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Phytocritical Examination of Plant Consciousness in *The Island of Missing Trees*

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Abstract

This paper explores plant consciousness and sentience in Elif Shafak's novel The Island of Missing Trees by drawing on the theoretical insights developed under the rubric of phytocriticism, specifically focusing on plant personhood and plant agency. Phytocritical examination of literature involves exploring tree sentience, consciousness, and agency. In this regard, this paper argues that the plant, specifically the Fig Tree, emerges as an active, sentient agent of the botanical world that exists independently beyond human measure, witnessing human love, war, and trauma, along with arboreal suffering. The tree, then, is not merely a setting, but a character having knowledge of both the plant and human worlds. As shown in the novel, the Fig Tree brought to London from Cyprus tells the part of the story in the first person as a wise and observant narrator. It is a witness for Kostas and Defne's affairs in Cyprus, and their daughter, Ada's, growing up in London. Recognizing plants' agency and sentience is a part of phytocritical exploration as discussed by Michael Marder, Peter Wohlleben, and Matthew Hall. Theoretically, phytocriticism, a branch of ecocriticism, recognizes plants as persons. Whollenban's plant sentience and communicative virtues, Hall's exploration of plants as persons, Marder's idea of plants' sentience, and Kallhoff's discussion of plant language, which is 'no language of sounds', serve to establish plants as social beings with communicative capabilities, thereby narrating and witnessing their own histories and human histories/world.

Keywords: agency of the tree, arboreal suffering, Fig tree, phytocriticism

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Plants tell stories about "people, times and places" (Kallhoff et al., 2018, pp. 1-9), they have sense and can "communicate with each other by positioning themselves in particular ways relative to their neighbors" (Mancuso & Viola, 2013, p. 90) and their primary purpose on life is to "live and grow for themselves" (Hall, 2011, p. 40) rather than providing food and shelter to human beings. In this context, the arboreal narration of *The Island of Missing Trees* by Turkish writer Shafak (2021) raises the issues of plant sentience and agency. The novel tells a story of two generations of the Fig tree and humans, respectively, in Cyprus and London. The story in Cyprus follows a romantic relationship between a Greek Cypriot named Kostas and a Turkish Cypriot named Defne. Their forbidden bond sparks a connection amidst the violent, divided history of post-colonial Cyprus in the 1970s. The narration loops back and forth, bringing the human story and plant story to the fore and intertwining them to communicate how both worlds, despite their difference, share the same history, memories, and trauma.

The arboreal stories resist linear progression of human understanding of time and space, foregrounding a plant consciousness and sentience: "Human-time is linear, a neat continuum from a past that is supposed to be over and done with to a future deemed to be untouched, untarnished . . . The human species' appetite for novelty is insatiable" (Shafak, 2021, p. 47). Human time is linear but plants' time is cyclical, which does not move in a straightforward way. Through the tree's approach, Shafak destabilizes traditional notions of linear time and narrative structure, moving beyond human linearity and narrative closure. The novel significantly highlights that plants are not passive backdrops; rather, they are active agents with their own emotions, perceptions, and reactions, seeking to establish interconnections between humans and the natural world. Based on this, the study problematizes the idea that plants are passive beings by taking the Fig Tree's agency into consideration.

The Fig Tree narrates the story of its migration to London from Cyprus, and the story of two teenagers. Kostas, being Christian, and Defne, being Muslim, suffer in their attempt to share love in a painfully divided postcolonial Cyprus. In 1974, Cyprus, Kostas and Defne; Greek Christian and a Turkish Muslim respectively, meet secretly and share their love. Their relationship is a taboo amidst the tension between Greeks and Turks in Cyprus. They meet in a local tavern called The Happy Fig, run by a secretly gay couple, Yiorgos and a Turkish man named Yusuf. They once suffered a pipe bomb attack on the tavern; they hid for safety in the tavern, spending the night together, and making love for the first time. However, with

continuous tension, they are compelled to separate, and Kostas is sent to London by his mother to live with her brother. Defne is pregnant, but she cannot contact Kostas. It is witnessed by the Fig Tree.

