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THE OTHERNESS OF TREES: FACTNESS AND FICTION IN RECENT NARRATIVES OF ARBOREAL SURVIVAL

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The primary intention of this article is to explore some of the ways in which present-day readers, living in an age of increasing awareness of ecological change, interact with the concept of the “tree” as it appears in a variety of discourses: children’s fiction, TV documentary, scholarly writing, popularising ecological discourse, and recent mainstream Anglophone fiction, most notably that of the Turkish-British novelist Elif Shafak, whose *The Island of Missing Trees* (2021) features a sentient tree as a prominent narrator. The primary concern of this article is then to discuss some of the ways in which fictional texts have been augmented by popularising, fact-based discourses, most notably by the use of anthropomorphism, which supposedly permits the reader to “imagine” the existence of the arboreal Other. Inevitably, given the range of discursive sources, the findings are in part conflictual, although all can be seen to contribute in different ways to the current human-centred re-imagining of the perceived fraught relationship that exists between the natural world and the human being.

Keywords: *Arboreal, human, tree, sentient, Silverstein, Holocaust, forest, Wohlleben, Shafak, Cypriot conflict, narrative voice, anthropomorphism, magic realism.*

Introduction

My original intention in this brief study was to describe and define the extent to which Elif Shafak’s most recent novel, *The Island of Missing Trees* (2021), manages to create an adequately decentred “post-human” narrative solution to the decidedly common “human” dilemma of thwarted care and love on an intercommunal no less than a personal level. I hoped to articulate my perception – and that of many of the novel’s other readers – that Shafak’s narrative stratagem provides a challenging alternative to the usual novelist’s

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problem of engaging and sustaining the reader's attention. However, as will become apparent in the following sections, my eclectic critical approach, based largely on secondary texts focusing on trees, rather than relying on certifiably "scholarly" literary theorisation and analysis, has meant that my range of reference has taken a number of unexpected turns. In essence, this concern with the "factness" of trees – their identity as entities that can be described and admired, but also used and abused, and ultimately destroyed – has resulted in an array of narratives, both factual and fictive, that deserves closer attention to its overlapping and divergent characteristics.

My eventual argument will then consist of the perception that in approaching an imaginative narrative such as Shafak's, our reading will inevitably be informed by an array of sometimes conflicting knowledge concerning as familiar a concept as the tree.

Talking (about) trees

The following four sections present concise descriptions of a few of the ways in which different types of discourse have presented the tree as central to their essence as narratives. The selection is clearly by no means exhaustive, but it will hopefully illustrate not only their diversity but also some of the ways in which they coincide. This discussion will then be succeeded in the subsequent main section by consideration of a key aspect of Shafak's current fiction: an anthropomorphised fig tree.

Shel Silverstein, *The Giving Tree* (1964)

The Giving Tree, written and also illustrated with line drawings by its American author Shel Silverstein (1930-1999), was created for children, and to the present remains a controversial and even "divisive" text. The narrative presents the relationship between a tree and a boy. Neither is named: the boy remains "the boy" throughout his life, while the tree remains "the tree", evidently an apple tree, although the balance of the relationship is increasingly diminished as the boy repeatedly uses the tree to support various crucial stages of his life, moving on from the playfulness of childhood, when "the boy loved the tree very much", and on to the boy's adolescence and young maturity, when the tree willingly provides him with the wealth supplied by the sale of its apples and with the strength of its branches to provide him with a home. The arboreal and human relationship starts to sour, however, when the boy removes all of the

tree's branches to build a boat "that will take me far away from here". "The tree was happy", the reader is told, "... but [unsurprisingly, at this late stage] not really." Reduced to a mere stump, the tree endures until the final return of the "boy" in his extreme old age, seeking the stump of the tree to sit on and rest, and the story closes with the no doubt intentionally perplexing narrative comment: "And the tree was happy".

