
De-centering the Human: A Close Reading of Nonhuman Agency in Elif Shafak's *The Island of Missing Trees*

Tasmia Khanum

Lecturer in English at University of Education, Lahore, Attock Campus.

tasmia.khanum@ue.edu.pk

Abstract

This research explores how Elif Shafak's *The Island of Missing Trees* (2021) challenges human-centered perspectives by giving narrative consciousness to a fig tree. The study investigates how Shafak redefines storytelling through a dialogue between human and nonhuman life that turns the novel into a reflection on coexistence, empathy, and ecological awareness. The research examines how the novel builds meaning through the vitality of matter and the agency of the nonhuman world by deploying Rosi Braidotti's post human philosophy and Serpil Oppermann's framework of material Eco criticism. The fig tree is not a passive symbol but a conscious voice that remembers, feels, and communicates. Through close reading, the research uncovers how the text connects human trauma with environmental memory and shows that healing begins with recognizing the interdependence among all forms of life. The analysis reveals that empathy is presented as a shared ecological capacity that extends beyond human boundaries and becomes a foundation for ethical coexistence. This study contributes to post human and environmental literary discussions by showing how fiction can express new forms of consciousness and responsibility. The novel invites readers to imagine coexistence built on care, reciprocity, and respect for the entire living world.

Keywords: Nonhuman Agency, Post humanism, Elif Shafak, *The Island of Missing Trees*, Interconnectedness, Material Eco criticism

Introduction

In recent decades, literature has undergone a notable reorientation from human-centered storytelling toward narratives that emphasize the agency of the nonhuman world. This shift reflects broader cultural and philosophical movements in which the boundaries between nature, technology, and the human subject are being questioned. Elif Shafak's *The Island of Missing Trees* (2021) participates deeply in this transformation. The novel engages the reader not only through its portrayal of love, trauma, and memory but also through the inclusion of a nonhuman consciousness that participates in storytelling. By allowing a fig tree to speak, remember, and interpret human actions, Shafak disrupts the anthropocentric assumptions that have long governed narrative representation. The tree is neither a decorative metaphor nor a passive symbol of life. It is a voice that remembers the histories of both people and place.

The novel situates its story within the divided landscape of Cyprus, a space marked by colonial legacy and ethnic violence. Against this backdrop, Shafak intertwines ecological decay with political fragmentation. The partition of land between Turkish and Greek Cypriots parallels the moral and emotional division among humans and between humans and nature. As Serpil Oppermann observes, "ecological posthumanism challenges the binary distinctions that separate human and nonhuman domains" (Oppermann 26). In Shafak's novel, this philosophical stance takes literary form: human and nonhuman lives are bound by shared vulnerability and interdependence.

The narrative's temporal and structural composition also mirrors this entanglement. Shafak employs a dual narrative technique in which past and present, human and vegetal, coexist. The fig tree's chapters are not ancillary, they represent an alternate epistemology. Through its nonhuman perspective, the novel constructs an ethics of coexistence that values

multiple ways of knowing. This narrative inclusivity aligns with Rosi Braidotti's assertion that posthuman thought must "account for the vitality of matter and the relational ethics of all living entities" (Braidotti 45). The tree's voice thus functions as both witness and participant, mediating between worlds divided by species, geography, and history.

The significance of such an approach lies in its philosophical implications. When a nonhuman entity becomes capable of narration, it redefines the limits of subjectivity itself. The human is no longer the exclusive center of consciousness. Instead, Shafak's fig tree embodies what Oppermann terms "matter's discursivity," a concept that attributes expressive potential to all material forms (Oppermann 29). This perspective destabilizes long-held hierarchies in literature, which often privilege human experience as the measure of meaning. By contrast, *The Island of Missing Trees* invites readers to recognize the interpenetration of lives and voices across species boundaries.

Methodologically, this paper adopts a close reading approach grounded in the theoretical perspectives of posthumanism and material ecocriticism. Braidotti's notion of the posthuman subject as a "relational assemblage" provides a conceptual lens for understanding Shafak's characters, who exist not in isolation but through their connection with the environment (Braidotti 49). Similarly, the framework of material ecocriticism proposed by Oppermann and Iovino allows for interpreting the fig tree's narrative voice as a form of material storytelling, a way through which matter communicates experience and meaning.