The Fig tree, characterized as a subject with distinct traits, desires, and agencies, functions as a character disclosing history and memory rather than serving as a background for human stories. This challenges humans' perception of trees, which exists for utilitarian relationships. This triggers a vision of environmental ethics grounded in recognition of plant sentience and agency. This mode of human-plant relationships based on reciprocity rather than domination opens a new avenue for plant turn where plants use mycorrhizal networks of communication. By acknowledging the plant subjectivities and their communicative potentiality, this research opens new avenues for the botanical world.

The Fig Tree's experiences of time/space offer a contrasting view to humans' limited temporal perspectives, thereby suggesting a cyclical time framework that shows interconnection among plants, humans, and inter-generational memories. This paper reflects or represents botanical ways of moving beyond the anthropocentric perception of time and space. This study significantly expands ecocritical methodologies through a plant-centered approach that enhances how literature depicts nonhuman experiences, especially that of plants. The novel is also structured in six parts like a tree: burying the fig tree, roots, trunk, branches, ecosystem and unburying the fig tree resembling a human form.

Literature Review

Shafak's novel, though a newly published book, has got critical remarks continuously. This story delineates love between humans – a Greek Christian Cypriot, Kostas Kazantzakis, who is an ecologist and botanist, and a Turkish Muslim Cypriot, Defne, who is an anthropologist. It also discusses human love for trees and vice versa. The novel has received a good critical remark after its publication.

Raval (2024) discusses the trauma that the human world and plant world, including the Fig tree bears due to war: "The destruction of the arboreal ecosystem, insurmountable suffering, and the transgenerational trauma of the fig trees (Ficus carica) due to the civil war in Cyprus are depicted accurately by Shafak" (p.166). For Raval, the theme of Transgenerational trauma is pervasive in the novel. Ada Kazantzakis, the daughter of Kostas Defne suffers trauma in England as a migrant child. Her aunt Meryem and her history teacher want her to read/study her past/history, which her father denies, and does not allow her to read history. She becomes a traumatic character as she learns from her aunt about the history of Cyprus, and her parents' secret meeting in the tavern due to their forbidden love. Along

with the Ada, Raval also discusses the trauma of fig tree: “Like Ada’s trauma, Shafak also delineates the transgenerational trauma of the fig trees” (p. 169). The fig tree growing in a Tavern is affected/wounded due to bombing. Raval mentions, “The cracks in trunks, unhealed splits, and the autumn-colored leaves suggest the signs of traumas experienced by the trees” (p. 171). Kostas, after returning to Cyprus from London, takes a cutting of a fig tree and plant in his garden in London. This fig tree serves as a metaphor for memory, history, and trauma.

O’Neill (2023) also explores the significance of the tree in the novel: “The tree is central to the novel’s exploration of the past’s uncanny incursion into the present in three interlinked ways” (O’Neill, 2023, p. 798). Ada’s parents’ past is rediscovered through the narrative of the tree, which unfolds the complex relationship of the couple before they are married. The tree serves more than a narrator: “Third, the tree is a more-than-human medium or an imaginative leap into arboreal life that enacts an interspecies communion with nature, which is accorded a subject status at the level of narrative and story” (p. 798). The first two points significant to trees, as suggested by O’Neill, are; fig tree as a witness to history and the tree as memory. Thirdly, the concept of tree is a leap to arboreal life, foregrounding interspecies communication. O’Niell further states the arboreal memory: “Kostas’ tree is a similar site of memory, reconstructing Cyprus as homeland in London, and remembering Defne too” (p. 802). Here, for Kostas, the tree is a memory of Cyprus as hometown and Defne as beloved. Tree further experiences non-linear time: “The tree’s experience of time is non-linear. Telling its story, the tree tells arboreal time, opening up a more-than-human time space” (p. 810). When a tree tells the story, it tells in arboreal narration and is temporally different from clock time. O’Neill (2023) also acknowledges that “Trees are radiant forms of life that we humans encounter in our environment, language, and culture. Science offers deep insights into trees as intelligent life forms” (p. 798). Trees are like humans in terms of intelligence and sentience.