The thoroughly-documented Wikipedia article devoted to *The Giving Tree* (n.d.) is comprehensive in its summary of the "divisive" controversy raised by the book's publication, citing even the numerous references by commentators to the back-cover photograph of the author, which has struck many as "menacing," "evil," and even "Satanist" in its visual impact, especially its impact on child readers. Inevitably, the extent to which critics have interpreted the magic realism of the story itself, represented through the anthropomorphic relationship between the boy and the tree, in terms of an ideologized vision of the world has varied considerably, and my only contribution to the debate is to indicate that the relationship between the boy and the tree is constructed in terms of gender – the boy is clearly a boy, while the tree is clearly and repeatedly referred to as "she". Gender, it would seem, in Silverstein's creation of his story, is key.

Surviving the Holocaust: Uncovering Secret Hideouts (DW TV, 2022)

In early 2022 the DW television channel, which is broadcast in English throughout Europe, featured a documentary programme compiled and presented by the Polish researcher Natalia Romik. Romik's focus in the programme is on some of the hiding-places used by persecuted Jewish individuals in the course of the Second World War: in the concealed basements of private homes, in the sewers of Kyiv, inside tombs located in the Jewish cemetery in Warsaw. Strikingly, in the programme Romik also visits a renowned and ancient oak tree nicknamed "Józef", growing in the grounds of a palace in the southeast Polish region of Wiśniowa. The tree, some 650 years old and now 30 metres in height, was used for an extended period by two Polish Jewish brothers to evade capture, the filming revealing the continuing existence of five shelves built into the hollow tree-trunk that permitted the two young men to keep watch and survive. As Romik comments in the programme, "The tree is living and constantly changing. [...] Living inside a tree was a desperate measure necessitated by a desperate situation". Clearly, as Romik concludes,

“the psychology of *living inside a tree is outside our imagination*” (my emphasis). (See also “Pedunculate Oak”, n.d.)

Tuulikki Halla, Reetta Karhunkorva, Jaana Laine, and Leena Paaskoski,
Human - Forest Relationship in Finland (2018/2021)

As an example of scholarly discourse, “Human - Forest Relationship in Finland” may be considered significant for its emphasis on the ongoing shift in people’s attitudes to forest. For the majority of Finns, inhabiting a country that as part of the managed “boreal” (i.e., northern) forest belt remains massively forested, forests “are still important [...] but mainly as spaces for recreational rather than traditional economic spaces. [...] Citizens gain health benefits from forests, including stress relief. In addition, spirituality and the desire to protect nature are important to Finns. [...] The] Every Man’s Right tradition acknowledges that the forest benefits all society and the Finns are entitled to enter and use forested areas even though most forests are privately owned” (pp. 169-70).

An interesting crossover, mentioned later in the article, between ownership and the “right to roam” or “everyman’s right of access” is reflected, for example, in the common citizen’s pastime of (non-commercial) berry- and mushroom-picking (which, of course, also occurs on a commercial level and is tax-free), and in the regulated “sport” hunting of animals such as moose, deer, and bears (p. 176). Further evidence of a shift in the significance of forests is attested, in part, by the emergence of a form of “selfie” photography sometimes referred to as “Woodsies” (p. 172) and also by the increase in media programmes and publications “where nature and trees are represented as communicative and even emotional creatures” (p. 170).

In sum, the Human-Forest Relationship (HFR) within Finland (and no doubt elsewhere) is in flux, “and this relationship is based on commonly shared values and experiences as well as ecological, cultural, social and economic aspects of our societies” (p. 172). The remainder of this particular article by Halla et al. (2021) centres on the broadly social implications of the human response to forests rather than to “trees” per se – the passing use of the word “trees” on page 170 of the article is its only occurrence in thirteen pages, including no reference at all to the most common tree species in the Finnish forests, despite their evident significance. The relatively limited scope of the article is perhaps also reflected in its unspoken assumption that the dominant element in the human - forest relationship is the human rather than the arboreal,

and there is no further development in the article of the innovatory notion that trees may be “communicative and even emotional creatures” (p. 170).

