, but central: “Humans were not the only one 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, 2022, p. 190). This shared vulnerability mandates a shared ethical responsibility, reinforcing the necessity of viewing human suffering and ecological degradation as a singular moral consequence (Haraway, 2008).

Furthermore, the novel’s narrative structure challenges anthropocentric perspectives by giving the fig tree a central role in the narrative. By attributing human characteristics, the fig tree as a narrative strategy emphasises idea that human notions of identity and belonging are intimately connected to the natural environment. This approach allows Shafak to explore ethical issues related to care and coexistence. Laheg (2024) suggests that the tree functions as a “moral witness,” documenting the silences and absences in both human and natural history. By listening to and connecting with the tree’s stories, the novel’s protagonists and, by extension, the readers are encouraged to adopt an ethic of care that transcend purely human concerns.

The interrelationship between the human and non-human worlds is further illustrated by the novel’s metaphorical portrayal of the vegetal process of implanting and digging up the tree, a beautifully created figurative image that both apprises of the adversarial reminiscing on the past and suggests compromise and recoupling with one’s roots no matter how tangled they are.

In this sense, the storied memory of the novel is fundamentally relational: it emerges from the interaction between human beings, plants, history, and place. The mobility, rootedness, and scars of the fig tree are not mere metaphors, but rather constitute a central element of the novel’s ecological and political narrative. As O’Neill (2023) points out, the perspective of the tree transcends temporal and spatial distances, uniting in a single narrative voice the memories of war, exile, and environmental degradation. In *The Island of Missing Trees*, memory is not an abstract or purely mental function; it is material, embodied, and constructed collectively by different species and nature itself.

B. Non-Human Cognition and the Ethical Critique

In her novel *The Island of Missing Trees*, Elif Shafak offers an ethical critique of anthropocentrism by portraying non-human cognition through the voice of the novel’s protagonist, the fig tree. This challenges conventional notions of intelligence, sentience, and moral value. The tree is not merely a passive object of human observation; it is a thinking, remembering, feeling, and narrating being (a non-human cognition) that participates in moral testimony. For example, the tree states, “A tree’s rings do not only reveal its age, but also the traumas it has endured... carved deep in each circle, is a near-death experience, an unhealed scar” (Shafak, 2022, p. 45). This suggests that the tree’s memory is inherent in its structure, and that it processes trauma in a way like humans. Similarly, when Kostas buries the tree to protect it from the harsh London winter, this act is viewed as a moral responsibility towards a living being in need of protection. “A tree is a memory keeper... Tangled beneath our roots, hidden inside our trunks, are the sinews of history, the rains of wars nobody came to win, the bones of the missing” (Shafak, 2022, p. 211). This implies that the tree carries a collective memory across generations, possessing a consciousness that resonates with moral testimony.

The fig tree’s narrative authority is validated through ecological phenomenology (Kohn, 2013), which asserts non-human cognition. The tree describes its complex communication network: “We trees communicate all the time, sending chemical signals through the air and across our shared mycorrhizal networks” (Shafak, 2022, p. 99). This affirmation of a distributed, functional intelligence challenges the humanist requirement of a central brain for subjectivity. The tree immediately utilizes this cognitive authority to launch an ethical critique against anthropocentrism. The tree notes: “Human do not want to ascertain whether we may be capable of volition, altruism, and kinship. They find it easier to assume that trees can only experience the most rudimentary existence” (Shafak, 2022, p. 44). This act of philosophical evaluation demonstrates that the non-human world possesses the capacity to interpret and morally judge human actions, aligning with the philosophical extension of ethics to the “Other” (Levinas, 1991).

C. Reciprocity, Healing, and the Honorable Harvest

The culmination of the ontological and perceptual findings is the necessary shift to an ethical practice. The tragic failure of the dishonorable harvest the colonial and nationalist exploitation of the land is redeemed through the relationship between Kostas, Defne, and the fig tree, which embodies the Indigenous ethic of Honorable Harvest (Kimmerer, 2013). Kostas's labor and care for the transplanted sapling in London giving resources, knowledge, and protection is reciprocated by the tree, which offers shade, memory, and spiritual anchoring (Shafak, 2022). This is an active, mutualistic practice of *becoming-with* (Haraway, 2008). The healing of the daughter, Ada, depends entirely on this trans-species relationship. Her emotional stabilization occurs when she leans against the tree, feeling her breath synchronize with its "silent rhythm" (Shafak, 2022), demonstrating that reconnection with her fractured human history requires re-establishing physical and emotional rooted kinship with the non-human entity that holds that history. The tree thus serves as a model for how the ontological truth of entanglement must be matched by an ethic of reciprocity to achieve reconciliation.

Shafak's narrative powerfully deploys these integrated findings to offer a profound ethical and societal intervention. The novel uses the fig tree's relational existence as a direct blueprint for condemning human division and promoting ethical coexistence. The tree's commentary "Under and above the ground, we trees communicate all the time. We share not only water and nutrients, but also essential information. Although we have to compete for resources sometimes, we are good at protecting and supporting each other" (Shafak, 2022, p. 99), is a direct ecocentric critique of exclusionary societal systems. This statement is substantiated by the finding of intra-action (Section 6.1) because their existence is materially co-constituted (Barad, 2007), arboreal life is structurally dependent on cooperation, a necessity that transcends the arbitrary boundaries of human identity.

The novel rejects linear, anthropocentric time, adopting instead the cyclical, rhizomatic pattern of the tree (Deleuze & Guattari, 1978). This structural choice reinforces the Indigenous epistemological finding that the dishonorable harvest is unsustainable. The fig tree insists on a paradigm of *interbeing*, where non-human moral influence (Aspoy, 2024; Plumwood, 2002) guides societal and ecological reorganization.

Besides, the fig tree's role as a mobile memory archive reflects the necessity of multidirectional memory (Rothberg, 2009) for diaspora healing. The tree, carrying the "sun and the dust of the Mediterranean inside me" (Shafak, 2022, p. 33), materially embodies the sensory entanglement with place, a concept central to ecological phenomenology (Abram, 1996). The healing of Ada requires recognizing that her family's past is not abstract history, but is physically archived in the tree, underscoring that human healing is inseparable from ecological restoration. By granting the fig tree the status of an ethical subject, Shafak envisages the reader to acknowledge that reconciliation from historical violence is achievable only when the non-human entities that witnessed and bore the trauma are recognized as integral partners in the process of regeneration. The novel confirms that ecological and cultural survival requires recognizing the non-human world, in its materiality and agency, as an equal partner in the processes of healing and history-making.

This fictional representation of arboreal life and its human-like agency "Generates new epistemologies and ontologies for the human" (O' Neill, 2023, p. 8). The convergence between science and sensuality in the novel suggests new forms of connections. By humanising the fig tree, Shafak breaks down the barrier between humans and nature and forces us to appreciate them for what they are and what they give. She proposes that treating nature as an object creates a barrier between us, exonerating ourselves of moral accountability and encouraging exploitation. The description of the interrelationship of the fig tree with the arboreal ecosystem as depicted in the novel informs about Shafak's arboreality.

A tree always knows that it is linked to endless life forms – from honey fungus, the largest living thing, down to the smallest bacteria and archaea – and that its existence is not an isolated happenstance but intrinsic to a wider community. Even trees of different species show solidarity with one another regardless of their difference, which is more than you can say for so many humans. (Shafak, 2022, p. 100)

Shafak's emphasis on arboreal matter, especially her treatment of the fig tree, shows her knowledge about the trees and a deep appreciation for nature. Her humanization of the fig tree expands human ways of knowing and understand the natural world. Her projection of the fig tree as, familiar, friendly, and connected to lively beings challenges the traditional human/plant hierarchy in favour of a relational one. This arboreal association and exchange according to O'Neill (2023) "Highlights the novel's significant contribution to the imaginative work needed in the Anthropocene to find new ways of being responsible for nature" (p. 17). Since the relationship between humans and nature is reciprocal, any change made by one entity can affect the other. Shafak explores this interrelationship between humans and nature on different levels such as spiritual, economic, health, food, and arboriculture.

Through these descriptions, Shafak raises an ethical critique. She compels us to reconsider the idea that moral values and cognitive abilities are exclusively human attributes. Shafak's portrayal of the fig tree's capacity to perceive and interact with its environment has ethical implications: if trees can remember, suffer, and possess moral value, then human actions that ignore, exploit, or harm them are immoral. For example, human violence in Cyprus (bombings, territorial division, displacement) demonstrates that it not only affects people but also harms the fig tree, thus underscoring the novel's perspective on our ethical responsibility towards nature. The novel suggests that environmental damage is also moral damage; harm to nature is harm to memory and human bonds. As the study, *Branching Paths of Pain: Trauma and Ecocriticism in Elif Shafak's The Island of Missing Trees* (2024) concludes, "The fig tree symbolizes memory, resilience, and healing, and serves as a witness to both human and environmental suffering" (Elgamal, 2024, p. 37). In short, the concept of non-human sentience that Shafak presents in the novel encourages a redefinition of ethics, where humanity is not the sole moral agent, but part of an interconnected ecosystem, whose cognitive and moral capacities deserve respect

and care. Through her unique narrative technique, Shafak challenges us to reconsider our relationship with the natural world and the impact of our action on it.

VI. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that Elif Shafak's *The Island of Missing Trees* (2022) is a theoretically sophisticated literary text that moves far beyond metaphor to articulate a rigorous philosophy of coexistence. Through the narrative of the fig tree, Shafak successfully synthesizes complex theoretical frameworks: Barad's (2007) relational ontology and the concept of *intra-action* establish the tree as a material co-constitutor of history; Kohn's (2013) non-human semiotics validate the tree's distributed cognition and narrative authority; and Kimmerer's (2013) Indigenous ethics, expressed through the framework of the *Honorable Harvest*, prescribe the necessary moral foundation for human-nonhuman reciprocity.

The integrated analysis confirms that the fig tree functions as a fully realized non-human ethical subject and a trans-species memory archive. The novel effectively critiques anthropocentric systems, showing that nationalist conflict and ecological degradation are two sides of the same dishonorable harvest that embodies a failure of relational responsibility. By centering the perspective of the fig tree, Shafak validates the concept of 'storied matter' asserting that the environment is not a passive backdrop but an active repository of the history and memory whose agency must be recognized. Conversely, the arboreal solidarity and the practice of mutual care between the tree and the human characters offer a model of "rooted kinship" that provides a blueprint for ecological and societal reconciliation.

The novel serves as a powerful testament to the idea that ecological and cultural survival requires recognizing the non-human world, in its materiality and agency, as an equal partner in the processes of healing and history-making. Future research could extend the application of *agential realism* to analyze other narratives of post-conflict reconstruction, specifically examining how non-human elements resist fragmentation in diasporic literature.

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