The temporal spatial setting revolves around Cyprus and London, taking readers from war-torn Cyprus of the 1970’s to London of the late 2010s: “*The Island of Missing Trees* by Elif Shafak is a beautiful and captivating novel about love and loss, identity and displacement, devastation and renewal. At once heartbreaking and hopeful, the story spans several points in time across almost half a century, taking us from war-torn Cyprus of the 1970’s to London of the late 2010s” (The Resting Willow, n.d.). Similarly, Poja Goel talks about postmodern features of the novel: “One of the most powerful elements of the book is how it handles memory – not as a clear, chronological account, but as a fragmented emotional experience” (Goel, 2025, para 1).

These critical commentaries, Raval's discussion on the destruction of the arboreal ecosystem, insurmountable suffering, and the transgenerational trauma, O'Niell's exploration of the arboreal memory, and Goel's fragmented features of the novel redefine humanity, showing a limited perspective of humanity. However, the substantial study of plant consciousness and sentience in the novel is underexplored. This gap is addressed to explore plant sentience and agency.

Methodology and Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for the research stems from phytocriticism, which is a branch of ecocriticism. Thus, the methodology revolves around a phytocritical exploration of the primary text under study. This is based on a qualitative research approach employing textual analysis as a research method. Phytocriticism is a branch of ecocriticism that expands ecocritical scope, bringing plant consciousness and sentience to the fore, and blurs the hierarchical notion of human as subject and plant as object. The literary scholars contributing to the literary scholarship of the plant world are Michael Marder, Matthew Hall, Peter Wohlleben, Richard Powers, and a few others.

Powers (2018) in *The Overstory* asserts that "All her (nature) twig creatures can talk, though most, like Patty, have no words" (p.141). Powers means to say that trees have their own methods to share their ideas. He further adds that "trees are social creatures" (p. 153). For humans, it is a lack of wisdom not to see the potential of trees to communicate. The trees are "learning to make whatever can be made. And most of what they make we haven't even identified" (p. 565). What Powers discloses is the fact that trees are sentient creatures and have a capacity to share their perspective, though they cannot talk like humans using words.

The fact that plants are different from humans is the root cause of limiting them to the three categories: "Food, medicine, and wood" (Jahren, 2016, p. 360). It is humanity's blind spot not to recognize them as key creatures in maintaining ecological harmony. After long research carried out to understand plants, Jahren agrees that the trees are "beings that we can never truly understand" (p. 360). Their uniqueness is, in fact, humanity's unfamiliarity with the trees.

Trees' mycorrhizal network is discussed in phytocritical criticism. Wohlleben (2016), in a similar manner, justifies that trees make sense of the world they inhabit. Bringing the reference of Wohlleben, O'Neill (2023) shares how plants support each other and communicate in their own way: "Trees support each other through a network of roots and fungi below ground. This mycorrhizal network, the so-called 'wood-wide web' of fungi and

roots, brings us into the understory of arboreal matter" (p. 796). They function through a network of roots and fungi, known as the mycorrhizal network or wood-wide web.

Angela Kallhoff, Di Paola and Schörgenhumer (2018) argue that plants "tell stories about people, times and places" (p. 2). They agree on the narrative potentiality of trees. Their focus on plant consciousness extends the bio-centric notion of environmental ethics to a value-in-nature approach which "emphasizes neither our reasons to value plants, nor our relation to them, but rather the values of plants" (p. 3). The value-in-nature approach seeks values in plants in relation to plants themselves, irrespective of humans' perception and consciousness. In this context, Gianfranco Pellegrino asserts that plants "have values independently of valuers" (p. 13). In this case, valuers are not the source of values to make judgments on plants, but the plants are the values themselves. Pellegrino mentions, "Plants can have values even in a world without humans" (p. 14). These values, consciousness, and awareness of existence subvert the conventional notion of plants as 'relational to humans', thereby enriching the narrative capabilities of plants.