Peter Wohlleben, *The Hidden Life of Trees* (2015, 2016)

The rise in popular eco-politics has also given rise to a related popular literature that focuses on the familiar natural world of Europe and North America. Thus, when Peter Wohlleben’s *Das geheime Leben der Bäume* (2015) was translated into English in 2016, the German “geheim” in its title had to be rendered as “hidden” rather than “secret”, since an earlier work, *The Secret Life of Trees*, by Colin Tudge, had already appeared in 2005, when eco-catastrophe had not yet appeared to be quite as imminent as it does now. In review (as in a contemporaneous *Guardian* review by Adam Thorpe (2005), Tudge’s study appears to be fact-based, relatively balanced, and globally wide-ranging, whilst simultaneously campaigning passionately for a new awareness of the need for a fundamental change in attitudes and action.

In turn, Wohlleben’s study would seem to appeal to a similar popular readership, but with respect to its publication and publicity it has achieved a far greater impact internationally, selling more than a million copies in German and well over 3 million in English translation and in other languages (Wikipedia), with a popular documentary film adaptation appearing as recently as a year ago, in 2021 (Internet).

Despite the widespread commercial success of Wohlleben’s book, also apparent is the extent to which informed reviewers have expressed their dismay at his stylistic strategy, which depends to a major extent on anthropomorphism. A mere glance at the Table of Contents (v-vi) reveals the flavour of this in these randomly selected chapter headings: “Friendships”, “Social Security”, “Love”, “Forest Etiquette”, “Slowly Does It”, “United We Stand, Divided We Fall”, “Mother Ships of Biodiversity”, “A Question of Character”, “Street Kids”, “Burnout”, “Tough Customers”, “Immigrants” – all, as the narrative reveals, explicitly in reference to trees. Such chapter titles do not belie the style of their narratives; to cite a few at random:

Thirst is harder for trees to endure than hunger, because they can satisfy their hunger whenever they want. Like a baker who always has enough bread, a tree can satisfy a rumbling stomach right away using photosynthesis. But even the best baker cannot bake without water, and the same goes for a tree: without water, food production stops. (Ch. 8, “Tree School”, p. 43)

When I walk through the forest I manage, I often see oaks in distress. And sometimes they are very distressed indeed. Anxious suckers sprouting at the base of the trunk are a dead giveaway. [...] They indicate that the tree is engaged in an extended fight to the death, and it is panicking. (Ch. 12, “Mighty Oak or Mighty Wimp?”, p. 68)

In the forest, there are unwritten guidelines for tree etiquette. These guidelines lay down the proper appearance for upright members of ancient forests and acceptable forms of behaviour. This is what a mature, well-behaved deciduous tree looks like. It has a ramrod straight trunk with a regular, orderly arrangement of wood fibers. [...]. (Chapter 7, “Forest Etiquette”, p. 37)

In the last of these, the analogy with the conservative social order of an established human family of distinction is perceptible. The narrative stratagem of such anthropomorphism is present through the text, and has evidently appealed immensely to Wohlleben’s popular readership. As Tim Lusher (2016) notes in an early *Guardian* review of the English translation, “A book called *The Hidden Life of Trees* is not an obvious bestseller but it’s easy to see the popular appeal of German forester Peter Wohlleben’s claims – they are so anthropomorphic”. Lusher goes on to cite, for example, Wohlleben’s coining of the term “wood wide web” to convey the way in which he wishes his popular readership to understand how “trees message their distress in electrical signals via their roots and across fungi networks (*‘like our nerve system’*)” (my emphasis).

Writing some five years later, in 2021, Michael Bell is also prepared to suggest that Wohleben [*sic*], while also challenging conventional understanding of trees, offers firmly scientific justification. The initially outrageous claims that the tree feels pain, has lungs, or goes to sleep, are all given a scientific explanation. So, for example, the underground network of funghi [*sic*] by which trees are now known to “communicate” with each other is revealed by botanical enquiry not by poetic intuition. No doubt the expression of these claims *remains in some sense metaphorical* but it is with the Nietzschean proviso that all language is ultimately metaphorical. In short, *Wohleben’s book is a soberly scientific exposition of information, observation and experience* leading the reader to enter a new relation with the tree (Bell, 2021; my emphases).