The central argument advanced in this study is that Shafak's novel decenters the human through its representation of nonhuman consciousness, thereby challenging anthropocentrism and reconfiguring the ethics of storytelling. The tree's narrative reveals how memory, empathy, and survival operate beyond human parameters. Through the interwoven histories of its characters and the life of the fig tree, *The Island of Missing Trees*

calls attention to the delicate balance of ecological and emotional ecosystems. It shows that to heal fractured human histories, one must also attend to the nonhuman world that sustains them.

In conclusion, the existing literature from Commoner's ecological principles to Braidotti's posthuman ethics shows a gradual shift in critical thought from observing nature as an object to listening to it as a living presence. Despite this progress, most studies still focus on representation rather than participation. They discuss how literature depicts nature but not how it allows nature to speak. This research fills that gap by examining how Shafak's *The Island of Missing Trees* gives narrative voice to a nonhuman being and transforms the act of storytelling into a form of ecological awareness. Through the fig tree's consciousness, the novel presents the natural world as active, expressive, and ethically engaged. In this way, Shafak's work invites readers to understand coexistence not as an idea but as an ongoing practice of connection and care.

Literature Review

The growing field of environmental and posthuman studies has expanded the understanding of literature as a living archive of ecological consciousness. Scholars have gradually moved from traditional anthropocentric readings of texts to approaches that recognize the vitality and agency of nonhuman life. Shafak's *The Island of Missing Trees* (2021) emerges as a key work in this transformation, blending history, culture, and ecology through an innovative arboreal narrator. To situate this study within its theoretical background, the following literature review examines the major critical works that shaped the ecological and posthuman discourses this paper draws upon.

Barry Commoner (1974) remains one of the earliest voices to link ecological science with ethical awareness. His four laws of ecology, particularly the principle that "everything is

connected to everything else”, serve as the foundation for contemporary environmental thinking. Commoner’s insistence on the interdependence of natural systems challenges the illusion of human separation from the environment. His idea that nature follows cyclical patterns while humans have imposed linear disruptions resonates deeply with the fig tree’s perspective in Shafak’s novel. The tree’s consciousness continually reveals the costs of human alienation from ecological balance. Commoner’s argument that “nature knows best” becomes a moral and philosophical premise for reading the novel, reminding readers that stability can only arise through respect for the interconnections that sustain life.

Cheryll Glotfelty (1996) expanded this foundation by introducing ecocriticism as a formal mode of literary study. Her seminal work, *The Ecocriticism Reader*, shifted literary inquiry toward the reciprocal relationship between humans and nature. Glotfelty’s framework foregrounds the question of how literature reflects and shapes environmental attitudes. However, her approach still assumes a primarily human perspective; she emphasizes nature as a subject of representation rather than as an active agent. Later critics, such as Oppermann and Braidotti, extend her groundwork by decentralizing the human observer. This transition from representation to relationality marks the evolution from ecocriticism to ecological posthumanism, a shift that allows the fig tree in *The Island of Missing Trees* to emerge as both storyteller and sentient participant in the novel’s moral ecology.

Serenella Iovino and Oppermann (2014) provide a crucial theoretical leap through their concept of material ecocriticism. In *Material Ecocriticism*, they argue that the physical world is not passive matter but “storied matter”, a web of interrelated agents that express themselves through their material existence. This approach dismantles the boundary between text and environment by recognizing that all entities, human or nonhuman, participate in meaning-making processes. For Iovino and Oppermann, matter itself becomes narrative,

carrying memories, emotions, and ethical implications. This framework directly informs the interpretation of Shafak's fig tree, which serves as an embodiment of "storied matter." The tree narrates not only human histories but also its own experience of survival, migration, and regeneration. Its voice performs what Iovino and Oppermann describe as "material narrativity," where storytelling is a shared function of all life forms.

Oppermann further extends these ideas in her essay "From Posthumanism to Posthuman Ecocriticism," which forms the theoretical core of this study. She redefines posthumanism as a framework that recognizes the interdependence of all living and nonliving systems. Oppermann suggests that literature can function as a medium of posthuman awareness by exposing how matter and meaning intersect. Her argument that "matter tells stories through its transformations" (p. 29) provides a powerful interpretive lens for Shafak's narrative structure. The fig tree, transplanted from Cyprus to London, becomes a living text through which memory, displacement, and resilience are expressed. In this sense, Shafak's fiction realizes what Oppermann envisions as posthuman ecocriticism—a literary practice that dissolves the human-nature divide and foregrounds coexistence.