Plants have sentience, rationality, emotions, and agency. They have intrinsic values, and they can share sentience, or autonomy, or agency" (Pellegrino, 2018, p. 15). Pellegrino shares that plants have volitions, sentience, feelings of agency, and they can comment/observe on human activities/stories. Trewavas (2005) provides supporting details to claim plant sentience and intelligence, focusing on the plant's adaptive behaviors, decision-making capabilities, and narrative potentiality. Wohlleben's study of how plants, connected by both root networks/process and airborne chemical signals, form communities. His focus on 'plant talk' and 'plant turn' along with mycorrhizal networks of trees establishes a ground for plants' ethical and moral significance.

Plant Sentience in *The Island of Missing Trees*

This analytical part of the paper seeks to explore how the novel foregrounds the sentience of plants, using a phytocritical lens, especially focusing on what the fig tree shares. The Fig Tree stands as witness and participant, carries memory, grief, and continuity, connecting human stories across generations and geographies. The narration moves forward with Fig Tree's account of personal reflection: "I am a *Ficus carica*, known as the edible common fig, though I can assure you there is nothing common about me" (Shafak, 2021, p. 23). The narrator, the Fig Tree, then talks about humanity and their perception of trees, ranging from utilitarian purpose to acknowledging their intrinsic worth. The narrative ability

of the tree is supported by the ideas of Matthew Hall, Michael Marder, and Peter Wholemben.

Hall's (2011) acknowledgement of the plant as a person offers a ground for narrative space that the tree seeks. In his book *Plants as Persons: A Philosophical Botany* (2011), Matthew Hall argues that "From a basis that all beings are related, . . . plants as beings that possess awareness, intelligence, volition, and communication" (p.10). Just like humans, they have the capacity to flourish and be harmed, hinting at the narrative possibility of sharing sad feelings and joyous moments. As seen in the novel under discussion, the Fig Tree, a narrator, observes Kostas Kazantzakis's activities, and goes on telling how he buried the narrator in the garden in London: "Kostas Kazantzakis buried me in the garden" (Shafak, 2021, p. 20). The tree wants to share the story associated with it: "I wished I could have shared my worries with him" (Shafak, 2021, p. 20). The tree understands that the language the trees use is "words before words" (Powers, 2018, p. 4). It means trees have been speaking even before humans invented words. The Fig Tree understands that its language is incomprehensible to humans: "But even before I could have spoken, he was too distracted to hear me, absorbed in his own thoughts as he kept digging without so much as a glance in my direction" (Shafak, 2021, p. 20). The narrative trends of humans as subject/agent and trees as object get disrupted as the tree understands what the human is thinking, thereby empowering the narrative possibility of trees with an innovative narrative technique where a tree stands at central focalization.

Similarly, Marder (2013) establishes philosophical foundations for acknowledging plant intelligence, capacity and emotional outlet without attributing with human qualities: "Like plants, animals and humans too are "growing things," even if in addition to the growth of hair, nails, claws, fur, or feathers, they exhibit other kinds of growth that are experiential, intellectual, and so on" (p. 57). The plants grow and become mature just like humans. A closer examination of the representations of plants in Shafak's *The Island Missing Trees*, through a literary plant studies, inclines towards her engagement with botanical life beyond traditional symbolic or metaphorical approaches, where the connection of trees, especially through roots, is pervasive. Thus, the Fig Tree shares, "For us, everything is interconnected" (Shafak, 2021, p. 30). Tree's happiness comes when Kostass addresses it: "You will be fine. Trust me, darling Fiscus" (Shafak, 2021, p. 36). These kind words make the tree reflect its love to him: "The gentleness in his tone enfolded me and held me tight in place; even a single word of endearment from him had a gravity of its own that drew me back to him" (Shafak, 2021, p. 36). This is how trees can respond and react to the kind nature of human and it makes them emotionally strong.