In contradiction to the evident popularity of Wohlleben's combination of scientific data with an anthropomorphic narrative, the German Wikipedia entry refers to a critical study of Wohlleben's writing, *Das wahre Leben der Bäume* (The True Life of Trees), by the German biologist Torben Halbe, in which Halbe condemns Wohlleben's popularisation as detrimental to the environment, since Wohlleben appears to demand a reduction in scientific forestry, going so far as to manipulate his readers:

Wesentliche Thesen und Argumente Wohllebens versucht Halbe zu widerlegen. Wohlleben zeichne keinen realen, sondern einen fiktiven, „perfekten“ „Bambi-Wald“, womit er sachliche Diskussionen verhindere. In den Medien würde Wohlleben und seinen Büchern unkritisch viel Platz eingeräumt. Der „Meinungsjournalismus“ verhindere dabei einen wissenschaftlichen Diskurs.

(Halbe tries to refute some of Wohlleben's main theses and arguments. Rather than a real forest, Wohlleben creates a fictional, “perfect” “Bambi forest”, and in the process hinders objective discussion. The media have uncritically devoted excessive space to Wohlleben and his books, and in the process “advocacy journalism” of this kind has prevented the establishment of a scientific discourse. [My translation])

More recently, Halbe has repeated his criticism of Wohlleben's discursive method in an interview with Janne Kieselbach conducted in January 2020 for *Der Spiegel* (Kieselbach, 2020). When asked why Wohlleben appeals to his popular readership in a way that scientists cannot emulate, Halbe replies:

Herr Wohlleben vermittelt kein Wissen, sonder betreibt Unterhaltung. Er sagt den Menschen, dass man sich selbst auf den Wald projizieren kann und ihn dann schon verstanden hat.

(Mr Wohlleben does not convey knowledge but indulges in entertainment. He tells people that they can project themselves onto the forest and that in doing so they've understood it. [My translation])

Halbe's criticisms have been spelt out in greater detail in a variety of reviews of the English version of the book, such as:

Wohlleben's anecdotes are engaging, but sadly his book contains only a few. For the most part, it jumps around a tree's life, *using anthropomorphic language* to explain various aspects. This may help laypeople relate to trees, but when he hints that humans might be able to communicate with plants given that seedlings respond to sound, *we have strayed into oversimplification*. (Ceurstemont, 2016. My emphases.)

Another (anonymous) review entitled "Pitfalls of Anthropomorphism: *The Hidden Life of Trees*", published online in 2019 on The Odd Website, expresses similar reservations at greater length, while in a 2021 review of Wohlleben's most recent writing Robert Moor (2021) suggests that "The purpose of this verbal sleight of hand is to humanize trees and thereby impel the reader to extend greater care to them", going on to illustrate yet another of the numerous moments of narrative anthropomorphism at which (in Moor's opinion) Wohlleben "overreaches". Similarly, for Sharon Kingsland (2018), a scholar working in the Department of the History of Science and Technology at Johns Hopkins University, the fundamental fault in Wohlleben's writing is that, by restricting the scope of his sources and by creating a relentlessly anthropomorphic narrative style, he "obscures and trivializes the amount of effort and the level of long-term support from society that is required to advance scientific fields".

Elif Shafak, *The Island of Missing Trees* (2021)

From this handful of examples, it can be seen just how discursively controversial trees can be. The scientific reading of trees as "forest" in Halla et al. underlines the keen awareness in many societies of the significance of the changing relationship between human beings and their arboreal surroundings, while my brief reference to the documentary programme that bore witness to the profound, but entirely contingent, relationship in Second World War Poland between a tree and those seeking protection from Nazi persecution sheds renewed light on the innovative use that human beings can make of a somewhat exceptional tree to preserve their own lives. As the commentator, Natalia

Romik, suggests, it is an experience that would normally lie “outside our imagination”.

