

Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

Print ISSN: 3006-5887

Online ISSN: 3006-5895

<https://llrjournal.com/index.php/11>

The Island of Missing Trees: A Challenge to Anthropocentrism Via Non-Human Narration



Hani Ikram

MS Scholar, International Islamic University Islamabad
Pakistan

Email: Haniikramkashani@gmail.com



Abstract

This paper attempts to examine Elif Shafak's novel *The Island of Missing Trees* with specific reference to challenging traditional forms of narration. I argue that Shafak's novel challenges anthropocentric biases in narration by using a fig tree as the narrator in the story; however, the novel's approach provides a paradigm shift in human-centric narration by acknowledging the interconnectedness and interdependence of human and nonhuman entities. Drawing upon the conceptual horizons of the new materialism, this paper uses material ecocriticism to supplement the argument. Material ecocriticism accounts for the matter being agentic, expressive, and having inherent creativity and innate meaning. This also drew our consciousness to rethink the question of agency, interconnectedness, and narrativity. Using material-discursive practices and intra-action put forward by Karen Barad and semiotic-materiality being co-constituted by Donna Haraway, material ecocriticism affirms that matter is endowed with meaning and bears stories manifested as "storied matter," which is discussed by Serpil Oppermann. This paper discusses how materials convey meanings and how they are the co-participants of humans in the physical world. Shafak, in her novel, provides a paradigm shift by giving voice to a fig tree as the story's co-narrator, suggesting the tree's agentic power and its interconnectedness with humans; however, this novel challenges anthropocentric biases via narration from a non-human entity.

Keywords: The Island Of Missing Trees, Non-Human-Centered Narration, Anthropocentrism, New Materialism, Storied Matter, Karen Barad, and Donna Haraway.

Introduction

Non-human narration comprises different characters where narrators cannot only be humans but non-human entities too, such as animals, stones, birds, trees, etc., that have something in common as narrative devices. The non-human narrators prompt readers to attribute the human experience to non-human entities that are not expected to have a cognitive outlook. In other words, the empathetic identification with the subject matter thus enables the reader to empathize with them. At the same time, such narration defamiliarizes some of the reader's assumptions and challenges the reader's preconception about human life and consciousness, consequently enabling readers to recognize the otherness of non-human narrators.

In the first part of this paper, I aim to expand on a conceptual framework for the study of non-human narration and analyze Shafak's *The Island of Missing Trees* in terms of its innovative narrative form. The novel challenges conventional human-centric narration by employing a fig tree as the co-narrator. Through this paper, I suggest that Shafak's novel represents a paradigm shift in comprehending the relationship between human and non-human entities and acknowledging the vital agencies of non-human entities. Taking insights from the conceptual framework of new materialism, this paper mobilizes material ecocriticism to support its argument. Material ecocriticism recognizes matter's agentic and expressive power and its inherent creativity and meaning. Barad's material-discursive practices highlight that the world is co-constructed through ongoing intra-action between matter and meaning. Haraway's

material-semiotic process sees non-human agents as co-participants of the meaning-making process. Furthermore, Oppermann illustrated “Agency manifests itself in many ways and is distributed across humans and nonhumans that include not only biological organisms, but also non-biological players, such as metals, electricity, and machines (65). In Shafak’s text, the fig tree is projected as an agentic and vital entity manifesting agency. In the analysis part that makes up the second part of the paper, I will first investigate the non-human narrator in *The Island of Missing Trees*, drawing attention to how literature can challenge readers’ familiarity with mental processes, presenting the fig tree as a narrator challenging anthropocentric biases by providing a non-human perspective on events and relationships. Material ecocriticism further supplements this argument by accounting for matter’s agentic and expressive nature. The fig tree in the novel is presented as an agentic co-narrator, highlighting its interconnectedness with humans and challenging anthropocentric biases in narration.

Debates on Narrativity, Matter, and its Agency

Human language is said to have meaning, emotional registers, and a variety of expressions, rich symbolism, and rhetorical possibilities, while nature is often perceived to be mute and lacking in meaning, essence, and expressions. Nature as silent and dependent on human interlocutors is what material ecocriticism contests by giving agency and eloquence to nonhuman entities. However, non-human entities are endowed with meaning and creative expressions, thus they can communicate intelligibly with their surroundings and with other entities as well. All Human and non-human entities have agencies and are filled with narrative potentialities (Oppermann 209). The narrative potentialities here refer to the matter’s storytelling capacity, which is postulated as storied matter by Oppermann.

