

From roots to routes: violence, vulnerability, versatility and vitality in Elif Shafak's recent fiction

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Abstract: Drawing on ecocriticism, ecofeminism, affect theory and transnational theory, this research aims to investigate the intersectionality of various forms of violence against humans and the environment as a critical representation of their ideological and ethical entanglements in Elif Shafak's recent fiction. This article argues that Shafak's *The Island of the Missing Trees* (2021) and *There Are Rivers in the Sky* (2024) articulate a discourse where cultural, spiritual, and environmental concerns are interwoven in polyphonic narratives of diasporic and minority identities meant to chronicle the disturbing realities of the Anthropocene. Moreover, Shafak's novels illustrate how the co-produced forms of violence against nature and the minorities shape one another and become inseparable, generating complex networks of crime that include uprootedness, forced migration, displacement and environmental damage. Thus, this article explores how these novels define minority identity, both personal and cultural, as an ongoing negotiation between roots and routes, foregrounding uprooted protagonists whose experiences in and of the world blend attachment to tradition with environmental displacement, resulting in cultural syncretism and the transgression of geographical borders and cultural boundaries. In addition, this study investigates how crimes against nature and vulnerable humans stem from similar structures of exploitation and domination. To this purpose, this research argues that Shafak's fictional representations of both human and non-human agency allow for a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the Anthropocene, as both cultural and individual survival depend on networks of cooperation that ought to reach beyond species and national or cultural boundaries, thus producing new approaches to being in and of this world.

Keywords: violence; climate fiction; the Anthropocene; ecocriticism, ecofeminism; transnational literature; affect.



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Introduction

The current state of humanistic studies is, without a doubt, fraught with controversy. As multiple forces constantly threaten and reshape the humanities, the study of literature requires significant reconfigurations that should reflect the rapid changes affecting the production and reception of the literary text. In this respect, one of the first areas in need of thorough revision is that of terminology. Formerly consecrated categories, labels, instruments and methods are no longer as relevant or effective in a world where globalization, artificial intelligence, the democratization of knowledge, migration, environmental disasters and wars constantly reshape our relationship with the world and with literature. In this context, the emergence of new critical perspectives that would accurately reflect these new realities is imperative. While still exploring literature's central concerns – human experience, identity, meaning and expression – these new avenues of research should foster an interdisciplinary dialogue and promote the much-needed social engagement that would restore the relevance of the humanities in today's world.

As part of revising and reinvigorating terminology, contemporary literary scholarship is under pressure to reconceptualize classical labels such as English literature, British or American literature, as these no longer accurately describe the current state of world literature. The aforementioned phenomena have highlighted the inefficiency and limitations of such labels, as writers have become increasingly mobile, languages, English in particular, have been deterritorialized, and more and more literature is being produced in contexts shaped by migration, displacement, and marginality. Thus, the concept of transnational literature has emerged as an increasing number of theorists have challenged national labels. As Paul Jay observes in his seminal 2021 study, for the first time in world history, transnational literature has become a dominant force in the literary marketplace (Jay X). The relevance of this new category to the present research lies in its ability to understand difference (Jay 9), to shift the attention from the dominant to the dominated, from the central to the marginal, while at the same time dissolving borders and rendering identities “hybrid and syncretic” (Jay 9).

The coinage of the Anthropocene in 2000, by Paul Crutzen, a Nobel laureate chemist, and Eugene Stoermer, a biologist, to describe the new geological era dominated by decisive human intervention that has dramatically shaped objective reality over the past two hundred years (Crutzen and Stoermer 484), represents another significant instance where the scientific world explicitly took notice of how human activity was becoming a crucial factor in shaping not only cultures and ideologies, but the Earth's geological and ecological status. Even though Crutzen and Stoermer specifically referred to Earth systems science, the term was rapidly popularized in other disciplines and fields of research, as it successfully described a fundamental shift in the way humans related to their environment. Aside from implying a sense of urgency, immediate risk and systemic crisis, the Anthropocene also signalled humans' displacement from being in the world to being against the world. All of a sudden, humanism, as the pursuit of progress and growth, was confronted with its limitations and red lines, as well as with the consequences of that constant but seemingly unsustainable growth. While the attuned scientific discourse began to map, quantify, and then provide solutions to the human-devastating impact on the Earth and its ecosystems, it

sadly failed to produce the expected changes across a large-scale societal spectrum. Although the explanations are undoubtedly complex, one obvious reason is the limited reach of scientific discourse amongst ordinary people, whose engagement with highly specialised domains remains limited. In the case of narrative discourse, whether fiction or film, the situation is remarkably different, as the general public's engagement with these genres often produces unexpected effects on awareness and, ultimately, on action itself.

It was in this context that, in a 2005 article for *The Guardian*, suggestively entitled "The Burning Question", which has since become a milestone in rethinking literature's engagement with the environment, Robert McFarlane reported the lack of creative artistic response to the increasing anxieties related to climate change and global warming:

Cultural absences are always more difficult to document than cultural outpourings. But the deficiency of a creative response to climate change is increasingly visible. It becomes unignorable if we contrast it with the abundance of literature produced in response to the other great eschatological crisis of the past half-century – the nuclear threat. (McFarlane n.pg.)