Where the children’s story in *The Giving Tree* (a telling title chosen by Silverstein) coincides with Wohlleben’s extensive presentation of the existence of trees and threats to their ultimate survival is obviously in their narrative dependence on anthropomorphism – which in Wohlleben’s case has proven enormously popular on a readerly level but has received extensive criticism from its readership within the scientific world. Some of his critics even appear to think that, in his attempt to state the trees’ case for proper treatment, by using the narrative strategies that he does he has veered away from scientific presentation and into the realm of fiction.

Shafak, in turn, may be considered an interesting contemporary novelist, and not only for her bilinguality – she produced her earliest fiction in her native Turkish, which was then translated by herself and others into English, while her more recent works have undergone a radical process of writing and rewriting, with English as her starting-point. As a writer, she is also notable for her recent attempts to experiment with radically different forms of narrative voice. For example, in her exploration of the outcomes of the Armenian Genocide in her second novel in English, *The Bastard of Istanbul* (2006), she sifts through the consciousness of a character whose Armenian roots have long been concealed. In contrast, her more recent novel, *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in this Strange World* (2019), contains three parts, the first of which, making up rather more than half of the whole novel, consists of the thoughts and memories of a murdered woman whose corpse has been discarded on an Istanbul garbage dump. The reader is required to assume the scientificity of the notion that, even after death, the mind of the deceased may possibly take some time to cease functioning altogether – hence the notable foregrounding of the 10 minutes and 38 seconds in the novel’s title. While this radical narrative mode cannot be maintained as far as the final resolution of the novel, Shafak’s experiment is strikingly memorable, an experimentation with perspective that has been carried forward into *The Island of Missing Trees*.

Thus, at the centre of this her most recent English-language novel, there lies a conundrum that, as I will argue, cannot be easily solved by simply granting Shafak the right to “poetic licence” or postmodern experimentation with the (innovatory) forms of contemporary prose fiction. The novel consists of a mixing of narrative voices and perspectives that focus on the recent conflictual experience of the community/communities inhabiting the island and

political nation of Cyprus in the latter part of the 20th century and the first two decades of the new millennium (this is not to ignore the smaller “minorities” that have long played a role in the island, such as the British imperial and colonial forces and their families, and others such as the local descendants of the post-1915 Armenian diaspora).

Where Shafak’s somewhat over-familiar deployment of the “traditional”, i.e., intertextual, ingredients of human love and historical and contemporary intercommunal violence diverges from the general run of post-colonial narratives is in her reliance on the anthropomorphic strategy of a sentient fig tree of considerable antiquity (this is not, however, a unique instance – in 2018, for instance, the US author Richard Powers (2018) published a tree-centred novel, *The Overstory*, although with a radically different intention). For the bulk of Shafak’s story, the tree inhabits a space at the heart of the Cypriot conflict, a space occupied by an amalgam of Turkish, Greek and cosmopolitan cultures. It has, however, grown to maturity not in predictable surroundings but enclosed as an integral part of the structure of a Nicosia building, a tavern named The Happy Fig (I have personally seen a similar phenomenon in the environs of Moscow, though the tree was not a *Ficus* and the building was a dacha rather than a tavern). The fig tree barely survives the intercommunal Cypriot conflict of the 1970s but is eventually evacuated to where she can live – and can continue her narration – in a very ordinary post-imperial London garden, in a novel form of arboreal exile.

Notably, while a major portion of the narrative in this novel appears in a fairly standard, “omniscient”, third-person mode, it becomes immediately apparent that this conventional narrative is interspersed with a total of 27 chapters – comprising rather more than a quarter of the complete novel – that are narrated in the first-person voice of the fig tree. The tree initially remains unnamed until its principal human protector, the Greek Cypriot Kostas Kazantzakis addresses her lovingly as “darling *Ficus*” (p. 36), and later, in professionally scientific terms, explains to his daughter Ada that “Our *Ficus carica* is female, and she’s a parthenocarpic variety – that means that she can make fruit on her own, without needing a male tree nearby” (p. 40).