Oppermann’s idea of storied matter stresses matter’s narrative capability, which resonates with the novel’s central idea. The trees in the novel are the storytellers, depicting history and how it transcends human perceptions by rejecting an anthropocentric worldview. However, “Narrative agency denotes a non-linguistic capacity present in every material structure, encompassing bodies down to their atoms, rendering them inherently expressive or imbued with stories. These narrative agencies constitute the foundational elements of storied matter, forming a tangled network of meanings, properties, and processes that generate undeniable forces of signification” (Iovino and Oppermann, 1-2)

Similarly, the theoretical debate on agency and the meaning of matter sheds light on narrativity and text as well. Matter and non-human entities bear meanings; hence they can tell stories and can be the object of critical analysis and the subject of discursive practices, and they also occupy a place in the choreography of becoming (Iovino 18). The material agency also manifests narratives of sea, river, and stone, projecting themselves as textual forms of matter endowed with consciousness and producing interactive relationships between humans and nonhumans. Similarly, Jeffery Jerome Cohen also mentioned in his book *Stone: An Ecology of the Inhuman*, the narrative power of stone, which does not necessarily need to be overcome but can instead smash cities to the ground, leaving behind the smashed infrastructure of the city that tells its tale. Moreover, Niklas Erlandsson under an effective study examining the non-human phenomenological experience, communication, and sensory perception in Barbara Gowdy’s *The White Bone* Erlandsson argued that the novel provides narrative strategies revolving around non-human entities and their experiences, which

serves as a disorientation by challenging the notion of anthropocentrism (22). The non-human narration disorients readers, defamiliarizes them, and disrupts their thinking patterns. In this way, readers' anthropocentric biases can not only be contested, but this can prompt them to rethink their preconceived perceptions.

In addition to this, Shafak's *The Island of Missing Trees* illustrates meaningful insights for understanding and recognizing human and nature's harmony and coexistence. The characters in the novel are shown in close connection with the natural world; however, impacts of human actions and activities on the environment are also discussed by the writer to raise ecological consciousness among the masses (Ramzan et al, 2023). Leading further, human preferences and activities have a significant impact on the environment. In the context of Cyprus, human preferences have caused environmental exploitation and degradation, depicting a strong pattern of anthropocentrism. Shafak fosters a shift from strong to weak anthropocentrism for creating a respectful connection with nature (Laila 23). Furthermore, *The Island of Missing Trees* provides an imaginative depiction of nature, using personification to generate a narrative of animist ontology. The novel contributes to botanical knowledge, bestowing importance on nature and non-human entities. The novel, focusing on trees, posits a non-human connection with humans in the world shared by both; hence, the novel surpasses the conventional literary arboreal depiction, fostering imaginative and ethical perceptions (O'Neil 55). This paper discusses the novel *The Island of Missing Trees* concerning challenging anthropocentric biases through narration. The fig tree is put in a position to co-narrate the story of the novel, which serves as a paradigm shift, challenging traditional and human-centered narration. However, recognition and acknowledgment of nature being agentic, expressive, and permeable under the conceptual horizon of new materialism and usage of a tree as the narrator opens up new avenues of thought and understanding under the pretext of environmental consciousness and ecological debates. In doing so, this paper contributes to the existing literature by using narration from non-human entities to contest and challenge anthropocentric thought and biases.

The novel is set on the divided island of Cyprus, with two parallel narratives: one in the past and one in the present. In the past, during the 1970s, the story follows the life of a young Turkish Cypriot woman named Ada and her forbidden love affair with a Greek Cypriot man named Yanis. As tensions rise between the two communities, they are forced to flee their homes and are separated. In the present, Ada's granddaughter, a botanist named Nellie, travels to Cyprus to research the island's trees and uncover her family's hidden past. Shafak portrays the lives of the characters and their lost connections. A major portion of the text is narrated by a fig tree, while the other half is the portrayal of the lives of Ada, a sixteen-year-old girl, and her father, Kostas, a Botanist by profession. Defne, Ada's dead mother, falls in love with Kostas despite all odds; however, their clandestine relationship flourishes in a taverna, where a fig tree remains a witness to their secret love affair. Ada, residing in Landon with her father, is fascinated by her familial heritage and the turbulent past of her parents, but her father avoids communication out of grief and pain to keep his daughter far from heart-wrenching truths, marked by migration, exploitation, and suppression by the outbreak of war and the atrocities of colonialism. By giving voice to the fig tree, Shafak provides a re-visitation of human and non-human connection, which serves as a strong challenge for human-centered narration. The fig tree, as the narrator of the story, provides the readers with a new way to view the world through the lens of

nature and makes them reevaluate the boundaries between humans and nature, subverting the idea of human superiority and dominance.

Exploring the Dynamic Interplay of the Social-Material World

The theory of new materialism explores the entanglement between nature and humans, emphasizing the vitality of matter and its active role in the world. Material ecocriticism asks about material agencies that are so astonishingly expressive that the anthropocentric framing of storytelling as a uniquely human enterprise is easily undone when their narratives are discovered. (Opperman 29). Non-human entities communicate and deliver meaningful messages to the rest of the world. Haraway's Semiotic materiality depicts how the material objects are filled with meaning and how the material forms are intertwined in a creative process of meaning-production that shapes the world in dynamic and unpredictable ways. Operating in the realm of onto-epistemological entanglement illustrates that multiple assemblages function as "interchangeable isotopes in a chemical brew" (Barad 6). This entanglement refers to the fact that different elements are constantly interacting and influencing each other. By analyzing this perspective, we come to know that "human knowledge-making practices" are inseparable and entwined within the "social-material" world (26). In this regard, Cohen's notion of lithic agency supplements Barad's idea by suggesting that stones actively collaborate in shaping landscapes and building human connections with the natural world. Similar to stones, trees also carry meanings and absorb human emotions. According to Oppermann;

It seeks to explore the narrative dimension of the material world in terms of the stories embodied in material formations. The phrase "narrative agency" means that we are surrounded by stories, which are not limited to historical narratives, archeological and architectural signs, and cultural and literary texts. There are also geological, biological, and cosmic stories that compel us to envision the physical world as a storied matter teeming with countless narrative agencies that infiltrate every imaginable space and make the world intelligible (4).

Shafak's text mirrors the concept of "narrative agency." The fig tree in the story unveils the material world as a storied world where even trees carry, communicate, and embody narratives. Trees, through their branches, roots, stems, and rings, serve as repositories of biological, geological, and cultural stories of existence, survival, conflict, and migration. This paper exemplifies the narrative potential of matter through the fig tree having its consciousness and activeness, which destabilizes narrative agency as merely a human trait. The fig tree, through its narration, reflects on histories of human suffering, war, loss, and peace, serving as a repository of memories. Considering the ability of a matter to narrate stories, this research foregrounds its argument of narration by non-human entities in the literary canon to challenge anthropocentrism. By doing this, the readers can reconceptualize their opinions of non-human narration. Oppermann stated, "Whether biotic or not, matter in every form is a meaning-producing embodiment of the world" (411). In Shafak's text, there is a chapter division where the fig tree serves as the co-narrator of the story, which illustrates the role of nature in the physical world. Harmony and interconnection are shown at various points in the novel, for instance, "First-generation immigrants talk to their trees all the time when there are no other people nearby, that is. They confide in us, describing their dreams and aspirations" (Shafak 29). The fig here narrates how humans came and approached them to share their

feelings, depicting the notion that nature is agentic and has capabilities. The fig tree, time and again, shows the reader how nature is powerful. Human superiority is vividly challenged by the fig tree here. I wish I could have told him that loneliness is a human invention. Trees are never lonely. Humans think that they know with certainty where their being ends and someone else's starts. With their roots tangled and caught up underground, linked to fungi and bacteria, trees harbor no such illusions. For us, everything is interconnected (34).

This quote rejects the anthropocentric worldview, which reduces the world to things. Barad argues that, in this way, we lose sight of how these objects and entities are connected and interdependent. It shows the tree's ability to have interconnection with the rest of the physical world; hence, matter is not silent and worthless, it bears agency and innate meaning as the new materialists discussed. Moreover, "material-discursive practices are the causal relationship between discursive practices and the material phenomena" (Barad 34). This quote suggests that trees with their roots entangled and connected to fungi and bacteria do not experience loneliness because they are constantly in relationship with other beings. This material-discursive co-emergence, argues Oppermann, implies the breakdown of the traditional binary way of thinking intertwined within the social and cultural practice of the othering "more than human world" (Oppermann 60). In addition to this, the fig tree narrates: "Would they wish to know, for instance, that trees can adapt and change their behavior with purpose, one does not necessarily depend on a brain for intelligence, would they be pleased to discover that by sending signals through a network of latticed fungi buried in the soil, trees can warn their neighbors about dangers ahead" (47).

Here fig tree criticized humans for their dominant narratives of humans with intelligence and cognitive capabilities by establishing the actual narrative that trees do have intelligence and they can communicate and deliver meaningful messages to the rest of the physical world, and this bears testimony to the fact that nature is not mute. Moreover, this line, "by sending signals through a network of latticed fungi buried in the soil, trees can warn their neighbors about dangers ahead," provides a powerful insight into a mutual dependency between humans and non-humans, as Haraway suggests that matter and meaning are not separate but co-produce each other. Trees and humans intera-act and co-depend on each other; hence, the fig tree, regarding the matter being meaningful and telling stories, portrays 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? (48)." The rings of the trees are symbolic, and they postulate innate meaning in terms of suffering, aging, and various experiences they had, hence matter tells stories. One meaning leads to another meaning, suggesting one narrative upholds another. Similarly, the interconnectedness and interdependence of the natural world are visible at various points of the novel. Shafak narrates the importance of the ecosystem by personifying the fig tree, "We fig trees hold bats in high regard, we know how essential they are for the entire ecosystem, and we appreciate them, with their large eyes the color of burnt cinnamon. They help us pollinate, faithfully carrying our seeds far and wide. I consider them my friends; it broke me to see them dropping to their death like fallen leaves" (142).

The fig tree here depicts how imperative bats are for our ecosystem and how they assist the environment. Bats are shown here as the co-participants in the physical world; hence, matter is not dead, it encompasses activeness and participation in

keeping balance and harmony in the world. Furthermore, Shafak delineates trees have memory and can sense pain and traumas, suggesting matter is active and it possesses emotion, Ada, daughter of a Greek Cypriot says, “My father says trees can remember, and he says sometimes young trees have some kind of “stored memory”, like they know about the traumas their ancestors have gone through (164).” Indicated by the framework of Haraway and Barad, we reside in a world, intersected by multiple non-human agents, where humanity and non-humanity, posits Jane Bennet, “have always performed an intricate dance with each other” (qtd. in Opperman 64). In this part of the world, all beings can pass on something of themselves to other beings. Furthermore, the fig tree unveils how in times of despair and suffering, the natural world came in harmony to share pain and trauma in a parallel manner, “All these years we had lived in the same tavern, sharing one space, an exotic parrot and fig tree, but we had never been close. Our personalities were not exactly aligned. But in times of crisis and despair, the most unlikely beings can become friends” (257).

The interconnectedness of nature with humans is shown primarily during tough times, suggesting nonhuman entities also feel pain. Barad’s definition of matter, “dynamic expression/articulation of the world in its intra-active becoming” (392), provides a significant insight into matter’s narrative dimension. Therefore, matter is not silent; it has certain agency, and it plays a meaningful role in this physical world; moreover, matter narrates stories, this fact encompasses meaning and worth for matter and its existence. In the text, the author, through the fig tree, says;

Although we have to compete for resources sometimes, we are good at protecting and supporting each other. The life of a tree, no matter how peaceful it may seem on the outside, is full of danger: squirrels that strip our bark, caterpillars that invade and destroy our leaves, bonfires in the vicinity, loggers with chainsaws.... Defoliated by the wind, scorched by the sun, attacked by insects, threatened by wildfires, we have to work together (143).

The passage from the text sheds light on the agency of matter by depicting the capacities of trees and how they participate in their environment. Trees not only depict the biological process of food production and consumption but also other imperative information, and this manifests that there is a vibrant and complex network of communication that can be found both beneath and above the ground. The description of trees' communication resonates with Oppermann’s idea of storied matter as trees, through their chemical signals, illustrate a deep narrative of their growth, challenges, and struggles. In the same manner. The references used in the above passage are like squirrels. Caterpillars, wildfires, and actions undertaken by humans portray a dynamic bond and connection that exists between trees and their environment. In this way, this entanglement debunks the anthropocentric notion of individual agency, stressing the interconnectedness of all entities present in this world. Barad and Haraway’s ideas are also evident in the tree’s capacity to communicate information, deliver meaningful messages through entanglement and collaboration. “In nature, everything talks all the time, fruit bats, honeybees, wild goats, grass snakes Some screech, others squeak, yet others caw, chatter, croak, or chirp. Boulders rumble; grapevines rustle. The salt lakes narrate tales of warfare and homecoming; the field roses chant in unison when the Meltemi blows, the circus orchards recite odes to eternal youth” (311).