McFarlane's concern was legitimate and invited artists to engage with the new environmental threats and contribute thus to the general public's more visceral, emotional understanding of these realities. Over the next few decades, more and more writers across the world dedicated themselves to creating narratives that would accurately illustrate the new existential *Angst* now directly connected to an emergent environmental consciousness. In the anglophone world, novels like Octavia Butler's *The Parable of the Sower* (1993), Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003), Ian Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006), or McEwan's *Solar* (2010) are just a few examples that either preceded or immediately followed McFarlane's imperative plea. Nevertheless, the attention that writers around the world have dedicated to the dramatic planetary changes as the direct effect of human intervention has remained surprisingly modest, as Amitav Ghosh amply argues in his 2016 book *The Great Derangement*. Ghosh's three-dimensional analysis, which considers narrative, historical, and political factors, concludes that contemporary literature, particularly the realistic novel, has largely failed to engage with the scale of contemporary climate crises, implying that "the climate crisis is also a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination" (Ghosh 11). Ghosh's argument is compelling and extremely well-documented, its relevance to the present study lying in the claim that most contemporary novels tend to zoom in on what is probable rather than improbable, for realism's sake, hence their failure to construct an imaginary of unpredictability that would be attuned with extreme climate changes and catastrophes and that tends to be dismissed as unserious or marginal (Ghosh 34). It is this almost inexplicable absence of innovative narratives that Ghosh refers to as "the time of Great Derangement" (Ghosh 14), echoing McFarlane's plea for a consistent body of fiction that would represent with urgency the fundamental unpredictability of climate change.

Slowly but surely, though, a growing body of transnational fiction has been emerging as a distinct genre. Naturally, this development calls for new critical tools and methodologies capable of engaging with these narratives in a meaningful manner. Thus, the reformation of classical humanities has entered a new phase, that of ecological awareness and engagement, in which new critical discourses such as ecocriticism, affect

theory, and ecofeminism have gained impetus and prominence.

It was in this context that the American scholar Scott Slovic largely established ecocriticism as an interdisciplinary field of research, focusing on the paradoxical and often tense relationship between humans and nature, which oscillates between what he described as *biophilia* and *biophobia*:

What I have begun to describe above is a kind of paradox, a strange and ironic situation by which we know that we all need nature; yet, for some peculiar reason, we humans like to think of ourselves as being free from the encumbrances of physical needs. The point of showing that these biophilic and biophobic impulses compete with each other in the human mind is to suggest that our relationship with the natural world is complicated and often contradictory. (Slovic 2)

Slovic pertinently argued that for ecocriticism to remain relevant in the years to come, it should move beyond its early focus on nature narratives and restrictive close-reading and engage in a productive interdisciplinary dialogue with a wide range of fields of study and media of artistic expression, while adapting to emerging global concerns:

[...] ecocriticism is a flexible, porous discipline, readily combining different critical strategies in order to tease out the ecological meanings of all human expression, ranging from high art (poetry, painting, classical music etc.) to popular culture (television, advertising, rock music etc.). (Slovic 4-5)

Departing from Slovic's methodological approach, Adam Trexler systematically mapped the corpus of what is today consecrated as cli-fi or climate fiction in his comprehensive analysis of a substantial number of novels dealing with climate change. In *Anthropocene Fictions* (2015), Trexler was one of the first theorists to convincingly contend that climate change questioned traditional narrative forms and agencies, forcing narrative innovation (Trexler 77), destabilizing human agency and facilitating a significant transnational component (Trexler 10). The primary merit of Trexler's study was that, like Slovic some years earlier, it drew attention to the necessity of an interdisciplinary approach towards this emerging literary genre whose scope exceeded the boundaries of traditional literary criticism by initiating a dialogue with science, environmentalism, politics and cultural studies:

[...] the texts of the Anthropocene have only just begun to be read, mapped, and pondered. [...] But in order to begin to describe the novel in the Anthropocene, it has been necessary to develop some model of the interconnections among texts, sciences, societies, and things in the world. (Trexler 20)

While Slovic built the methodological foundation of ecocriticism and Trexler focused on analysing the corpus that responded to the challenges of the Anthropocene, ecofeminism, as a complementary and kindred route of critical inquiry, simultaneously started investigating the ideological connections between the exploitation of nature and the

oppression of women and, coextensively, of other minorities, opening up new avenues of study that addressed intersectionality. It is precisely this intersectionality that the present study seeks to investigate, as the recent fiction of Turkish-British author Elif Shafak foregrounds human identity as inseparable from the natural world, focusing on minority identities (gender, class, ethnic, national, religious) as shaped by an increasingly abused environment.