The story unfolds first in 1974 Cyprus, then revolves around in the early 2000s Cyprus, and in the late 2010s in London. The stories alternate between timelines narrated in the third person, and also through the perspective of the fig tree that also offers different pieces of the story. The fig tree exposes limitation of humanity embedded in their selfish ground, “they really don’t want to know more about plants” (Shafak, 2021, p. 44), mentioning how “they even compose romantic poems about us, calling us the link between earth and sky, and yet they still do not see us” (p. 46). The novel itself integrates arboreal and plant eyes and vision. In this regard, Stefano Mancuso and Alexandra Viola characterize plants’ millions of root tips as “data processing centers,” a network possibly communicating through underground chemical signals. Roots seek nutrients, even traces, by growing toward wherever these occur. Their tips touch, record, and adjust direction. The roots occupy as much space as possible, unless they recognize genetically close kin; then they share. They engage in energy exchanges with fungi and can tell friends from foes. Similar exchanges occur with nitrogen-fixing bacteria. Plants “perceive visual stimuli”; they can intercept and use light, and measure its quality and quantity. Odors are plants’ “words” – chemical warnings, invitations, and repulsions.

The story of Fig Tree is connected to the painful story of Kostas and Defne. After the separation, as Kostas goes to London, Defne learns she is pregnant. She has no one to share this happy but painful news except the fig tree. With a faint hope, despite a doctor’s suggestion for an abortion, she plans to give birth. Due to war, the fig tree is also sick and fragile: “Even strong trees get sick a lot over the course of their lives. When this happens, they depend on their weaker neighbors for support" (Wohlleben, 2016, p. 22). This trait resembles humans and other social creatures, “Trees are social creatures” (Powers, p. 42). They jointly make forests, and their active role alters the climate: “Forests modify the climate in which they are situated” (Attfield, 2018, p. 123). Thus, a tree constantly functions as an active sentient agent. By giving a voice to the fig tree, Shafak reconsiders and reevaluates the boundaries between human and non-human tree, thereby recognizing the agency and sentience located in the vegetal realm.

Defne plans to deliver and raise the child. Kostas is now a botanist who learns that Defne was pregnant and returns to Cyprus to reconnect with Defne, who is now an archaeologist. Defne tells the truth, and Kostas apologizes for it. Kostas proposes to marry and move to England, she accepts. They take a branch of Fig Tree who is not only the reminiscent of their love and loss but also remembers how Cyprus is war-torn region: "Every tree has to stay where it put down roots as a seedling. However, it can reproduce, and in that

brief moment when tree embryos are still packed into seeds, they are free. The moment they fall from the tree, the journey can begin" (Wohlleben, 2016, p.226).

So, before they leave for London, Kostas and Defne meet the dilapidated remains of The Happy Fig, which was partially damaged in the pipe bomb attack. They discover that the fig tree is severely diseased, and Kostas treats it. The narrator critiques anthropocentrism: "Most arboreal suffering is caused by humankind" (Shafak, 2021, p. 45). The suffering of trees undermines the ecological web. The tree keeps records of the warning signs explicating that "a tree's rings do not only reveal its age, but also the traumas it has endured, including wildfires, and thus, carved deep in each circle, is a near-death experience, an unhealed scar" (Shafak, 2021, p.45). The tree's trauma remains implicit in the unhealed bark.

The fig tree represents memory, growth, and continuity. The fig tree continues to grow, symbolizing resilience and the enduring power of love and nature. After a faint recovery of the fig trees, he takes a cutting from the branch to carry it back to London as a reminder of their love and harmony: "Trees might not have eyes, but we have vision. I respond to light. I detect ultraviolet and infrared and electromagnetic waves" (Shafak, 2021, p. 46). Similar to this, Kostas's love to the fig tree is his concern for Defne, Cyprus. Thus, he buries the fig tree to make it survive the harsh winter to unbury in spring. As such, Kostas' observation to his daughter—"We're only just beginning to discover the language of trees" (Shafak, 2021, p. 41). The roots of the trees show interconnectedness of trees to a series of forms of life in earth: "A tree always knows that it is linked to endless life forms – from honey fungus, the largest living thing, down to the smallest bacteria and archaea – and that its existence is not an isolated happenstance but intrinsic to a wider community. Even trees of different species show solidarity with one another regardless of their difference, which is more than you can say for so many humans" (Shafak, 2021, p. 100). A tree knows that it is connected to various life forms, from the honey fungus, the largest living thing. Thus, Kostas in London replants the fig tree in their home yard. The news of Defne's pregnancy makes them happy, and a daughter, Ada, is born. Defne, as a part of her job, starts interviewing Greek and Turkish Cypriot migrant families in London. This reminds her of sad histories and past stories, and she goes on drinking heavily. She wants Kostas not to tell their daughter about their pasts. Later, she dies, leaving Kostas and Ada alone.