My reading here is restricted primarily to the narrative identity of the fig tree rather than to a general interpretation of the novel as a whole. The 27 chapters given to the tree must obviously be read in terms of the anthropomorphism that Shafak has chosen to attribute to the tree itself. The voice of the tree is cast in an overwhelmingly didactic mode. Not only does she

(the tree) inform us, her readers, about her identity as an individual tree, but she places that identity within history, both genealogically and within a broader, conventional frame. Thus, we are informed:

I am a Ficus carica, known as the edible common fig, though I can assure you that there's nothing common about me. I am a member of the great mulberry family of Moraceae from the kingdom of Plantae. Originating in Asia Minor, I can be found across a vast geography from California to Portugal and Lebanon, from the shores of the Black Sea to the hills of Afghanistan and the valleys of India. (p. 23)

More precisely, she adds later:

I came into this world in 1878, the year that Sultan Abdul Hamid II, sitting on his gilded throne in Istanbul, made a secret agreement with Queen Victoria, sitting on her gilded throne in London. The Ottoman Empire agreed to cede the administration of our island to the British Empire in exchange for protection against Russian aggression. The same year the British Prime Minister, Benjamin Disraeli, called my motherland "the key to Western Asia", and added, "in taking it the move is not Mediterranean, but Indian". (p. 84)

The rest of the same short chapter is devoted to her bringing the reader up to speed with the "decimation" of the Cypriot forests, the "neglect" of each successive administration, and the wars "throughout the centuries" that culminated in intercommunal and anti-colonial conflict after the Second World War (p. 85): "And we trees watched, waited and witnessed" (p. 86).

The tone of this anthropomorphised narration, intended for an informed, adult readership rather than for the youthful readers of stories such as Silverstein's, is in a sense absurd. It is obvious to us that a tree cannot be observant and informed in this manner. But, like children, we can, as readers, be seduced by the tree's narration into the "magic" of her perspective on the world. This is especially so in the story told by the tree of her near-death in the Nicosia tavern, which in 1974 is virtually destroyed by bombing and fire and eventual abandonment when its owners, the Greek Cypriot Yiorgos and the Turkish Cypriot Yusuf, a gay couple, are killed and their bodies, chained together, are thrown into a well. The sickly, dying fig tree is eventually rediscovered and rescued from arboreal death by Kostas, in the meantime

having rather propitiously become a recognised professional tree botanist, who returns in the early 2000s from exile in London to the location where more than a quarter-century earlier his first – highly dangerous – wooing of a Turkish Cypriot girl, Defne, has been witnessed in remarkable detail by the tree. He saves the tree by smuggling a healthy branch cut from its dying trunk back to London, and while doing so rescues his teenage love for Defne by taking her back to the heart of empire, where their child, conceived in Cyprus, is born and named Ada, the Turkish for “island”.

In London Defne dies early, when Ada is only 16 years of age, and this rather mawkish and conventional love-story takes an even more curious turn. To quote from the tree’s narration:

*This year [in the “late 2010s”, the present time of the narrative], love, not unlike the unusual winter, has crept up on me, so gradual and subtle in its intensity that by the time I realized what was happening it was already too late to guard myself. I was stupidly, pointlessly besotted with a man [Kostas] who would never think of me in an intimate way. It embarrassed me, this sudden neediness that had come over me, this deep yearning for what I could not have. [...] I know what you are thinking. How could I, an ordinary *Ficus carica*, possibly be in love with a *Homo sapiens*? (p. 30)*

Despite her elaborate and exotic genealogy, as detailed above, “none of that makes me entitled to love a human being and hope to be loved back” (p.32).

Shafak, of course, is fully aware of the narrative strategy that she has chosen to use. After all, three-quarters of the novel is a somewhat conventional, if gripping, tale of romantic love in a society riven by an ethnic and religious conflict that many of its adult readers will still remember. The story details the high and low points in the lives of its characters: some, like Yiorgos and Yusuf, come to make decisions that eventually result in their violent deaths, while others, like Defne and Kostas, do finally find personal fulfilment, although it has to be in exile from their familiar home context. And some, like the *Ficus carica*, are obliged to suffer near-death and an unpredicted and precarious rebirth. These all, I would suggest, comprise what I have termed “seductive” life-stories of a kind that may well appeal to the reader, so much so that the “childish” anthropomorphic narrative mode of the fig tree’s part in the story-telling can be absorbed and, eventually, taken for granted.