This intersectionality is central to Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva's 1993 co-authored book, *Ecofeminism*, which, although not a pioneering contribution to the field, is often referenced as the theoretical scaffold tracing the abuse of women and nature to the same patriarchal ideology that generated the capitalist system. Similar mechanisms of violence and control are identified by Mies and Shiva in the historical treatment of women and nature, reinforcing the authors' thesis that both are seen as resources rather than life-sustaining entities:

[...] capitalist patriarchy or 'modern' civilization is based on a cosmology and anthropology that structurally dichotomizes reality, and hierarchically opposes the two parts to each other: the one always considered superior, always thriving, and progressing at the expense of the other. Thus, nature is subordinated to man; woman to man; consumption to production; and the local to the global, and so on. (Mies and Shiva 6)

While ecocriticism and ecofeminism focus on investigating the sources, mechanisms and consequences of ecological crises and their articulation in various narrative discourses, the relevance of affect theory to the present study lies in the way in which this perspective explores the more subtle effects of these crises in terms of emotions, empathy and moral implications. More precisely, while ecocriticism and ecofeminism are employed as theoretical frameworks for the analysis of Shafak's engagement with environmental topics and her specific scrutiny of the mutual relationship between the vulnerability of minority identity and that of scarred landscapes, affect theory bridges the gap between sterile information and the deep, emotional understanding of that information. As Bondi, Davidson and Smith argue in their introduction to *Emotional Geographies*,

Whether joyful, heartbreaking or numbing, emotion has the power to transform the shape of our lives, expanding or contracting our horizons, creating new fissures or fixtures we never expected to find. But how do we articulate and negotiate such complex emotional landscapes? (Bondi, Davidson and Smith 1)

This research attempts to answer the above question by investigating Shafak's recent fiction as sitting at the intersection of social, environmental, and ethical awareness with the intense emotional experience of vulnerability and loss. Also, the present study argues that Elif Shafak's work opens new creative routes towards a posthuman yet dialogic understanding of storytelling as a force that unites and bridges even when generated by non-human agencies. Moreover, in the case of Elif Shafak, the transnational component is visible not only in her fiction but also in her biography. Born in Strasbourg to Turkish

parents, Shafak spent most of her childhood and adolescence on the move because of her mother's diplomatic career. She debuted in the 1990s writing in Turkish, but then switched to English and moved to London, where she currently lives and writes. Her fiction represents an original dramatization of her roots and routes while engaging with "the key subjects in transnational literature explored in this book – mobility, identity, history, borders, migration, globalization" (Jay XI).

Consequently, this article contends that Shafak's fiction is dedicated to bridging the gaps between nature and culture, between conflicting ideologies and identities, between divergent religious and national narratives, going beyond borders and boundaries to create a space of profoundly humane dialogue and tolerance, while metatextually closing the gap between text and readers through emotional cognition. Just as trees are uprooted, rivers are rerouted, waters are depleted and forests are cut down, women, children, the poor, Muslims, Yazidis, Cypriots, and Kurds are all forced to rethink their relationship with their roots and their ancestral selves and to emotionally adapt to and survive in a world that is hostile to them, while still preserving their cultural heritage.

Ecosystems of violence and vulnerability: Shafak's stories of displacement

The choice of Shafak's two most recent novels, *The Island of Missing Trees* (2021) and *There Are Rivers in the Sky* (2024), as the subject of this research is grounded in the fact that these compellingly refine some of Shafak's earlier explorations of the elusive entanglements of humans with their ecosystem by specifically focusing on the above-mentioned intersectionality and collaboration between human and non-human elements as the necessary premise for the survival of both. Shafak's bold decision to distribute agency and narrative voice to trees, landscapes, forms of relief and animals might seem risky, especially to conservative readers accustomed to anthropocentric narratives. And yet, this choice strongly aligns with McFarlane's previously mentioned plea for narratives that would articulate the scale, violence and complexity of the current climate crisis. Also, it strongly innovates the literary tradition of the realistic novel by shifting the focus from human to non-human agency, raising awareness of something that Amitav Ghosh addressed in *The Great Derangement*:

an awareness that humans were never alone, that we have always been surrounded by beings of all sorts who share elements of that which we had thought to be most distinctively our own: the capacities of will, thought, and consciousness. (Ghosh 41)

To do so, Shafak does not commit to mapping a sterile scientific apocalypse that would put readers off or be dismissed as too didactic, marginal, or unserious. Instead, she translates the ecological crisis into intimate, affective, very personal stories that transgress the species or ontological boundaries and are far more likely to elicit emotional engagement and cultivate meaningful awareness among readers.

In this respect, Shafak's fiction aligns with Alexa Weik von Mossner's main argument in her 2017 *Affective Ecologies*, which discusses the inherent potential of climate fiction to generate a significant emotional response in readers that would then translate into

a genuine interest in and engagement with environmental causes (Weik von Mossner, *Affective Ecologies* 3). Moreover, drawing on Susan Keen's concept of *authorial strategic empathizing* (Keen qtd. in Weik von Mossner, *Affective Ecologies* 14), von Mossner argues that some environmental narratives elicit moral responses from their readers by deliberately steering their empathy towards the wronged, the oppressed, the marginal (Weik von Mossner, *Affective Ecologies* 14). Shafak's protagonists are all uprooted and displaced, while the landscape they inhabit and travel across is wounded by human exploitation or aggression. The relationship they share relies on mimesis in that the protagonists' marginal identities are always constructed against a scarred environment. On a metafictional level, this generates an emotional involvement on the part of the readers that "resonates beyond the immediate reading" (Weik von Mossner, *Affect, Emotion* 133). Thus, Shafak's relational storytelling builds bridges not only between her narrators and readers but also between species, alternative histories, conflicting identities, and disconnected temporal dimensions, implying that environmental desolation is embedded in humankind's historical conflicts, which always generate displacement, trauma, and vulnerability.

Shafak dedicates her novel "to immigrants and exiles everywhere, the uprooted, the re-rooted, the rootless, and to the trees we left behind, rooted in our memories..." (Shafak, *The Island*, VII), setting up from the very beginning a dialogic connection between vulnerable humans and non-humans, while framing her narrative as a story that subverts the atemporal, fantastic setting of the classical fairy tale with a witty revision of its opening formula. Instead of separating the tale from everyday reality, like the original formula, Shafak's "Once upon a memory" (Shafak, *The Island* 1) situates the ensuing narrative in the chronotope of memory, one that, even though subjectively constructed and thus palimpsestic, is significantly anchored in objective reality, while modulating it with affect. To that purpose, Shafak intentionally subverts the modern perception of time as linear as part of her endeavour to deconstruct the anthropocentric, domineering position of humans towards their environment. The fig-tree conceives of time much in the same manner that Shafak's multiple narrative voices and instances contribute to the story: a continuous flow that does not necessarily proceed forward, but which twists and turns unpredictably, spellbinding the readers with its meanders and bridging the gap between objective reality and creative imagination:

Arboreal-time is equivalent to story-time – and, like a story, a tree does not grow in perfectly straight lines, flawless curves or exact right angles, but bends and twists and bifurcates into fantastical shapes, throwing out branches of wonder and arcs of invention. (Shafak, *The Island* 47)

The Island of Missing Trees creatively revisits the history of Cyprus by braiding contemporary recollections of transgenerational trauma through Ada Kazantzakis's narrative with the insightful stories of a female fig-tree, an immobile yet insightful witness who experiences both human brutality and ecological fragility and whose uprootedness and forceful relocation meaningfully echo those of Ada's family. As if to illustrate Adam Traxler's claim that "climate novels must change the parameters of storytelling" (Traxler 14), Shafak constantly breaks the conventions of linear narrative, opting for multiple

narrative voices and perspectives that reflect the volatile nature of memory, emotionally reconstructing rather than reproducing the past. Enduring memory becomes a curse, the inability to forget, a fateful inclination to pessimism: “May you never be able to forget. May you go to your grave still remembering.” (Shafak, *The Island* 34)

Traumatic history is voiced by a human third-person narrator who focuses, in turns, on Ada Kazantzakis and present-day London, her parents’ love story and civil war Cyprus, and a transgressive, interethnic, interreligious, same-sex love story between a Muslim and an Orthodox Christian. To these, Shafak adds the first-person narrative of a fig-tree, which challenges the convention of a human narrator by providing a transgenerational, multi-species perspective on migration, climate change, history and the interconnectedness of the human and non-human. Thus, “the novel can also think about climate change’s intermingling with cultural narratives” (Traxler 14), allowing, in this case, a non-human narrative agency to recount, in a very authentic manner, the invisible bonds that connect human history to environmental changes. Shafak appears to have a deep understanding that, as Weik von Mossner argues, emotion shapes the way we understand ecological relations (Weik von Mossner, *Affective Ecologies* 13). The fig-tree constantly makes emotional commentaries on her relationship to both nature and humans, mediating between ontological realms but also between narrative instances:

First-generation immigrants talk to their trees all the time – when there are no other people nearby, that is. They confide in us, describing their dreams and aspirations, including those they have left behind, like wisps of wool caught on barbed wire, familiar with it. So are Spaniards, Portuguese, Maltese, Greeks, Lebanese, Egyptians, Tunisians, Moroccans, Algerians, Israelis, Palestinians, Iranians, Kurds, Turks, Jordanians, Syrians, Sephardic Jews ...and us Cypriots. (Shafak, *The Island* 22-23)

Hybridity and diasporic identities are depicted not just as the mere results of voluntary migration, but, many times, as ensuing from ethnic or religious conflict or ecological displacement. The female fig tree accompanies the Kazantzakis in their flight from interethnic and family conflict, becoming both the reflection and the embodiment of their ongoing acculturation. Brutally uprooted from her homeland, Cyprus, the female fig tree experiences the painful outcomes of adapting to an environment that is hostile to Mediterranean species. Metaphorically, her transplantation dramatizes the Kazantzakis’ cultural adaptation to Britain and London, while coping with the memories and scars of their homeland, Cyprus. In this respect, the tree’s survival depends on what Donna Haraway in *Staying with the Trouble* defines as *symptomesis*, *making with*, arguing that the survival of both humans and non-human beings is fundamentally dependent on relationality. Haraway maintains that “nothing makes itself; nothing is really autopoietic” (Haraway 58), thus outlining that survival is the result of various contributing forces and circumstances. The survival of the fig tree, much like that of Ada Kazantzakis, is not mere luck or genetic robustness, but the direct result of Kostas Kazantzakis horticultural knowledge and care, intertwined with environmental conditions that allow it to adapt and thrive. I would argue that in this respect, Haraway’s *symbiosis* becomes defining for the

way in which cultural and ecological hybridity are mapped in Shafak's novel.

Violence and vulnerability are intertwined realities in the two novels under scrutiny; they inhabit each other, they trigger each other, they modulate each other. Crimes against humans are always backed by crimes against nature, as a constant reminder of their mutual dependence. By revisiting a painful and very controversial moment in recent history, the Greek-Turkish civil war in Cyprus, *The Island of Missing Trees* explores how the abomination of war generates a landscape of endemic violence that not only engulfs people, but expands to the land, the forests, the animals, the entire island:

The capital was split by a partition which sliced right through it like a slash to the heart. Along the demarcation line – the frontier – were dilapidated houses riddled with bullet holes, empty courtyards scarred with grenade bursts, boarded stores gone to ruin, ornamented gates hanging at angles from broken hinges, luxury cars from another era rusting away under layers of dust ... Roads were blocked by coils of barbed wire, piles of sandbags, barrels full of concrete, anti-tank ditches and watchtowers. Streets ended abruptly, like unfinished thoughts, unresolved feelings. (Shafak, *The Island* 1)

It is worth noting that Shafak's narrative privileges female entities as mediators of both ecological and cultural uprootedness, as their vulnerability in the face of adversity and violence brings back archetypal structures of power and domination. Moreover, drawing on contemporary developments in ecocriticism and ecofeminism, it can be argued that Shafak is keen on exploring the origins of a worldview that treats nature and women as capital rather than as living organisms. Violence is embedded in this consecrated worldview and Shafak's fiction works to undo its moral implications by foregrounding various feminine agencies. The female fig-tree, Defne, Ada's mother, Ada, her aunt Meryam, and Panagiota, Ada's paternal grandmother, all carry transgenerational trauma that underscores how violence endures beyond the battlefield, affecting human sanity and relationships for several generations.

In this respect, I believe that Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva's argument that the current violence against nature and the environment parallels a similar violence and oppression against and of women and that both stem from the enforcement of traditional patriarchal structures (Mies and Shiva XVIII) is particularly relevant at this point. "The conquest of nature as an expression of capitalist patriarchy" (Mies and Shiva XVIII) is at the core of the Anthropocene, which might account for Shafak's choice to foreground feminine agency as a direct challenge to patriarchal discourses and practices about nature. As the fig tree beautifully recollects,

I wish I could have told him that loneliness is a human invention. Trees are never lonely. Humans think they know with certainty where their being ends and someone else's starts. With their roots tangled and caught up underground, linked to fungi and bacteria, trees harbour no such illusions. For us, everything is interconnected. (Shafak, *The Island* 30)

The female agencies in *The Island of Missing Trees*, human and non-human, forge a collaborative, multispecies network of support, care and survival that counteracts and criticizes the patriarchal exploitative dominance of the environment and of women. Shafak's novel endorses the ecofeminist creed that ecological trauma is gendered and that women and nature are similar in how they have been historically defined by patriarchal discourses as weak, vulnerable and therefore victimized. This certainly aligns with Carolyn Merchant's argument in *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution* (2005) that "the ancient identity of nature as a nurturing mother links women's history with the history of the environment and ecological change" (Merchant XX).

There Are Rivers in the Sky (2024) explores the same thesis that violence and vulnerability are not limited to physical aggression, to the human species, or to specific timeframes, but they are forces that transgress all borders and boundaries, causing transgenerational effects and (eco)systemic disruptions. This time, nature is primarily represented by water, the life-giving element that Shafak uses to mediate epochs, protagonists, landscapes and narratives. As a fundamentally feminine force, water becomes the container of violence against humans and nature, "both the harbinger of life and the messenger of death" (Shafak, *There Are Rivers* 3). Set in several distinct settings and timeframes, the narrative constantly moves back and forth, thus generating a disruptive chronotope meant to reflect the violent realities of the Anthropocene. The novel begins and ends with an ingenious conceit, a raindrop, the metaphorical image of ecological vitality, that travels through ages and various media (clouds, rivers, snow, bodies) to fictionally represent "the consummate immigrant, trapped in transit, never able to settle" (Shafak, *There Are Rivers* 78). Again, the stories run in circles rather than in lines, evoking the memory chronotope that Shafak had inaugurated in *The Island of Missing Trees*. The Tigris and the Thames feature as fluid geographical anchors, framing the seemingly disconnected narratives into a coherent flow whose cultural leitmotif is The Epic of Gilgamesh, the oldest known epic poem in the world. The novel's protagonists, a girl, a woman and a man, are all, in one way or another, marginal to their communities, being thus significantly exposed to waves of violence. Victorian Londoner Arthur "of the Sewers" Smyth, 2014 nine-year-old Yazidi Narin and 2018 London-based Zaleekhah are all symbolically connected by a web of braided stories that dwell on the cultural and ecological legacy of ancient Mesopotamia.

While Arthur Smyth rises from extreme poverty and anonymity to become a leading scholar in cuneiform writing and an expert in recovering the clay tablets of the ancient epic, little Narin literally inhabits the former territory of Mesopotamia as part of the Yazidi community in Iraq, while Zaleekhah, a British hydrologist of Iraqi descent, encounters the epic as part of her search for her Iraqi roots. All three withstand the effects of either physical or ecological violence as part of their marginality. Extreme poverty and child labour scar Arthur Smyth, who later becomes an agent of imperialist exploitation himself, conducting an archaeological campaign on behalf of the British Empire in former Mesopotamia and plundering artifacts to bring them to the British Museum. As a child and one with a serious hearing impairment, nine-year-old Narin is perhaps the most vulnerable of Shafak's protagonists, illustrating how violence expands beyond physical aggression to cultural and identity erasure. Zaleekhah, on the other hand, experiences violence more subtly, both as

part of her informed research work on water and as her quest for identity. Together, their intertwined stories suggest that violence flows like a mighty river, continuously affecting ecosystems and humans, while vulnerability is a shared condition rooted in the very principle of life. Memory, remembrance and storytelling become, in Shafak's view, ethical antidotes.

In *There Are Rivers in the Sky*, water is not only a source of life, but also a medium that enables violence and vulnerability to circulate and become visible. Incredibly versatile, water can both quench thirst and infect, contaminate, and malign. Thus, vulnerability extends not only to the marginalized and the dispossessed, but to all of humanity, as all living creatures depend on water. Also, unlike other natural resources, water escapes human control by consistently resisting forms of domination: it flows, it reroutes, it evaporates, it crystallizes, it is both outside of us and inside, it morphs into a myriad of shapes, it contains and is contained, thus challenging the anthropocentric worldview that humans can and will master their environment. As Narin's Yazidi grandmother says at one point,

it is the human body that responds to sources in nature. The water inside us communes with the water outside us. A good diviner can tell the depth of an underground stream, and even whether it is contaminated or clean. (Shafak, *There Are Rivers* 96)

In a surprisingly similar manner, Carolyn Merchant notes in *The Death of Nature* how Leonardo da Vinci "enlarged the Greek analogy between the waters of the earth and the ebb and flow of human blood through the veins and heart" (Merchant 24).

Water, memory and storytelling become avenues through which humans and nature are interconnected, circulating both values, traditions, knowledge and vitality but also pollution, hatred, trauma and suffering.

Vitality as versatility: Shafak's stories of survival

While the previous section suggested that the two novels under scrutiny foreground violence and vulnerability as consequences of crimes against humans and the environment, this section argues that they also highlight adaptability and vitality as counteracting forces that ensure the survival of both humans and the environment. Resilience does not result from forgetting the past and adapting to new conditions by obliterating one's roots, but from acknowledging and celebrating those very roots. Shafak chooses to portray resilience not as stubborn resistance, but as the capacity to transform, transgress and connect. Survival is thus the celebration of interconnectedness, cooperation and change across ecosystems, diverse cultural environments and ontological levels. Humans and non-human entities depend on each other for survival, thus reinforcing Donna Haraway's concept of *making-kin*, which she uses to contend that no living creatures can actually exist in isolation and that survival is a mutually dependent achievement:

[...] all earthlings are kin in the deepest sense, and it is past time to practice better care of kinds-as-assemblages (not species one at a time). Kin is an assembling sort

of word. All critters share a common “flesh,” laterally, semiotically, and genealogically. (Haraway 104)

The female fig-tree in *The Island of Missing Trees* is the embodiment of ecological resilience, as she is literally uprooted from sunny Cyprus to be taken as a living reminder of the homeland to chilly Britain by Kostas, the Greek botanist who tries to rebuild his life in the aftermath of collective and personal trauma. The tree’s survival depends on his knowledge and care, much like Kostas’s thriving in seemingly hostile circumstances depends on the memories, values and traditions that the fig-tree has the capacity to evoke: “I still carry the island with me, though. The places where we were born are the shape of our lives, even when we are away from them” (Shafak, *The Island* 33).

Similarly, in *There Are Rivers in the Sky*, water carries the semiotics of ecological adaptation that is fundamental to survival. With a motto from Ovid that reads „dripping water hollows out stone, not through force but through persistence” (Shafak, *There Are Rivers* VIII), the novel repeatedly chronicles the travel of one raindrop through distant epochs, geographies and media, suggesting that survival is a prerogative of change:

[...] the journey of life resembles the march of rivers to the sea, at times meandering aimlessly, at others purposeful and unswerving, the bend in the flow is where the story takes a sudden turn, winding away from its predicted course into a fresh and unexpected direction. (Shafak, *There Are Rivers* 101)

Thus, Shafak introduces adaptation as an ecological principle first, to later revisit it through subtler representations as memory, history and identity. These are braided in the personal narratives of the protagonists and of the communities they belong to. In *The Island of Missing Trees*, sixteen-year-old Ada, the daughter of an interethnic couple, has to figure out ways to reclaim her complicated ancestry and thus fully own her diasporic identity. Born in Britain, she remains oblivious of the traumatic past that her parents had to put behind them, but this cognitive gap generates a symptomatic inability to adapt or belong. The heavy silence she is fed by her Turkish mother Defne, and her Greek father, Kostas, both scarred by the horrors of interethnic war, by their families’ refusal to acknowledge their relationship, by the loss of their first child to malaria and by the eventual failure of their marriage, is balanced, later in the novel, by Ada’s maternal aunt, Meryem, and her willingness to bridge that gap and answer difficult questions: “Where do you start someone’s story when every life has more than one thread and what we call birth is not the only beginning, nor is death exactly an end?” (Shafak, *The Island* 55)

Meryem’s maternal presence allows Ada to cautiously open up and process the inherited grief that her parents passed on to her through their stubborn refusal to talk about the past. Slowly but surely, Ada comes to life by gradually learning about her roots and her family’s troubled history. Vitality follows adaptation, as part of a process that requires self-discovery and acceptance. Offering constant emotional care and support encourages Ada to immerse herself in her cultural legacy by cooking together, sharing old proverbs, and helping with a history project on migration. Moreover, Meryem symbolically reconciles the ethnic divide between Ada’s paternal and maternal lineages, bridging a conflict that

reverberates throughout the novel.

In *There Are Rivers in the Sky*, Arthur Smyth, Narin and Zaleekhah Clarke negotiate very personal routes to survival, eventually celebrating the strength of versatility in an otherwise hostile environment. Arthur's and Narin's survival is first physical, as they have to overcome extreme poverty, physical impairment and terrorist aggression. Born in the slums of 19th-century London on the same day as Queen Victoria's firstborn, "King Arthur of the Slums and Sewers" will remember the exact moment of his birth

with exceptional clarity and in astonishing detail: the roar of sewage rushing nearby, the bark of a crooked oak tree, the coarseness of the coats piled beneath him, their edges frayed and gnawed away by rats and mice, the locks of golden hair cascading on to the shoulders of the woman who brought him into this world but then wanted to throw him into the Thames, and, above all, the feel of icy crystals dissolving on his tongue. (Shafak, *There Are Rivers* 30)

A transparent dramatization of Donna Haraway's *making-kin*, that principle which brings together all living creatures in a network of cooperation and mutual dependence, Arthur's birth on the banks of the filthy Thames sharply contrasts with his later becoming the British Museum's leading expert in ancient manuscripts. Exceptional intellectual capacity, paired with unwavering education and perseverance, allows him to eventually rise above his circumstances and overcome the social divide. In the end, adaptation surfaces as an ongoing process of self-adjustment and self-definition that results in multiple versions of oneself meant to fit any situation. On a metatextual level, this translates as multiple avatars of storytelling that Shafak inserts, braids and skillfully illustrates in the metaphor of the raindrop that traverses the novel and the structural leitmotif of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* that holds the entire novel together. The epic functions as an intertext that connects the three protagonists across centuries and geographies, grounding their cultural roots and shaping their personal routes, while metatextually illustrating Shafak's vision of storytelling as a survival mechanism:

All you need is a memorable tale, one that frames you as the hero. Yet, as much as the king treasures stories, he does not trust storytellers. Their imagination, unable to settle in one place, like the Tigris in springtime, changes course in a manner most unpredictable, meandering in ever-widening curves and twisting in haphazard loops, wild and untamed to the end. When he built this library, he knew there were other versions of the Epic of Gilgamesh. Copied and recopied by scribes throughout the centuries, the poem emerged in new renderings. (Shafak, *There Are Rivers* 11)

Stories, much like humans, plants, and animals, survive if they adapt, if they can constantly build new versions of themselves that would remain relevant through time and space. It is important to note at this point that Shafak intentionally reframes the ancient epic whose central heroic agents, like any other's foundational text, are exclusively male, to voice marginalized identities, particularly women. This significant alteration of the initial text is consistent with Shafak's challenge of the traditional patriarchal worldview as the ideological root cause of women's and nature's domination and exploitation. In *There Are Rivers in the Sky*, women move from marginality to centrality, asserting their ability to

adapt and survive in an extremely hostile environment.

The story of nine-year-old Yazidi Narin, who inhabits the contemporary landscape of what was once ancient Mesopotamia, is perhaps the strongest example of physical, cultural and ecological survival. Battling a hearing impairment that renders her extremely vulnerable to the world, Narin has to rely on her community to stay alive as they are all victims of ISIS brutality. Her grandmother, just like Gilgamesh's mother, becomes Narin's spiritual guide and her anchor in the world, while also being the custodian of Yazidi oral culture. Narin and her grandmother become the symbolic image of enduring collective memory and of cultural survival which overcomes displacement, violence and victimization. Throughout the novel, Narin's grandmother is portrayed as a living archive of oral wisdom and tradition whose physical death at the end of the novel does not equate to the disappearance of a culture. Shafak's avoidance of openly recounting her death reinforces the novel's main argument that cultural survival does not depend on people's longevity but rather on their ability to function as a community, passing down, from one generation to another, their most valuable knowledge and practices. Narin's physical survival celebrates the principle of *making-kin* that Donna Haraway introduces in *Staying with Trouble*, according to which survival, both ecological and cultural, is relational rather than individual. Thus, Shafak presents a story of survival in which memory, storytelling and ritual ensure the transgenerational preservation of cultural identity but also one that parallels the survival of the ecosystem the Yazidis inhabit.

Zaleekhah's story, unlike Arthur's and Narin's, is not so much about physical survival, as she is born to a well-to-do family in London, but about emotional, cultural and spiritual survival. Portrayed in the aftermath of her failed marriage, Zaleekhah feels utterly disconnected from herself and the environment she studies. Alienation scars her identity much in the way most contemporary urban individuals suffer from isolation and various forms of social invisibility. As a female researcher studying water, Zaleekhah is Shafak's fictional ruse to articulate marginality in a much subtler manner, not only through her maternal Iraqi lineage, but also through the depiction of constant professional bias towards women's work:

[...] she will finish the article she has been secretly working on for so long, a controversial paper about 'water memory' that she was too scared to share for fear that it might draw harsh criticism and ridicule from the scientific community. (Shafak, *There Are Rivers* 78)

In this respect, her research is a fictional articulation of Alexa Weik von Mossner's previously mentioned affect theory, which advances the thesis that empathy bridges the gap between environmental crises and human understanding and action. Weik von Mossner insists on the capacity of literary texts and films "to evoke environments and make those environments emotionally salient through the use of narrative perspective and imagery that invites embodied simulation" (Weik von Mossner, *Affective Ecologies* 78). Zaleekhah's engagement with the study of water exceeds scientific interest; it becomes part of her exploratory journey into her family's past and her profound transformation in terms of personal identity. While at the beginning, Zaleekhah views water as an external object of

scientific study that bears no connection to her actual existence, she gradually realizes what Donna Haraway calls the *making-kin*, the interconnectedness of humans and their environment. At the same time, she dives deep to uncover her personal ancestry on her mother's side, which offers her a deep sense of belonging and the much-needed grounding she formerly lacked. Her maternal uncle's words are, in this sense, revelatory to Zaleekhah:

'People like us' ... immigrants, exiles, refugees, newcomers, outsiders ... Too many words for a shared, recognizable sentiment that, no matter how often described, remains largely undefined. Children of uprooted parents are born into the memory tribe. Both their present and their future are forever shaped by their ancestral past, regardless of whether they have any knowledge of it. If they flourish and prosper, their achievements will be attributed to a whole community; and, in the same way, their failures will be chalked up to something bigger and older than themselves, be it family, religion or ethnicity. (Shafak, *There Are Rivers* 77)

Thus, survival is celebrated in Shafak's novels as a dynamic process of adaptation that requires individual growth, the salient incorporation and processing of transgenerational trauma, and an ongoing negotiation between humans and the environment so that both thrive. It is worth noting that Shafak expands this view at the metatextual level by foregrounding storytelling as the key instrument in circulating cultural values and practices. Stories, like humans and nature, can survive across millennia due to their capacity to transform and remain relevant.

Conclusions

This research was initially prompted by a comparative reading of Shafak's two most recent novels and the realization that, beyond further methodological complications, they both ask similar questions and provide substantially similar answers in investigating the intersectionality of humans and nature, of the individual and the collective, of history and contemporaneity, of texts and their readers. Built on the theoretical foundation of ecocriticism, ecofeminism and affect theory, this study has argued that Shafak's recent fiction represents a valuable contribution to environmental humanities, not only through its skillful depiction of survival as the result of a complex process of adaptation in which exposure to violence and the ensuing vulnerability represent stages in the becoming of both the protagonists and the landscapes they inhabit, but also through innovative creative strategies that effectively address the paradigm shifts prompted by Anthropocene.

Moreover, this analysis has foregrounded the fact that Shafak's recent fiction imagines ecological crises as the result of humankind's ethical crises. Read through the lens of the above-mentioned theoretical perspectives, these narratives expose similar mechanisms of oppression and domination in the abuse against nature and marginal individuals. As Gaard argues,

the ideology which authorizes oppressions such as those based on race, class, gender, sexuality, physical abilities, and species is the same ideology which sanctions the

oppression of nature. (Gaard 1)

Adaptive resilience becomes the cure for vulnerability and the response to sheer violence, while emotion, both the protagonists' and the readers', transforms abstract ecological information into lived experience and authentic ecological awareness. One of Shafak's merits in these novels is, without a doubt, to have expanded the sphere of ethical models far beyond the human realm, giving agency to trees, islands, rivers, ants, bats, butterflies and many other non-human entities, while keeping responsibility where it belongs, in the hands of humans.

Through stories that cross ontological and temporal boundaries, Shafak fictionally imagines a network of cooperation that ultimately defines being in the world and the essence of life itself. Resilience is not, in Shafak's view, the ability to remain unchanged in the face of life's torrent, but rather to learn to live with constant change and endure.

To conclude, Shafak connects routes to roots, both literally and symbolically, by advancing a posthuman vision of the world in which humans are displaced from their anthropocentric position, only to become vulnerable in their exposure to the elements, the landscape, their own passions and lusts, their quest for identity, and their ignorance of the past. And thus, more humane.

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