Ada has a traumatic event in school when her teacher asks her to talk about her past life, her parents' love, which she has no idea about at all. Gradually, Kostas and Ada drift apart after they lose Defne. During holidays, her aunt Meryam (Defne's sister) comes to visit the family. Though Ada is initially furious with her due to her absence during a difficult time,

and a funeral, Ada asks questions to Meryam and learns more about her parents' loves, history, and their life, along with the history of Cyprus. Ada and Meryam have grown close, and Ada also tries her best to talk with her father, Kostas. Kostas, Defne, and Ada are reconnected by the Fig Tree, which was there in the Tavern as a witness to the love and loss of Kostas and Defne in Cyprus, and also to the trauma and frustration of these characters, along with Ada in London. In this regard, Tatjana Visak (2018) argues, "Plants can communicate with each other and do so in an interesting way: they release and receive chemicals via the air and their roots" (p. 31).

Tree's agency for Visak is an intentional one: "Intentional, therefore purposive, conscious, and subjectively meaningful" (p. 32). This is reflected towards the ending of the book where Defne's spirit seems taking shape along with the fig tree as a means to remain close to Kostas and Ada, she is supposed to be transformed into the tree, and it is her approach through which the tree speaks: "A tree is a memory keeper. Tangled beneath our roots, hidden inside our trunks, are the sinews of history, the ruins of wars nobody came to win, the bones of the missing" (p. 212). The fig tree, as a character with conscience, sentience, and intelligence, offers insights into characters' memories, life stories, the history of Cyprus, and information about trees, insects, varieties of birds, and creatures that constitute the ecosystem: "Under and above ground, we trees communicate all the time. We share not only water and nutrients, but also essential information. Although we sometimes have to compete for resources, we are effective at protecting and supporting one another. The life of a tree, no matter how peaceful it may seem on the outside, is full of danger" (Shafak, 2021, p. 99). The tree suffers, survives and shares memories. In this regard, Matthew Hall acknowledges p*lants as persons.* Hall's examination of "plant personhood" entails "many capacities and capabilities" (Shafak, p. 155). According to Hall, plants are other-than-human persons. These capacities establish a ground to re-conceptualize the plant-human nexus beyond instrumental frameworks.

Conclusion

The exploration of plant sentience and consciousness suggests that trees grow for themselves, and they cover a large part of the world. The novel under scrutiny suggests that they teach humans about new forms of connection. Plants can communicate, recognize, perceive, and measure like human characters. Hall's take on reconceptualization of plants as subjects rather than objects theorizes plant personhood based on their intrinsic worth, agency, and teleological organization. Kostas's affection for fig trees, despite his inaccessibility to plants' language, extends his ethical relationships with plants beyond instrumentalist

approaches. Marder examines how a tree challenges normative conceptions of agency, sentience, and consciousness by cultivating a botanical sensibility of the plant life. Kostas and Defne's representation of plants as conscious vegetal life shows how Shafak's novel represents botanical sensibility through narrative techniques and character development.

This paper concludes that Fig Tree, standing as a person, comes to present itself as an active, sentient being representing a botanical world in Elif Shafak's novel. Kostas and Defne befriend the tree, the one growing at a Tavern as a character, seen in a cavity of the roof, which witnesses the human story of love, war, and trauma. It further goes on sharing its own story with human characters. In the garden of Kostas in London, a branch of the same Fig Tree (*Ficus Carica*) is planted (buried), serving as a younger generation of Fig Tree similar to Ada Kazantzakis, daughter of Kostas and Defne. This reconnects to their ancestral belonging. Thus, the plant's representation as an active sentient being is grounded in the disruption of traditional narrative structure, where the tree is not merely a setting but a character possessing the history of the plant and human world. Recognizing plants' agency and sentience is a part of phytocritical exploration.

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