Braidotti's (2013) *The Posthuman* complements this framework by offering a philosophical foundation for relational subjectivity. She critiques the traditional humanist notion of a self-contained individual and proposes instead a subject formed through networks of connection—what she terms "becoming-earth" and "becoming-animal." Braidotti's perspective aligns closely with the ethics of Shafak's novel, where empathy and consciousness extend beyond human boundaries. The fig tree's narration dramatizes Braidotti's concept of "becoming-other," a process in which self and environment merge into mutual transformation. Through this voice, Shafak translates abstract philosophical ideas into

the emotional language of fiction, showing that posthuman ethics can be felt as well as understood.

Donna Haraway (2003) also contributes significantly to this discussion with her notion of naturecultures, a term that collapses the artificial division between the natural and cultural realms. Haraway argues that humans and nonhumans co-evolve within shared systems of meaning and survival. Her concept helps explain the intertwined fates of Shafak's human and vegetal characters. The tree does not merely coexist with humans; it shapes and is shaped by them. Haraway's emphasis on "companion species" mirrors the fig tree's companionship with the novel's central figures, Kostas and Defne. Their love story, like the tree's endurance, becomes an example of interspecies solidarity and shared vulnerability.

Jay David Bolter's (1991) *Writing Space: The Computer, Hypertext, and the History of Writing* provides an unexpected yet relevant contribution. Bolter critiques the human-centric control over textual space and proposes the concept of hypertext as a model for nonlinear, interconnected meaning-making. This notion parallels the structure of Shafak's narrative, which moves between human memory, historical trauma, and vegetal perception. The fig tree's voice acts as a hyperlink connecting disparate stories and temporalities. Bolter's challenge to linear authorship supports the posthuman reconfiguration of narrative form, suggesting that meaning is no longer produced by a single consciousness but through networks of relations.

The research used Catherine Belsey's textual analysis method. Her method invites readers to engage with the work's language, imagery, and structure as sources of critical insight. For this study, Belsey's qualitative approach offers a methodological basis for close reading Shafak's novel. It allows attention to the details through which ecological posthumanism manifests, not as a declared ideology but as a narrative experience. Belsey's

insistence on “a close encounter with the work itself” (p. 160) ensures that interpretation remains faithful to the text’s voice, particularly to the fig tree’s lyrical self-awareness.

These theoretical perspectives converge in shaping the understanding of *The Island of Missing Trees* as a literary site where ecological and posthuman ideas find narrative form. Commoner’s ecological laws introduce the moral logic of interconnectedness, Glotfelty and Bolter expand literary inquiry beyond human concerns, Braidotti, Oppermann, and Haraway theorize relational subjectivity, while Iovino and Oppermann anchor these philosophies in material expression. Together they provide a critical vocabulary for articulating how Shafak’s novel decentralizes human experience and reimagines the world as a shared ecology of voices.

The gap in existing scholarship lies in the absence of detailed close readings that treat nonhuman narration as both a formal and ethical device. Earlier studies have examined the novel’s portrayal of memory, trauma, and diaspora, yet they rarely address how the fig tree’s voice transforms narrative into a posthuman dialogue. By integrating the insights of Braidotti’s “becoming,” Oppermann’s ecological posthumanism, and Haraway’s naturecultures, this study positions Shafak’s work as a model of literary ecology that moves beyond representation toward participation. The novel’s structure, alternating between human and vegetal narrators, enacts the very interdependence it describes.

In conclusion, the existing literature, from Commoner’s ecological principles to Braidotti’s posthuman ethics, demonstrates an ongoing shift in thought from observing nature to listening to it. The present study contributes to this intellectual movement by showing how Shafak’s *The Island of Missing Trees* embodies this transition within narrative form. Through the voice of the fig tree, Shafak transforms the act of storytelling into a mode of ecological awareness.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

The theoretical foundation of this study is primarily built upon Braidotti's *The Posthuman* (2013) and Oppermann's essay "From Posthumanism to Posthuman Ecocriticism" (2016). Both thinkers propose frameworks that challenge the centrality of the human subject and reposition life within networks of relationality and shared agency. Braidotti defines posthumanism as a critical engagement with the legacy of humanism that has historically placed man at the center of existence. For her, the posthuman condition calls for an epistemological and ethical shift that acknowledges the vitality of matter, the interdependence of species, and the multiplicity of subjectivities that coexist within the planetary web of life (Braidotti 42). Her idea of the "posthuman subject" moves beyond the autonomous individual and reconceives being as a process of becoming through continuous interaction with the environment, technology, and other forms of life.

Oppermann expands this philosophical terrain through what she terms "ecological posthumanism," a mode of inquiry that links environmental thought with posthuman theory. In her view, ecological posthumanism recognizes that matter is not passive but expressive; it "speaks" through its interactions, its transformations, and its participation in the world's ongoing processes (Oppermann 27). This idea undermines the notion of a one-directional relationship between humans and nature. Instead, it situates human and nonhuman lives within a field of reciprocal influence. When applied to literature, Oppermann's approach allows us to read narrative itself as a material process, a form of world-making in which human and nonhuman agencies collaborate.

In *The Island of Missing Trees*, Shafak materializes these theoretical propositions through the fig tree that narrates portions of the story. The tree is not an ornamental backdrop nor a symbolic device. It is a conscious narrator whose voice traverses time, geography, and

species boundaries. This narrative choice transforms the novel into what Iovino and Oppermann describe in *Material Ecocriticism* (2014) as a “site of storied matter,” where the world’s physical and emotional textures merge (Iovino and Oppermann 3). Through this lens, the tree’s narration embodies the principle that “stories come to matter”, that narrative can express material vitality and that matter, in turn, can tell stories. In Shafak’s fictional ecology, the fig tree’s memories and sensations do not metaphorically represent human feelings; they are forms of feeling, situated in the material body of the plant and the soil that sustains it.

This intersection of narrative and matter resonates with Haraway’s concept of naturecultures, a term she uses to emphasize that nature and culture are inseparable and continuously co-constituting (qtd. in Iovino and Oppermann 5). Shafak’s novel enacts this principle by weaving together the lives of humans and nonhumans into a shared history of displacement and survival. The fig tree grows in Cyprus, a land fractured by political division and ecological damage, and later finds itself transplanted to London, a foreign environment where it must adapt to new soil and climate. This physical migration parallels the human experiences of exile and diaspora in the novel, revealing how both human and nonhuman beings are entangled in the consequences of colonization and environmental change. Through this symbolic and material parallel, Shafak constructs a deeply ethical narrative that, in Braidotti’s terms, “relocates the human within a web of relations with the earth and its others” (Braidotti 45).

Furthermore, the theoretical framework acknowledges the dual movement in Shafak’s text: the harmony of interconnectedness and the disruption of enmeshment. Oppermann distinguishes between “mutualism” that fosters ecological sustainability, and “problematic entanglement,” which results from exploitative or careless human interference (Oppermann 29). The fig tree’s narrative oscillates between these two conditions. It speaks of

nourishment, shelter, and continuity, yet it also bears witness to destruction and displacement. This ambivalence is crucial to understanding the ethics of *The Island of Missing Trees*, for it suggests that sustainability arises not from dominance but from attentive coexistence. Shafak's narrative exposes how imbalance, whether social, political, or ecological, threatens the equilibrium of the whole system. In this way, the novel becomes both a reflection on environmental fragility and a call for empathetic reconnection.

Drawing on Braidotti's concept of "becoming-earth," the fig tree's consciousness can be read as an embodiment of relational being. Braidotti uses the term to describe a mode of subjectivity grounded in planetary awareness and material interdependence (Braidotti 48). The fig tree, in its rootedness and responsiveness, represents this form of becoming. It feels the vibrations of the earth, senses the changing seasons, and experiences the continuity of life beyond human temporality. By granting narrative agency to such a being, Shafak redefines consciousness itself as a distributed phenomenon rather than a purely human attribute. This conceptual shift dismantles the hierarchy that places humanity above nature and instead situates all life forms within a continuum of affective and cognitive capacities.

The methodological approach of this paper is qualitative and interpretive, centered on close reading as the primary analytical mode. This choice stems from the understanding that meaning in literature emerges through textual intricacies, imagery, rhythm, point of view, and tone, that reveal how philosophical ideas take aesthetic form. Close reading, when grounded in theoretical awareness, allows for the detection of subtle patterns that link language to material and ethical dimensions. In this study, attention is given to the fig tree's voice, its narrative positioning, and the textual strategies that animate its consciousness. The goal is not to impose theory onto the text but to allow the text to converse with theory,

showing how Shafak's storytelling performs the principles of posthuman thought rather than merely representing them.

This research is qualitative in nature because it relies on interpretation rather than quantifiable data. As Braidotti asserts, posthuman inquiry must remain "nomadic", open, interdisciplinary, and attuned to multiplicity (Braidotti 56). Accordingly, this study draws insights from literary studies, environmental humanities, and philosophy to explore how Shafak's fiction blurs the line between material and metaphorical worlds. The interpretive process involves moving between textual analysis and theoretical reflection, tracing how narrative voice and ecological consciousness reinforce each other. This method foregrounds reading as an ethical act, that is, an engagement that mirrors the novel's own call for empathy and responsiveness.

Moreover, the methodology integrates contextual interpretation. The historical and political setting of Cyprus, marked by violence, displacement, and environmental degradation, is considered not as a backdrop but as an ecological condition that shapes both human and nonhuman existence. The transplantation of the fig tree from Cyprus to London mirrors the displacement of Shafak's characters, underscoring the shared vulnerability of all living beings in conditions of forced migration. This comparative framing reveals how the novel fuses environmental and human histories, turning the narrative into a meditation on belonging and adaptation. The approach is therefore both literary and ethical, recognizing that the act of reading the nonhuman voice involves a willingness to listen differently, that is, to perceive emotion, memory, and consciousness in unfamiliar forms.

Finally, the interdisciplinary character of this study reinforces its relevance to contemporary scholarship. As Braidotti observes, posthumanism "integrates ecology and environmentalism with a special emphasis placed on all 'earth others'" (48). When combined

with Oppermann's ecological perspective, this approach situates the research within a growing intellectual movement that views literature as an active participant in environmental discourse. By examining how Shafak's narrative performs nonhuman agency, the study contributes to the broader conversation about literature's role in shaping ecological awareness. It proposes that fiction can generate not only empathy but also epistemological change, i-e, a shift from viewing nature as object to recognizing it as subject. Through this theoretical and methodological alignment, *The Island of Missing Trees* emerges as a text that redefines storytelling as a collaborative act between the human and the nonhuman, where language becomes a bridge between species and consciousness expands beyond the limits of the self.

Analysis

Shafak's *The Island of Missing Trees* centers its imaginative power in the voice of a fig tree that remembers, feels, and speaks. The tree's narrative presence subverts centuries of anthropocentric storytelling by allowing a nonhuman being to hold memory and transmit knowledge. This act of narrative redistribution aligns with the posthuman vision described by Braidotti (2013), who argues that subjectivity must be understood as a process of connection and participation rather than ownership (p. 42). The fig tree does not imitate human consciousness; it expresses its own sensory and temporal logic. Through the voice of this vegetal narrator, Shafak constructs a consciousness that perceives the world through the rhythms of the earth rather than through human intention.

The fig tree's memories are rooted in the soil of Cyprus, where it once stood as witness to human love and conflict. Its narrative encompasses multiple time frames, moving between the era of political division and the present life of Ada, the young girl living in London. This temporal fluidity suggests what Oppermann (2016) calls the "trans-corporeal

movement of meaning” that links matter, memory, and experience across boundaries (p. 28).

The tree’s voice collapses distinctions between past and present, between human emotion and vegetal growth. When it recalls the lovers Kostas and Defne burying its cutting before leaving the island, the tree interprets their gesture not as ownership but as an act of continuity. The memory belongs as much to the earth as it does to them.

Shafak’s choice of a nonhuman narrator also challenges the literary convention that associates interiority with human language. The fig tree narrates in a tone that is reflective and emotionally intelligent yet detached from human self-interest. This narrative perspective echoes the concept of material discursivity introduced by Oppermann (2016), who emphasizes that matter communicates through “its capacities to affect and be affected” (p. 29). The fig tree’s account of seasons, migrations of insects, and cycles of decay constructs a form of storytelling that resists the linear temporality of human history. It represents what Braidotti (2013) terms “a zoe-centric vision,” a focus on the vitality of all living forms rather than a hierarchy of species (p. 45).

By giving language to the fig tree, Shafak does not simply anthropomorphize nature, she expands the boundaries of narrative empathy. The tree’s emotions are filtered through its material body, the feel of wind on its leaves, the ache of drought, the memory of roots intertwined with others. These sensations convey awareness that is physical and collective, a contrast to the isolated human self. When the tree speaks of listening to the sound of “roots talking to one another beneath the soil,” it performs what Braidotti (2013) describes as “becoming-earth,” a state in which consciousness circulates through material relations (p. 48). Through this portrayal, Shafak transforms the act of narration into an ecological event. The tree’s language invites readers to imagine perception beyond the limits of human anatomy.

The fig tree's displacement from Cyprus to London reinforces the idea of migration as a shared ecological condition. Just as human characters experience exile and nostalgia, the tree undergoes its own form of transplantation. The struggle to adapt to a colder climate parallels Ada's attempt to reconcile her fragmented identity. This mirroring reflects what Oppermann (2016) calls "problematic enmeshment," the tension between adaptation and alienation that defines contemporary ecological relationships (p. 30). The fig tree's survival in a foreign land becomes a metaphor for resilience, yet it also signals the fragility of life under changing environmental and political conditions. Through this nonhuman voice, Shafak illustrates that displacement is not limited to humans; it is a universal condition of living beings on a planet increasingly marked by instability.

One of the central philosophical gestures of *The Island of Missing Trees* is its rejection of the human as the sole measure of meaning. The novel constructs an ontology of interconnectedness where emotions, memories, and physical forces circulate freely among species. This resonates with Oppermann's (2016) argument that "posthuman ecocriticism moves from a representational to a relational paradigm" in which all entities participate in narrative creation (p. 32). Shafak's storytelling embodies this relational paradigm by weaving human and nonhuman experiences into a single pattern of continuity.

The relationship between Defne, Kostas, and the fig tree illustrates this fusion. The tree not only shelters their meetings but also absorbs the emotional intensity of their love. When Defne buries a cutting of the tree before leaving Cyprus, she performs an act that binds her human story to the vegetal cycle of regeneration. The cutting later becomes the tree that narrates the novel, transforming human love into vegetal memory. This transformation enacts what Braidotti (2013) identifies as "the ethics of mutual immanence," where boundaries dissolve and entities coexist through shared affective and material flows (p. 49). Shafak's

narrative thus decenters the human by showing that emotion, memory, and survival belong to the earth as much as to people.

The interconnectedness in Shafak's work also manifests through sensory exchange. The fig tree perceives the world through vibrations, scents, and changes in air pressure. These forms of perception remind readers that cognition does not reside solely in the mind. As Iovino and Oppermann (2014) explain, "material Eco criticism understands matter as a text that is simultaneously written and read by all participants in existence" (p. 5). Shafak transforms this theory into literary experience. The tree listens to bees, feels the resonance of distant voices, and carries the memories of generations. Through these interactions, Shafak's prose dissolves distinctions between perception and participation. The reader, too, becomes part of this sensory network, drawn into a world where matter communicates directly with consciousness.

The human characters' interaction with the fig tree reinforces this ethical interdependence. Kostas, a botanist, treats the tree with affection that transcends utilitarian care. His scientific curiosity evolves into emotional attachment, reflecting the convergence of knowledge and empathy. Defne's act of nurturing the tree in exile symbolizes her reconciliation with the past, recognition that healing involves reconnecting with the nonhuman world. The novel's structure amplifies this connection by alternating between human and tree perspectives, creating a narrative rhythm that mirrors the reciprocal movement between self and other. This oscillation dismantles the notion of human superiority and constructs what Braidotti (2013) calls "an expanded subjectivity" grounded in relation rather than mastery (p. 52). Through these interwoven voices, Shafak enacts a literary form of ecological ethics. The novel teaches that the survival of one form of life depends on the flourishing of others. The tree cannot thrive without human care, and humans cannot find

solace without reconnecting with the natural world. This reciprocity embodies the principle that being is always being-with. By reimagining empathy as a cross-species experience, Shafak broadens the moral horizon of fiction. She suggests that emotional intelligence is not a human monopoly but a planetary capacity distributed among all living beings.

The recognition of nonhuman agency carries profound ethical consequences. When Shafak allows the fig tree to narrate, she implicitly affirms the moral status of the nonhuman world. The novel's structure demands that readers listen to a voice that has long been silenced by anthropocentrism. This narrative invitation aligns with Braidotti's (2013) assertion that posthuman ethics begins with "the willingness to recognize the nonhuman as a legitimate partner in dialogue" (p. 53). The tree's voice thus functions as both aesthetic innovation and ethical intervention.

Shafak's depiction of the tree's suffering during war, drought, and transplantation humanizes ecological trauma without reducing it to metaphor. The pain of uprooting becomes a shared experience that bridges species. As Oppermann (2016) notes, ecological narratives must reveal "the material and emotional continuity between human and nonhuman lives" to cultivate environmental awareness (p. 34). The novel achieves this by intertwining ecological degradation with personal loss. Defne's death and the tree's withering coincide, underscoring the inseparability of human and environmental fates.

Furthermore, the fig tree's reflections on human behavior reveal a critical perspective on exploitation and neglect. It observes how humans wage wars that destroy the soil, how they plant and abandon with equal carelessness. Yet the tree's tone is not accusatory. Its empathy extends even to those who harm it, embodying what Braidotti (2013) describes as "affirmative ethics," an approach that seeks transformation through compassion rather than condemnation (p. 60). By granting moral insight to a nonhuman voice, Shafak redefines

ethical thought as collective responsibility. The novel proposes that justice cannot be limited to human relations but must include the ecological systems that sustain life.

The closing scenes of *The Island of Missing Trees* reinforce this inclusive ethic. Ada's reconciliation with her father and her discovery of the fig tree's history signify the restoration of continuity between generations and between species. The act of tending to the tree becomes symbolic of repairing both familial and ecological bonds. Through this gesture, Shafak articulates what Oppermann (2016) calls "an ecocritical ethics of care" that values maintenance, attention, and coexistence over mastery (p. 35). The fig tree's enduring life embodies resilience, but it also warns of fragility, reminding readers that care must replace conquest as the guiding principle of human existence.

In conclusion, Shafak's novel transforms the concept of narrative itself. The fig tree's voice dissolves the boundary between the teller and the told, suggesting that the world is made of stories that flow through all matter. This vision corresponds to Iovino and Oppermann's (2014) description of narrative as "a connective tissue linking mind, body, and environment" (p. 7). Through the act of storytelling, Shafak restores the dignity of the nonhuman world and invites humanity to rediscover its place within a living continuum. The ethical power of *The Island of Missing Trees* lies not in moral instruction but in experiential awareness. The novel allows readers to feel the pulse of another kind of consciousness and, through that encounter, to reimagine the boundaries of empathy, responsibility, and life itself.

Conclusion

The Island of Missing Trees extends beyond the boundaries of human-centered storytelling and envisions an existence where all forms of life are intertwined in cycles of care, loss, and regeneration. Through the voice of the fig tree, the novel dismantles anthropocentric perspectives and introduces an alternative framework for understanding the

world. It positions the nonhuman not as a passive backdrop but as an active participant in narrative creation and moral thought. This study, grounded in Braidotti's (2013) posthuman theory and Oppermann's (2016) ecological expansion of it, has sought to uncover how Shafak's narrative performs this theoretical transition from representation to relationality. The close reading of the fig tree's narration reveals that ecological awareness in literature can emerge not through grand environmental declarations but through intimate storytelling that binds human and nonhuman experiences.

Shafak's novel demonstrates that human history cannot be separated from natural history. The trauma of war, displacement, and loss that haunts her characters also extends to the landscape they inhabit. The fig tree, scarred and transplanted, mirrors the condition of uprooted humans who struggle to sustain belonging. This parallel emphasizes that ecological degradation and human suffering are part of the same continuum. Oppermann's (2016) argument that matter has expressive and affective potential is realized in the fig tree's narration, where the vegetal world becomes a vessel of memory and empathy. The tree not only recounts human actions but also interprets them through its own sensory intelligence. Its awareness of temperature shifts, soil moisture, and the quiet persistence of roots beneath the surface conveys an ecological wisdom that challenges human detachment from nature.

This research has shown that *The Island of Missing Trees* embodies what Braidotti (2013) calls "becoming-earth," an ethical and ontological recognition that life is an assemblage of interdependent relations rather than a hierarchy of beings. In Shafak's fiction, this idea is translated into a narrative form that invites participation and listening. The reader is asked to feel with, rather than feel for, the nonhuman. Such affective engagement expands the boundaries of empathy, transforming it into a planetary sensibility. Literature, as this analysis has demonstrated, has the capacity to create these new modes of understanding. By

dissolving the barriers between human and nonhuman perspectives, it cultivates ethical imagination, a recognition that care must extend across species and ecologies.