As my examples also show, however, Shafak's use of anthropomorphism is a major exaggeration of the kind deployed by Wohlleben in his "factual" study. A tree that has a detailed, rational awareness of human and botanical history and a desire for the reciprocation of love with a human being is undoubtedly an absurdity! It could also be suggested that, as in the case of her previous novel, *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in this Strange World*, Shafak is again experimenting with the degree to which a fictional narrative can convey a consciousness that (to quote again Natalia Romik's comment on the Polish oak tree) would otherwise be "outside our imagination". The absurdity of such a strategy in *10 Minutes 38 Seconds* also verges on the grotesque: it is gothic fantasy rather than magic realism. The almost-extinguished brain of the dead woman may indeed still be functioning and enabling "her" to recall past episodes in her troubled life but – as in the case of the fig tree transplanted into a London garden – there is no hope or possibility of either of these protagonists ever communicating their thoughts, memories or sentiments to another human being.

In this, I would suggest, they are in a very real sense analogous to the victims of "locked-in syndrome" or *pseudocoma*, their secret internal narratives accessible to others only through a creative act of imagination on the part of the reader (or, in the case of Romik's oak tree, the viewer or listener). This is, of course, the case with all creative narratives: we recreate potentially credible narratives through our readerly interpretation of the complex narrative strategies deployed by the writer. However, Shafak's exploitation of such "locked-in" consciousness, in her re-creation of the final mental processes of the already-dead, and especially in her playful exaggeration of the kind of anthropomorphised arboreal identity developed and marketed earlier by Wohlleben et al., is arguably of another order. In *The Island of Missing Trees* this comes to the fore in the case of Ada, the "island", who, although conceived on Cyprus, has been brought up in London by her Cypriot parents (and latterly by her widowed father) largely in ignorance of her parents' respective languages and past lives. In consequence, as a teenager she has become silent, withdrawn and shy, largely unconnected with the lives of her fellow students. It is then unsurprising that, near the start of the novel, she feels compelled to utter a long and uncontrollable "primal" scream in the course of a school History lesson. She has become "locked in" by her ignorance of her family's Cypriot past, and her release of this uncontrolled scream acts as a form of therapy, an act of freeing that is unavailable to the fig tree or, indeed, the dead

woman of Shafak's previous novel. In this process, the complexities of her parents' island and of her familial past start to become accessible to Ada – and the reader is able to understand this process through drawing analogies with the narration of the anthropomorphised fig tree. Hence, our previous perceptions of the absurdity and grotesquery of this anthropomorphised narrative are allayed by the resolution typified especially by the potentially “locked-in” child who rediscovers the connections between her own voice and the narrative of her personal and political-historical origins in Cyprus.

It is, then, with some degree of astonishment that we may read the final chapter, again narrated by the fig tree, for suddenly the narration reveals the hybrid narrative identity of the anthropomorphised fig tree:

*After I [i.e., Defne] died and emptiness swallowed me whole like a huge yawning mouth, I floated about aimlessly for a while. I saw myself lying on the hospital bed where I had remained in a coma, and I knew it was sad but I could not feel what I knew. [...] I wanted to continue to be anchored in love, the only thing that humans have yet to destroy. But where could I possibly reside now that I was no longer alive and lacked a body, a shell, a form? And then I knew. The old fig tree! Where else to seek refuge but in its arboreal embrace? Following the funeral, [...] I drifted above and danced in circles around our *Ficus carica*. I seeped into her vascular tissues, absorbed water from her leaves and breathed life again through her pores. (pp. 342-343)*

Thus, the inexplicable grotesqueness and absurdity of death, represented by that of the Turkish Cypriot mother Defne, has been transformed by the fig tree's anthropomorphic narrative into something entirely unexpected. It has moved on from the silence of the dead, discarded woman of *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in this Strange World*, whose post-mortem silence is broken only by the memories of her friends. That silence is replaced in *The Island of Missing Trees* by a narrative “voice” that links the arboreal with the human and with their respective histories.