The excerpt from the text underscores the dynamic expressions and sound system of nature, which further posits that nature is filled with meaningful tales and possesses vital vocal tendencies. The notion of storied matter showcases how animals, plants,

and even inanimate entities like boulders and salt lakes tell their own stories, disrupting human as the only meaning-makers in the world. Barad's intra-action further supplements this by reinforcing how everything in this universe is enmeshed with each other, as roses chant with the wind, and salt lakes narrate through their interactions with their surroundings, stressing a co-constitutive, non-hierarchical nature of agency. Haraway's semiotic materiality further reveals how non-human entities create and convey meaning through their material presence, such as the rustling of grapevines or the rumbling of boulders, which resonate with the histories and rhythms of their environments. By centering non-human narration, this perspective dismantles anthropocentric assumptions of exclusive human agency, offering a vision of the world as a shared, storied, and communicative network where all matter plays an active role.

Therefore, Shafak's *The Island of Missing Trees* challenges the traditional form of narrativity where the human is the ominous or first-person narrator and the environment or human actions are narrated by humans. On the other hand, in this novel, all human actions and emotions are recounted through Tree's eye (personification). Such an approach shapes ecocritical dimensions because it concentrates on the matter as a place where stories are created and told. This radical rethinking and revisiting of human and non-human relations is the attempt to break down categories and restructure our conceptual categories that have long upheld the oppressive social, cultural, and political practices based on dualistic frameworks. This paper, while engaging with Barad's intra-action, Haraway's semiotic materiality, and Oppermann's storied matter, postulates that matter is not mute; it possesses agency, narrates tales, conveys meaningful messages, and participates in the interwoven world; hence, this paper contests and debunks notions of anthropocentrism.

Works Cited

- Barad, K. (2007). "Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning." Duke University Press.
- Bernaerts, Lars, et al. "The Storied Lives of Non-Human Narrators." *Narrative*, vol. 22, no. 1, 2014, pp. 68–93. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24615410>. Accessed 9 May 2023.
- Cohen, Jeffery Jerome. *Stone: An Ecology of the Inhuman*. University of Minnesota Press, 2015. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.ctt155jmtb>. Accessed 23 May 2023.
- Erlandsson, Niklas. "ANIMAL QUALIA AND NON-ANTHROPOCENTRIC NARRATION IN BARBARA GOWDY'S THE WHITE BONE: PROBLEMATIZING NONHUMAN EXPERIENTIALITY THROUGH ENVISIONMENTS IN THE EFL CLASSROOM." (2021).
- Iovino, Serenella, and Serpil Oppermann. "Material Ecocriticism: Materiality, Agency, and Models of Narrativity." *Ecozon*, 3.1, 2012, 75–91. Web.
- Iovino, Serenella. "Materia Agens, Materia Loquens: Ecocriticism and the Narrative Agency of Matter." (2018)
- O'Neill, Stephen. "Arborealities, or Making Trees Matter in Elif Shafak's *The Islands of Missing Trees*." *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment (ISLE)*, pp. 1-21, 2023.
- Oppermann, Serpil. "How the material world communicates: Insights from material ecocriticism." *Routledge Handbook of Ecocriticism and Environmental*

Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

Print ISSN: 3006-5887

Online ISSN: 3006-5895

Communication. Routledge, 2019. 108-117.

Oppermann, Serpil. "Material Ecocriticism and the Creativity of Storied Matter."
Semantic Scholar, Nov 2013, 55-69.

Ramzan, Shagufta, et al. "HUMAN-NATURE RELATIONSHIP IN SHAFAK'S THE
ISLAND OF THE MISSING TREES: AN ECOCRITICAL APPROACH."

PalArch's Journal of Archaeology of Egypt/Egyptology 20.1 (2023): 473-483

Shafak, Elif. *The Island of Missing Trees*. Penguin Random House, 2021.