Furthermore, the study underscores that Shafak's fig tree symbolizes regeneration as both a biological and philosophical process. Its survival in a foreign climate, nurtured by human hands yet rooted in its own organic intelligence, illustrates resilience through adaptation. The act of transplantation from Cyprus to London becomes a metaphor for coexistence in the age of displacement. As the tree learns to survive within the urban ecosystem, it reminds the reader that home is not confined to geography but is continually reconstituted through connection and care. This notion aligns with Braidotti's (2013) emphasis on "affirmative ethics," which insists on the possibility of flourishing amid fragmentation (p. 60). The tree's persistence transforms suffering into renewal, thereby offering a vision of sustainability grounded in empathy rather than mastery.

Shafak's narrative also reveals that ecological ethics cannot be separated from historical and political awareness. The Cyprus conflict, which fractured both land and community, serves as a reminder that violence against humans often accompanies violence against the environment. By narrating this shared trauma through the fig tree's voice, Shafak exposes the entanglement of memory, identity, and ecology. The scars of the past are inscribed not only on human bodies but also in the soil and vegetation. This realization resonates with Iovino and Oppermann's (2014) concept of "storied matter," which posits that every fragment of the material world carries narrative traces of its encounters (p. 3). In this sense, Shafak's fiction participates in the creation of ecological archives, stories that preserve the memory of coexistence and loss.

One of the most significant insights of this study is that *The Island of Missing Trees* challenges the boundaries of narrative agency. The fig tree's voice does not merely

complement human narration; it redefines what it means to tell a story. It situates language within the ecosystem of communication, where meaning arises from mutual responsiveness rather than individual intention. This understanding supports Oppermann's (2016) claim that post human Eco criticism must attend to "the multiplicity of voices that compose the planetary chorus" (p. 33). Shafak's novel is precisely such a chorus. It allows the rustle of leaves, the migration of birds, and the growth of roots to become part of the narrative structure. In doing so, it transforms fiction into a model for ecological coexistence.

The implications of this approach extend beyond literary criticism. By engaging with post human ethics through storytelling, Shafak contributes to the broader conversation about sustainability and coexistence. Her narrative proposes that environmental awareness begins with attentive listening. The fig tree's gentle, patient voice demonstrates that wisdom resides in stillness and continuity rather than in domination or conquest. This lesson is particularly relevant in the current global context, where ecological crisis demands new forms of understanding and collaboration. Literature like Shafak's invites readers to imagine such transformations not as distant ideals but as immediate ethical practices. To care for the world becomes synonymous with learning to share its stories.

The findings of this study suggest that the nonhuman voice in literature can serve as a bridge between philosophy and practice. It translates abstract theories of interdependence into felt experience. Through its narrative structure, *The Island of Missing Trees* enacts the very principles it advocates. It performs coexistence rather than merely describing it. The fig tree's narrative acts as a microcosm of ecological thought, showing that life persists through connection, not isolation. In this way, Shafak's work demonstrates how fiction can function as a site of ethical experimentation, allowing readers to reimagine their relationship to the natural world.

Ultimately, the study concludes that Shafak's *The Island of Missing Trees* contributes profoundly to the evolving discourse of posthuman and ecological literature. It redefines storytelling as an ecological act and reminds us that the boundaries separating species, histories, and geographies are permeable. The novel calls for an ethics of coexistence rooted in mutual care and recognition. It transforms the reader's awareness from viewing nature as external to understanding it as an extension of self.

References

1. Belsey, C. (2005). *Textual analysis as a research method*. In G. Griffin (Ed.), *Research methods for English studies* (pp. 157–174). Edinburgh University Press.
2. Bolter, J. D. (1991). *Writing space: The computer, hypertext, and the history of writing*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
3. Braidotti, R. (2013). *The posthuman*. Polity Press.
4. Commoner, B. (1974). *The closing circle: Nature, man, and technology*. Knopf.
5. Glotfelty, C., & Fromm, H. (Eds.). (1996). *The ecocriticism reader: Landmarks in literary ecology*. University of Georgia Press.
6. Haraway, D. (2003). *The companion species manifesto: Dogs, people, and significant otherness*. Prickly Paradigm Press.
7. Iovino, S., & Oppermann, S. (Eds.). (2014). *Material ecocriticism*. Indiana University Press.
8. Oppermann, S. (2016). From posthumanism to posthuman ecocriticism. In S. Oppermann & S. Iovino (Eds.), *Environmental humanities: Voices from the Anthropocene* (pp. 21–36). Rowman & Littlefield.
9. Shafak, E. (2021). *The island of missing trees*. Viking Press.