Afterword

As informed readers, we are to a greater or lesser extent aware of the range of threats to the continued existence of trees – and indeed to ourselves – in a world

confronting ecological catastrophe. In addition to their felling to provide land for housing and feeding an expanding population, trees burn in barely containable fires, they die of thirst in newly drought-stricken regions, and they drown in rising waters. In these senses, they are indeed “like us”. In addition, however, the otherness of trees is visible in the way that they are subjected to extensive human narrativisation of all kinds, be it scientific or literary. Thus, *The Island of Missing Trees* can undoubtedly be considered entirely sentimental in its narrativisation of the human dilemmas involved in dealing with the past – indeed, like that of many critics, Olivia Ho’s (2021) assessment (in *The Straits Times*) of the fig tree is that it is “a narrator prone to rambling exposition, gossip and maudlin outbursts. Though it harps on the incompatibility of arboreal time and human time, it is sentimentally anthropomorphic in its outlook”. In apparent contrast, Ron Charles’s (2021) review assessment in *The Washington Post* suggests that “*The Island of Missing Trees* isn’t just a cleverly constructed novel; it’s explicitly about the way stories are constructed, the way meaning is created, and the way devotion persists”. Finally, then, it is perhaps in the latter reading that an insight into the partial decentring of the human perspective in Shafak’s novel can be perceived, although, indirectly, it also suggests that our readings of arboreal narratives of all kinds should feed into each other for a fuller understanding of the dilemma.

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**ԾԱՌԵՐԻ ԱՅԼՈՒԹՅՈՒՆԸ. ՓԱՍՏԱԿԱՆԸ ԵՎ
ԳԵՂԱՐՎԵՍՏԱԿԱՆԸ ԾԱՌԻ ԳՈՅԱՏԵՎՄԱՆ
ՊԱՏՈՒՄՆԵՐՈՒՄ**

Ջոն Մթոթսերի

Սույն հոդվածի հիմնական նպատակն է ուսումնասիրել էկոլոգիական փոփոխությունների մասին իրազեկվածության դարաշրջանում «ծառ» հասկացության հետ ժամանակակից ընթերցողի առնչման որոշ ձևերը տարբեր դիսկուրսներում՝ մանկական գրականություն, հեռուստատեսային վավերագրական ֆիլմեր, գիտական գրականություն, հանրամատչելի էկոլոգիական դիսկուրս և վերջին շրջանի անգլալեզու գեղարվեստական գրականություն, մասնավորապես, ազգությամբ թուրք բրիտանացի գրող Էլիֆ Շաֆաքի «Կորած ծառերի կղզին» (2021) ստեղծագործությունում, որտեղ զգայուն ծառը հանդես է գալիս որպես պատմող: Հոդվածում առաջնային խնդիր է քննարկել գեղարվեստական տեքստերի ընդլայնումը հանրամատչելի և փաստերի վրա հիմնված դիսկուրսների միջոցով, առավելապես մարդակերպության սկզբունքի շրջանակում, որը ենթադրաբար թույլ է տալիս ընթերցողին «պատկերացնել» ծառի գոյության Այլությունը: Ընդգրկված դիսկուրսիվ աղբյուրների շրջանակը փոքր չէ, ու թեև մեր եզրահանգումները մասամբ հակասական են, դրանք բոլորն էլ կարող են նպաստել բնություն – մարդ վտանգված հարաբերությունների ներկայիս մարդակենտրոն վերապատկերացումների տարբեր ձևերի հասկացմանը:

Բանալի բառեր՝ ծառային, մարդ, ծառ, զգայուն, Միլվերսթայն, հոլոքոստ, անտառ, Վոհլերեն, Շաֆակ, կիպրական հակամարտություն, պատմողական ձայն, մարդակերպություն, մոզական ռեալիզմ: