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HUMAN-NATURE RELATIONSHIP IN SHAFAK'S THE ISLAND OF THE MISSING TREES: AN ECOCRITICAL APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

The present study intends to explore the relationship between humans and the natural world in Elif Shafak's novel *The Island of the Missing Trees* through the lens of ecocriticism. The novel tells the story of a group of characters living on the fictional island of Sanani, which is facing a severe environmental crisis. The island's trees are disappearing at an alarming rate, and the characters must work together to find a solution before it's too late. Shafak's use of magical realism and folklore creates a vivid and immersive world that highlights the importance of the natural environment and our connection to it. Ecocriticism is a literary theory that explores the relationship between humans and the natural world, and how this relationship is reflected in literature. In this context, the article analyzes the novel's portrayal of the human-nature connection, as well as the characters' attitudes towards the environment. Through a close reading of the text, the article argues that Shafak's novel presents a nuanced and complex view of the human-nature harmony. The characters in the novel are deeply connected to the natural world, and their actions have a profound impact on the environment. However, they also struggle with the consequences of their actions, and the novel explores the ways in which humans can both harm and protect the environment. The research methodology of this article is primarily qualitative, relying on a close reading and analysis of the novel *The Island of the Missing Trees* from an ecocritical perspective. The article employs a textual analysis of the novel's narrative, characters, and themes to explore the consistency of human-nature in the text. By highlighting the importance of environmental

awareness and responsibility in selected text, the study provides a deeper understanding of the complex relationship between humans and the natural world, and the impact of human actions on the environment.

INTRODUCTION

Elif Shafak is a highly acclaimed Turkish-British author, essayist, and public speaker who has gained recognition for her contribution to contemporary literature. With a diverse cultural background and education, Shafak's writing often explores themes of identity, belonging, and social justice. Shafak's work has been translated into over 50 languages, making her one of the most widely read authors of Turkish origin. Shafak has become a prominent voice in contemporary literature and social activism.

Human-nature harmony has gained significant attention in contemporary times due to the pressing environmental issues and social concerns. Literature is a powerful medium that can bring attention to this issue and inspire change. In this context, Shafak's *The Island of the Missing Trees* stands out as a thought-provoking work of fiction that explores the intricate relationship between humans and nature. An ecocritical approach to this novel helps readers to understand the complex layers of meaning embedded in the narrative. Ecocriticism is a literary theory that examines the relationship between literature and the environment. It focuses on how literary works represent, critique, and advocate for environmental issues. In *The Island of the Missing Trees*, Shafak (2021) presents a powerful allegory of human-nature connection through the story of a group of people living on an island with no trees. The novel explores the ecological, cultural, and emotional consequences of the destruction of the island's natural resources. It also highlights the importance of preserving nature and the need for a more sustainable way of life.

This study aims to provide an ecocritical analysis of *The Island of the Missing Trees* by examining the novel's themes, symbols, and narrative techniques. The article argues that Shafak's novel not only highlights the destructive impact of human activities on nature but also emphasizes the transformative power of nature on human lives. The article also discusses how Shafak's work invites readers to reflect on their relationship with nature and inspires them to take action to protect the environment. The novel sheds light on the interconnectedness between humans and the environment, and how human activities have profound effects on the natural world. Through its portrayal of the destructive impact of war and colonization on both the land and its inhabitants, the current study also highlights the societal and economic inequalities that arise from environmental degradation. This thing challenges us to reevaluate our relationship with nature and to work towards protecting it for the benefit of all, rather than merely exploiting it for our own gain. As concerns regarding climate change and environmental damage continue to escalate, the novel's ecocritical implications are especially relevant and significant. It also shows how environmental degradation can lead to social and economic inequality, as well as physical and emotional suffering. One of the key themes in the novel is the idea that humans are not separate from nature but are a part of it. This suggests that the health of the environment is directly connected to the well-being of human beings. This is a powerful idea

that has important implications for our relationship with the natural world. It suggests that we cannot simply exploit the environment for our own benefit, but that we must work to protect it for the benefit of all. The following research questions guide this study:

- How does the portrayal of the human-nature relationship in Elif Shafak's *The Island of the Missing Trees* reflect contemporary ecocritical concerns?
- How does the novel's depiction of the natural environment and its inhabitants serve to highlight the interconnectedness of all living beings?
- To what extent does *The Island of the Missing Trees* promote a more harmonious and sustainable relationship between humans and nature?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature has long explored the relationship between humans and nature, from Wordsworth's critique of materialism to Steinbeck's recognition of interconnectedness. Ecocriticism as a literary theory critiques human exploitation of nature and examines how cultural production shapes our understanding of this relationship. Through literature, we can reflect on our responsibilities towards the environment and the evolving human-nature dynamic.

Jamili and Khoshkam's (2017) research article named "Interrelation/Coexistence between Human/Nonhuman in Nature: William Blake's *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience* delves into William Blake's depiction of the interconnected relationship between humans and non-human entities in his poetry. The article highlights Blake's concept of the 'divine image' as a unifying force that connects humans and nature, blurring the boundaries between them. Through analyzing various poems in Blake's *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience*, the article argues that Blake challenges the notion of human superiority and portrays nature as a powerful force that can influence and shape human behavior. Additionally, the current study emphasizes the reciprocal relationship between humans and nature in Blake's works, where human intervention can impact non-human entities, as seen in the poem *The Garden of Love*.

Dabirnia's (2021) in the research article entitled "A Comparative Study of the Representation Human/Nature Relationship in Selected Poems from Robert Frost and Sohrab Sepehri from an Ecocriticism Perspective", analyses the poetry of Robert Frost and Sohrab Sepehri from an ecocritical perspective to explore the representation of the human/nature relationship in their works. By comparing Frost's *The Road Not Taken* and *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening* with Sepehri's *Water's Footfall* and *The Sound of Water's Footfall*, the study investigates how these poets represent nature and reflect cultural attitudes towards the environment. The study finds that while both poets have a deep respect for nature; their representations of the human/nature relationship differ. Frost's poems depict nature as an escape from societal pressures, while Sepehri's poems show nature as an integral part of the human

experience. The study emphasizes the importance of literature in shaping cultural attitudes towards the environment and promoting environmental awareness. It highlights how literature can encourage a more sustainable relationship between humans and nature by offering different perspectives on the complex human/nature relationship.

Akbar's (2016) in research project, "A Portrait of Environmentalist in Jostein Gaarder's *The World According To Anna*" examines the ecological and environmental concerns in the selected novel. The study specifically analyzes the character of Anna and her journey towards becoming an environmental activist. Throughout the novel, Anna's passion for the environment and her commitment to environmental activism are demonstrated through her conversations and actions. She becomes an inspiration to other young environmentalists, and her ideas highlight the urgent need for action to address climate change and environmental degradation. The study emphasizes the importance of the novel in promoting environmental awareness and encouraging readers to act to protect the environment.

Sardari (2020) in the article entitled "The River Exists, Therefore I Am: Ecocriticism, Nature and Human Nature in Willa Cather's *The Enchanted Bluff*" explores the relationship between humans and nature through the experiences of two characters: a city-dwelling artist and a rural boy. The story takes place on a bluff overlooking a river, and as the artist paints the landscape, he is challenged by the boy's insistence that he cannot truly appreciate the beauty of the land without understanding and respecting the natural world. Through the interactions between the characters, Cather emphasizes the contrast between urban and rural lifestyles and highlights the importance of being in touch with nature. The artist represents the disconnection of urban society, while the boy embodies the wisdom and understanding of the natural world. As the artist begins to learn from the boy and appreciate the river and its surroundings, he gains a new perspective on life and becomes more attuned to his surroundings.

Shah and Kumari's (2019) article "An Eco-Critical Study of Khaled Hosseini's *And The Mountains Echoed*" explores the relationship between humans and nature in the novel from an ecocritical perspective. The authors argue that the novel reflects the traditional Afghan way of life, where humans and nature are closely connected. They examine how the characters' actions impact the environment, particularly with regards to deforestation and the destruction caused by war. The study also explores how the characters' focus on survival during the war leads to a sense of alienation from nature. One strength of the article is its use of ecocritical theory to analyze the environmental themes in the novel. The authors provide a clear and insightful analysis of the ecological aspects of the novel, highlighting the impact of human actions on the natural environment.

The article "The Issues of Diaspora and Displacement in Shafak's *The Island of Missing Trees*" by Sabbah and Ayuningtyas (2022) examines how Shafak's novel explores the themes of diaspora and displacement. The novel, set in Cyprus, tells the story of two families, one Greek-Cypriot and one Turkish-

Cypriot, who are brought together by history and tragedy. Through their struggles, the novel explores the complex realities of living in a divided society, where the past continues to shape the present. Shafak's use of rich and vivid descriptions of the physical and emotional landscape of Cyprus, as well as traditional Cypriot folktales and mythology, creates an immersive world that draws the reader in. The article highlights how the novel shows the impact of displacement on individual lives and the ways in which it can lead to a profound sense of loss and disconnection. However, the novel also highlights the resilience and courage of those who must navigate the complex and often hostile terrain of diaspora.

Based on a literature review, it is evident that there is a research gap. Hence this study aims to fill the research gap by analyzing human nature in Shafak's novel *The Island of the Missing Trees* from an ecocritical perspective.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research design as it involves an in-depth analysis of a literary work, Shafak's *The Island of the Missing Trees*, using ecocritical theory. The data for this study collected through close reading of the novel and relevant ecocritical literature. The researcher read the novel multiple times to identify themes related to the human-nature connection and also consulted secondary sources such as academic articles, books, and online resources that explore ecocritical theory. The data analysis involves identifying themes related to the human-nature connection in the novel and mapping them to relevant ecocritical theory. The researcher used a coding system to categorize the data and identify patterns, and also conducted a textual analysis to examine specific examples of the human-nature connection in the novel.

The theoretical framework for this study is ecocritical theory, which focuses on the relationship between human culture and the natural world. The current study draws on key concepts from ecocriticism, including the idea of nature as a subject and not just an object, the concept of the Anthropocene, and the human-nature relation. Ecocriticism is a constantly evolving field, and scholars continue to explore new ways of examining the relationship between literature and the environment. Eco-criticism is a field of literary analysis that focuses on the portrayal of nature and the environment in literature, particularly with regards to the transmission of values. Ecocriticism, a term coined by William Rueckert in 1978, is a critical approach that examines the relationship between literature and the natural world. Glotfelty (2005) points out that Ecocriticism deals with "the interconnections between nature and culture" (p.21) Garrard (2004) in his book *Ecocriticism* defines it as "the study of the relationship of the human and the non-human" (p.5). Bate (2000), a prominent British eco-critic, has argued that Romantic writers and their literary successors had an intimate relationship with nature, which is reflected in their poetry. Bate (2000) contends that humans have become disconnected from nature and it is the responsibility of writers to articulate the connection between humans and their natural surroundings.

Mishra (2016) points out that loss of human nature relationship is due to anthropocentric attitude of human beings. According to him, human nature is “anthropocentric which positions humans on top. As earth's only literary being, man considers himself as superior to every other organism” (p. 169). Rowe (1994), an ecologist and proponent of ecocentrism, believes that our understanding of the environment should be grounded in a recognition of the interdependence of all living beings and natural systems. He argues that we need to move away from an anthropocentric view of the world, which sees nature as a resource to be exploited for human benefit, and instead embrace an ecocentric perspective that values the inherent worth of all living things. Rowe (1994) emphasizes the importance of understanding natural cycles and processes, and the ways in which different species interact with one another and their environment. He believes that by recognizing the interconnectedness of all living things, we can develop a more sustainable relationship with the natural world, one that values and protects the diversity of life on our planet. Rowe (1994) points out that “the whole Ecosphere is even more significant and consequential: more inclusive, more complex, more integrated, more creative, more beautiful” (p. 106-107) than human world.

One of the key concepts in ecocriticism is the idea of "nature writing," which refers to literature that portrays nature as an independent entity with its own agency and significance. As Glotfelty and Fromm (1996) state, "nature writing, as we conceive it, does not assume a separation between human culture and nonhuman nature" (p. 18). Instead, it recognizes the interconnectedness of all life forms and the importance of environmental sustainability. One area of current interest is the role of literature in addressing the issue of climate change. As Kroeber and Eaton (2009) state, "climate change presents us with an unprecedented ecological, social, and cultural crisis that challenges our ways of living, our beliefs, and our values" (p. 4). Literature, they argue, can help us better understand and respond to this crisis by offering different perspectives and imaginative solutions. Eco-theory seeks to find solutions to global ecological problems by addressing critical environmental concerns, including the examination of values present in literary texts that have significant ecological consequences. Eco-criticism plays a vital role in this process by promoting ecological consciousness and recognizing the symbiotic interconnectedness between humans and the natural world. Through eco-criticism, we can better understand our place in the environment and our responsibility to protect and honor biodiversity, promoting the dignity and well-being of all living beings.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

In *The Island of Missing Trees*, Elif Shafak portrays herself as an ecologist by highlighting the critical importance of preserving nature and the dire consequences of exploiting it for personal gain. Throughout the novel, Shafak depicts the island of Cyprus as a place where humans have long been connected to nature, with the fig tree serving as a symbol of this relationship. However, she also highlights the environmental challenges facing the island, such as deforestation, pollution, and climate change, which threaten this delicate balance.

Through the character of Kostas, a tree keeper, Shafak emphasizes the need to protect and care for trees as living beings with inherent value. She also explores the economic and political factors that drive environmental degradation, such as corporate greed and corruption. Furthermore, Shafak examines the role of culture and spirituality in shaping our relationship with nature, highlighting how ancient rituals and beliefs can offer valuable insights into ecological issues. The relationship between humans and nature is interdependent, where any changes made by either entity can have an impact on the other. In Cyprus, the exploitation of nature for personal gain has resulted in environmental issues. The novel explores this relationship between humans and nature through various aspects such as spirituality, economics, health, food sources, and tree care. For instance, the novel cites examples of how humans attribute mystical power to the fig tree and believe that it can solve their problems through certain rituals.

It was a ritual for the dead. An ancient rite to guide the safety of the spirit of a loved one, so that it would not wander off into the vast recesses of the ether. As a rule, the ceremony ought to be performed under a fig tree, but – given my current position – I guess it had to be above this time (Shafak, 2021,p.59).

The above excerpt from the novel suggests that humans maintain a connection with the fig tree even after it has died. They hold the belief that the fig tree acts as a conduit to guide the souls of the departed to the afterlife. Additionally, Kostas and Meryem perform a ritual to lay Defne's spirit to rest, conducted beneath a holy fig tree, which is thought to possess mystical powers.

Humans have a connection with the fig tree that extends beyond its spiritual significance. They engage in certain practices that involve the fig tree to achieve their desired outcomes or avert misfortunes. This custom has been prevalent since ancient times and has been transmitted across generations. Humans hold the belief that trees possess the ability to fulfill their wishes and shield them from potential dangers as is illustrated in the novel:

Under our canopy, sacrificial animals are slaughtered, vows taken, rings exchanged and blood feuds settled. And some even believe that if you circle a fig tree seven times while burning incense and uttering the right words in the right order, you can change the sex attributed to you at birth. (p. 60)

Shafak (2021) points out that humans have connections with trees beyond the fig tree, which involve avoiding misfortunes. Certain activities, such as sitting under a walnut tree, cutting a mastic tree, or planting koutsoupia, are considered taboo due to their historical association with human beliefs. Trees play a vital role in fulfilling human spiritual needs, as evidenced by various ceremonies and actions taken to avert bad luck. The relationship between humans and trees is predominantly spiritual, shaped by human beliefs. In addition, humans also exploit nature for economic purposes, employing various techniques to increase production and profits. Highlighting the destructive impact of human activities on nature. The novelist points out that

"Forests had been decimated, cleared for vineyards, cultivation, and fuelwood, and at times deliberately destroyed in endless vendettas" (p. 75)

The relationship between humans and birds also exists in an economic context, such as in Cyprus Island where illegal bird catching and trafficking is prevalent. Despite the illegality of the trade, the birds are sold on the black market at a high price. Cyprus is situated on the migration route of several bird species, and the island's diverse range of avifauna contributes to the illegal activity of capturing and selling birds for monetary gain. The novelist remarks that though selling birds is 'Supposed to be illegal, but that doesn't stop the poachers. It's a huge industry. (Shafak, 2021, p.217)

In the novel, the interdependence between humans and nature is emphasized in terms of health, particularly in the context of the malaria outbreak that affected Cyprus Island. The humans living on the island took action to prevent the breeding of mosquitoes by drying out the marshes and introducing eucalyptus and Australian plants. This illustrates how humans must work in harmony with nature to maintain their well-being. Moreover, nature also provides a source of food for humans, which is essential for their survival. The people of Cyprus Island rely on the natural environment for their food, and they have developed culinary traditions that incorporate various animals and plant species found on the island. The novel underscores the significance of a sustainable relationship between humans and the natural world, as it directly impacts their health and survival. As is evident in the novel "Ambelopoulia, the caviar of Cyprus: cooked songbirds – grilled, fried, pickled, boiled" (Shafak, 2021, p.217).

In order to prevent dieback, humans employ various measures, such as covering plywood with mulch to shield trees from frost. This exemplifies how humans not only utilize natural resources but also take responsibility for preserving and maintaining them. By taking steps to protect trees and other natural resources, humans demonstrate their commitment to sustainability and their understanding of the interdependence between humans and the environment. Shafak (2021) highlights the importance of responsible environmental stewardship and the consequences of neglecting the natural world. It emphasizes the need for humans to take proactive steps to prevent ecological degradation and preserve the environment for future generations. Novelist states that "Burying fig trees in trenches underground during the harshest winters and unearthing them in spring is curious if well-established tradition (p. 23)."

The theme of nature exploitation is a prominent motif in *The Island of Missing Trees*, often portrayed with little consideration for conservation. The novel depicts humans exploiting nature in various ways, driven by their personal needs and desires. One of the fundamental functions of nature is to provide resources that are utilized by both humans and other living organisms. In economic endeavors, nature plays a critical role in supplying the necessary resources to produce goods that hold commercial value. The novel highlights the consequences of exploiting nature without proper regulation, emphasizing the need for responsible environmental stewardship. It serves as a reminder that humans must strive to maintain a sustainable relationship with the natural

world, utilizing resources wisely to ensure long-term ecological stability. As Shafak (2021) mentions

“‘Good question,’ we tree conceded. Life was not easy for us. Swarms of locusts had plagued the island for too long, arriving in dense, dark clouds, and devouring all things green. Forests had been decimated, cleared for vineyards, cultivation, and fuelwood, and at times deliberately destroyed in endless vendettas” (p 75).

The paragraph highlights the prevalent anthropocentric approach, where humans primarily utilize nature for economic gains. The phrase "devouring all things green" signifies how humans often clear forests and trees to make way for more profitable activities such as vineyards or cultivation. This exploitation frequently results in the disappearance of less profitable plant species, leading to a significant ecological impact. Unfortunately, many forests continue to be logged without any thought given to the long-term consequences, ultimately resulting in catastrophic events such as wildfires that destroy vast areas of trees. Regrettably, no one is held responsible for the loss of trees, despite the profound environmental impact and harm caused to the wildlife residing there. The need for increased accountability and sustainable practices is emphasized, as humans must realize the detrimental effect of their actions on the natural world and the need for responsible environmental stewardship.

Shafak (2021) discusses how the illegal trapping and trading of birds in a black market is a reflection of the dominant anthropocentric mindset. Birds are seen as commodities to be exploited for economic gain, disregarding the impact of this activity on the bird populations and the larger ecosystem. Despite the fact that the trapping and trading of birds is illegal, the profit motive has led many to engage in this activity, creating a significant industry that is difficult to eradicate. The lack of enforcement by law enforcement agencies and the apathy of society towards this issue has contributed to the continued exploitation of birds. The character of Kostas attempts to report this illegal activity, but the system is rigged against him, indicating the pervasive influence of the profit motive in shaping attitudes towards nature. The lack of accountability and responsibility on the part of humans towards the natural world, as highlighted in this paragraph, underscores the importance of adopting an ecocentric perspective in society, one that recognizes the interconnectedness and interdependence of all living beings in the ecosystem. The novelist points out that “The birds caught in Cyprus were smuggled into other countries where they would be sold for hefty prices” (p. 216).

The novel depicts how humans engage in the trapping of birds by setting nets at night, which results in the nets being filled with various bird species the following day. The activity continues despite some of these bird species being already endangered, reflecting a strong anthropocentric approach. The birds are trapped at night and then illegally trafficked to the black market for personal profit. The novelist points out that birds are “snared in the depths of the night. (p. 214)

The impact of the long-standing war on Cyprus extends beyond humans, as it has also caused significant harm to the island's natural resources and ecosystems. One of the most visible outcomes of the conflict is the extensive logging of forests, which has resulted in the loss of habitats for many animal species. The destruction of natural resources and habitats has also led to environmental imbalances, which could have serious long-term consequences for the island's ecosystem. The war has also caused the displacement of people and forced migration, leading to social and economic problems. In light of these impacts, it is crucial to prioritize peace and sustainable development as a means of ensuring the well-being of all living things on the island. As it is clear from the novel that "That was the year entire forests caught fire during hunts for the insurgent groups hiding in the mountains. Pines, cedars, conifers they all burned down to stumps. (p. 104)

Anthropocentric mindset can result in environmental destruction and loss of biodiversity. When humans focus solely on their own needs and desires, they often disregard the impact of their actions on non-human beings, such as animals and plants. This can lead to habitat destruction, pollution, and other forms of environmental degradation. When biodiversity is lost, ecosystems can become unstable, and natural resources that humans rely on for their survival, such as clean air and water, can become scarce. In the long run, these consequences can negatively affect human health, well-being, and even economic prosperity. Therefore, it is important to recognize the value of all living beings and the interconnectedness of humans and the environment to promote sustainable development and conservation efforts. As novelist points out that "Cyprus was known in antiquity as 'the green island', famous for its dense, mysterious forests."(p. 168) Now there is "the absence of trees."(p. 168)

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that Elif Shafak's novel *The Island of the Missing Trees* presents a compelling exploration of the relationship between humans and the natural world. Through the lens of ecocriticism, this study has analyzed the novel's portrayal of the human-nature connection, highlighting the complex and nuanced perspective that the author presents. The novel depicts the consequences of human actions on the environment, and underscores the importance of environmental awareness and responsibility. Shafak's use of magical realism and folklore creates a vivid and immersive world, further emphasizing the significance of the natural environment and our connection to it. As the environmental crisis becomes increasingly pressing, it is vital to examine our attitudes towards the natural world and to recognize the impact of human actions on the environment. Through a close reading and analysis of the novel, this study has demonstrated the ways in which *The Island of the Missing Trees* reflects and responds to real-world environmental issues. The novel's portrayal of the human-nature connection offers a nuanced and complex perspective on the complex relationship between humans and the natural world. *The Island of the Missing Trees* serves as a reminder of the importance of environmental awareness and responsibility, and the potential for literature to offer imaginative solutions to environmental issues.

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