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NAVIGATING IDENTITY IN EXILE: A READING OF DIASPORIC EXPERIENCES IN SHAFAK'S *THE ISLAND OF MISSING TREES* (2021)

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Abstract

This paper explores the negotiation of identity and belonging in Elif Shafak's *The Island of Missing Trees*, focusing on the complex diasporic experiences shaped by exile, displacement, and intergenerational memory. Through an interpretive reading, the study examines how Shafak intertwines personal histories with collective trauma to depict the ways in which individuals navigate fractured cultural identities across geographical and temporal divides. The narrative's dual settings — rooted in the political unrest of Cyprus and extended into the diasporic space of Britain — serve as a lens to analyze themes of hybridity, cultural inheritance, and the persistence of ancestral ties. By foregrounding the voices of both human and non-human narrators, Shafak constructs a multi-layered portrayal of exile that transcends the boundaries of time, place, and species, inviting reflection on the resilience of identity in the face of displacement. The paper argues that the novel offers a nuanced exploration of diaspora as a site of both loss and renewal, where memory becomes an act of survival and identity remains a fluid, evolving construct.

Keywords: *Belonging, Cultural Inheritance, Diaspora, Displacement, Exile, Hybridity, Identity, Intergenerational Memory.*

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1.Introduction

The word 'diaspora' is derived from the Greek *diaspeirein*, meaning "to scatter," and was originally used to describe the displacement of a population from its native land. While historically tied to instances of forced migration, the term has evolved to include voluntary movements, exile, and transnational modes of living. In modern cultural and literary discourse, diaspora is conceived not merely as a spatial dispersal but as an experiential condition characterized by the continual negotiation of intersecting identities, loyalties, and cultural connections. Diaspora refers to "any ethnic group or community that is forced or induced to leave their original homeland for another place in the world" (Dapke, 2022, p. 1), resulting in a population that lives dispersed and disconnected from its nation. It also encompasses "the traditions and culture that these people develop throughout time away from their original countries" (Dapke, 2022, p. 1), reflecting the evolving identity and cultural expressions of displaced communities. Ang (2005) argues that diasporas are "transnational, spatially, and temporally sprawling socio-cultural formations of people, creating imagined communities whose blurred and fluctuating boundaries are sustained by real and/or symbolic ties to some original homeland" (p. 25).

Diasporic Literature is written by authors who live outside their homeland; and is characterized by alienation, nostalgia, loneliness, search for identity and constant displacement of the self. It deals with emigrant sensibility and focuses on the lives of immigrants and their internal and external conflicts in an alien land. (Samuel & Pulizala, 2023, p. 136)

Diasporic narratives often revolve around the interwoven themes of home, memory, and displacement, where the homeland exists as both a physical reality and an imagined ideal, reshaped by the distance of exile. The hostland, in turn, becomes a space of adaptation and cultural negotiation, offering opportunities for new identities alongside experiences of marginalization and cultural loss. In literature, such tensions frequently appear through fragmented structures, shifting perspectives, and intergenerational storytelling, reflecting the layered complexity of diasporic consciousness. Shafak (2021) positions diaspora as the central theme, portraying characters who navigate between memories of Cyprus and life in Britain. By intertwining personal and collective histories with themes of conflict, trauma, and cultural memory, the novel highlights the fluidity of identity across generations. The fig tree as a secondary narrator adds ecological and symbolic depth, framing diaspora as a space of both rupture and continuity.

This paper offers a critical examination of *The Island of Missing Trees* through the intersecting lenses of diasporic studies and postcolonial theory, highlighting the

multifaceted processes through which identity is shaped in situations of exile and displacement. It analyzes the dynamic relationship between memory, hybridity, and cultural heritage, situating these within broader debates on transnational belonging and the enduring impact of historical trauma. By engaging with the novel's treatment of intergenerational memory, the enduring presence of cultural roots, and the transformative possibilities of cross-cultural encounters, the research illustrates how Shafak (2021) portrays diaspora as a condition that is both precarious — susceptible to erasure, fragmentation, and loss — and remarkably resilient, capable of adaptation, regeneration, and reinterpretation. In this way, the paper contends that *The Island of Missing Trees* not only captures the emotional and cultural negotiations intrinsic to diasporic existence but also reconceptualizes exile as a generative space in which identities are continually reimagined across shifting temporal, spatial, and cultural landscapes.

2.Literature Review

Clifford (1994) describes diasporas as "dispersed networks of peoples who share common historical experiences of dispossession, displacement [and] adaptation" (p. 309). Furthermore, "diaspora discourses" are "experiences of displacement, of constructing homes away from home, while remaining rooted in specific, discrete histories" (Clifford, 1994, 302). Longley (2021) asserts that the concept of diaspora encompasses multiple forms, each shaped by distinct historical and social conditions. Some diasporas originate from the enduring impacts of colonialism, while others emerge from forced displacements due to political unrest or conflict. Additionally, diasporas may form through voluntary migration motivated by opportunities in education, employment, or personal advancement. Unlike communities displaced by coercion, voluntary immigrant groups — though maintaining strong cultural and spiritual ties to their homelands — are typically less inclined to pursue repatriation. Instead, they often cultivate a shared identity and draw a sense of collective empowerment or "strength-in-numbers." In contemporary settings, the presence and influence of sizeable diaspora populations increasingly inform national policies, shaping decisions related to foreign affairs, economic strategies, and immigration frameworks.

Du Bois (1996) explains that "Double consciousness" is a feeling of "two-ness," two souls, two thoughts, and the sense of always seeing oneself through the eyes of others (p. 2). Diasporic identities are inherently diverse, fluid, and continually evolving. While individuals navigate and adapt to a range of cultural experiences, they simultaneously engage in an ongoing search for self-definition. The reconciliation of these shifting, intersecting identities can be achieved through the emergence of a transcultural identity — one that integrates elements from multiple cultural frameworks into a cohesive yet

dynamic sense of self (Laxmiprasad, 2020). Jare (2021) argues that diaspora fosters the blending of languages, cultures, and ideologies, producing hybrid identities, a theme common in the works of writers like Lahiri, Naipaul, Mukherjee, Mistry, and Desai. Diasporic individuals often try to maintain their native cultural identities within close communities but face challenges in foreign environments, prompting the negotiation of new identities shaped by various experiences. Terms like expatriates, immigrants, and transnationals capture this condition, and diasporic literature reflects the tension between being rooted in a homeland and displaced, navigating belonging and alienation.

Diaspora literature revolves around the idea of a homeland or a place from where the displacement happens, and it deals with the narration of harsh journeys taken on by the characters due to their expulsion. It has its roots in the sense of loss and alienation, which emerged as a result of migration and expatriation. (Samuel & Pulizala, 2023, p. 137)

"Generally, diasporic literature deals with alienation, displacement, existential rootlessness, nostalgia, quest of identity. It also addresses issues related to synthesis or disintegration of cultures, as they are torn between the two places, cultures and often languages" (Samuel & Pulizala, 2023, p. 137). Qasim et al., (2024) argue that *American Fever* by Dur e Aziz Amna explores the challenges of diaspora, depicting how displacement fosters hyphenated identities. Through Hira, a sixteen-year-old Pakistani girl in Oregon, the novel highlights cultural dislocation and the negotiation of identity, showing her gradual movement toward a hybrid self that reconciles her heritage with American cultural norms. "Diaspora significantly influences the formation of hyphenated identities and contributes to immigrants'sense of alienation" (Qasim et al., 2024, p. 596).

Mortaza et al., (2024) point out that Kamila Shamsie and Monica Ali, both prominent diasporic authors, engage extensively with themes central to the experience of displacement and migration. Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows* and Ali's *Brick Lane* stand as significant literary explorations of identity crises within the Pakistani and Bangladeshi diasporic contexts. Rooted in the authors' awareness of migratory realities, these novels examine the struggles faced by immigrants in adapting to Western cultural frameworks while maintaining connections to their heritage. Cultural hybridity emerges as a central motif, reflecting the complex negotiations between inherited traditions and contemporary values. "Both the novels *Burnt Shadows* and *Brick Lane* are the outcome of diasporic experiences. They deal with the problems and struggles of the immigrants' assimilation of the western identity" (Mortaza et al., 2024, p. 4185).

The Island of Missing Trees focuses on the complex diasporic experiences shaped by exile, displacement, and intergenerational memory. Shafak (2021) intertwines personal

histories with collective trauma to depict the ways in which individuals navigate fractured cultural identities across geographical and temporal divides. The narrative's dual settings — rooted in the political unrest of Cyprus and extended into the diasporic space of Britain — serve as a lens to analyze themes of hybridity, cultural inheritance, and the persistence of ancestral ties. By foregrounding the voices of both human and non-human narrators, Shafak (2021) constructs a multi-layered portrayal of exile that transcends the boundaries of time, place, and species, inviting reflection on the resilience of identity in the face of displacement.

3. Research Methodology and Theoretical Framework

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive literary analysis grounded in diasporic studies and postcolonial theory to examine Shafak's *The Island of Missing Trees*. Drawing on Homi Bhabha's (1994) theory of hybridity, the research employs close reading to explore how the novel negotiates identity in exile through themes of memory, hybridity, and cultural inheritance. analysis synthesizes textual evidence, symbolic and metaphorical elements, and secondary scholarship to situate the novel within broader academic discourse on exile as both rupture and renewal.

The term 'postcolonial' encompasses all cultures and societies that have been shaped by the historical processes of colonization, extending from the colonial era into the present (Ashcroft et al., 2007). It "is used to cover all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day" (Walder, 1998, p. 35). Postcolonial theory emerged in part due to the limitations of Western critical frameworks, which often fail to adequately address the cultural heterogeneity and socio-political complexities depicted in postcolonial literature (Ashcroft, 2001). Postcolonial theory critiques the social histories, cultural divisions, and political injustices that have emerged from colonial and imperial domination (Jabeen et al., 2024). It is fundamentally concerned with the critique of colonial structures and the ongoing effects of imperial domination and "the challenges encountered by marginalized communities subjected to poverty and cultural upheaval due to colonial domination" (Qasim et al., 2024, p. 600). According to Bhabha (1994), postcolonial criticism examines the imbalanced frameworks of cultural representation within the contemporary global context, emphasizing the persistent struggles surrounding identity, authority, and notions of belonging. "Cultural hybridity has received a great deal of critical attention in both cultural and postcolonial studies" (Acheraïou, 2011, p. 17).

Diaspora should not be framed in terms of cultural purity but must instead be understood through its inherent heterogeneity and diversity. They focus on the concept of

hybridity — the idea that cultures are not static, but rather constructed through the interaction of various identities and influences. So, there is no possibility of identifying any singular or "authentic" cultural identity (Hall & Rutherford, 1990). "Cultural hybridity in diasporic literature challenges traditional notions of authenticity and purity in cultural representation. Many authors reject the idea of a monolithic or essentialized identity, instead embracing the complexities and contradictions inherent in multicultural experiences" (Bah 2024, p. 109).

Homi K. Bhabha's concept of cultural and identity hybridity is a key contribution to postcolonial theory, highlighting how identity and culture are fluid and shaped through interaction and negotiation. Hybridity challenges binaries, hierarchies, and the idea of "pure" cultures, emphasizing the complex power dynamics between colonizers and the colonized (Saqib et al., 2022). Hybridity, in Bhabha's (1994) view, emerges from these intersecting cultural forces and challenges the rigid binaries often imposed by colonial discourse. "Hybridity, for Bhabha, signifies the cultural mingling and interaction that happens in colonial and postcolonial settings, bringing about the rise of new, hybrid identities that cannot be deftly classified" (Al-Qassab, 2025, p. 313). Rather than viewing hybridity as a neutral fusion, Bhabha (1994) emphasizes its critical function in subverting dominant narratives and revealing the constructed nature of identity. "Bhabha also comes up with the notion of the "third space," which implies the inbetween, liminal space where overriding accounts and identities are undermined and novel likelihoods arise" (Al-Qassab, 2025, p. 313). Bhabha (1994) asserts that all social and cultural collectives — including nation-states, ethnic groups, and diasporic communities — are inherently hybrid, formed through historical processes of cultural exchange, negotiation, and resistance. Hybridity, thus, exists within the *Third Space*, a liminal zone that disrupts the authority of hegemonic discourses by exposing their internal contradictions and instabilities. Bhabha (1994) frames hybridity as a form of resistance. It not only destabilizes the claims of cultural purity and dominance but also reconfigures the terms of identity by transforming sites of marginalization into arenas of empowerment. In this way, hybridity becomes a critical tool for deconstructing colonial ideologies and affirming pluralistic and evolving forms of identity.

4. Textual Analysis

The Island of Missing Trees is not just a love story of a Christian Greek and a Muslim Turkish who moves to England from Cyprus, it is a story about displacement and migration from homeland and how it affected the second generation through the themes of identity, belonging, post-memory, generational and social traumas as well as nature (as a representation of nostalgia and rooting to homeland). (Aloseli, 2024, p. 23)

Shafak (2021) presents a realistic portrayal of diasporic identity as a fluid and continually negotiated construct, shaped by the interwoven forces of memory, hybridity, and cultural inheritance. Through the dual temporal and spatial settings of 1970s Cyprus and contemporary Britain, the novel captures the enduring psychological and emotional imprints of displacement, illustrating how exile reshapes familial relationships, intergenerational ties, and self-perception. The fig tree's role as a non-human narrator expands the diasporic discourse by embedding ecological memory into human narratives of loss and survival, thereby linking environmental continuity to cultural resilience. Characters such as Kostas and Ada embody the tensions of living between worlds — torn between inherited traditions and the demands of assimilation — while their fragmented identities reflect Stuart Hall's view of identity as "always in process" and Homi Bhabha's concept of the "third space."

Shafak (2021) examines the deep impact of diasporic displacement on individuals in exile, portraying characters who depart from their Mediterranean homeland for England, where they "grown and thrived" yet continue to "yearn to be back. Home. Motherland" (p. 1). This tension illustrates the negotiation of identity in exile, where material success in the hostland coexists with persistent emotional and cultural ties to the homeland. The novel also highlights the symbolic role of maps, which define borders and distinguish "friends or foes," reinforcing the liminality experienced by displaced individuals. Ada, the daughter of Kostas and Defne, exemplifies the intergenerational consequences of rootlessness. Unlike her parents, she has no direct memory of war or forced displacement and is perceived by them as a "British kid" who has never visited Cyprus. She embodies a familiar figure in diasporic narratives — the second-generation child who outwardly adapts to the host culture more easily than the first generation. Yet, despite being spared the direct experiences of loss and upheaval, Ada inherits the psychological imprint of her parents' displacement and trauma. This reflects how the repercussions of uprootedness can manifest indirectly in subsequent generations. Determined to shield their daughter from the pain of the past, Kostas and Defne consciously sever her ties to Cyprus: "If we want our child to have a good future, we have to cut her off from our past" (p. 317). This deliberate erasure of heritage leaves Ada in a conflicted state, feeling the absence of a rooted sense of self while being unable to fully comprehend its source. Although she observes her mother's struggles to cope with past wounds, the events that shaped Defne's life remain unspoken, creating a silence that fosters confusion and alienation. Ada's grief following her mother's death intertwines with a more abstract loss — of cultural belonging and identity. Shafak (2021) encapsulates this inherited burden through the metaphor, "Family traumas are like thick, translucent resin dripping from a cut in the bark. They trickle down generations" (p. 128). Ada's character thus becomes a lens through which the

novel examines intergenerational trauma in a postcolonial diasporic context, illustrating how displacement affects even those who are geographically and temporally removed from the original rupture.

A crucial element of Ada's alienation lies in her linguistic disconnection. Despite growing up in a multicultural household, her parents refrain from teaching her their native languages. As a result, Ada cannot speak her father's Greek or her mother's Turkish: "Her parents had not taught her their native languages, preferring to communicate solely in English at home. Ada could speak neither her father's Greek nor her mother's Turkish" (p. 7). Shafak (2021) frames this linguistic gap as both symbolic and practical — a barrier that prevents Ada from fully engaging with her cultural heritage and deepens her sense of isolation. Ada's collection of foreign words resembles "precious pebbles," beautiful yet devoid of practical use, symbolizing a cultural heritage that is cherished but remains beyond her reach. During moments of heightened emotional awareness, she becomes sharply conscious of her disconnection from others. Witnessing fear in those around her, she briefly experiences a reversal of her usual vulnerability: "Ada was no part of this chain…no part of anything. In her unbroken loneliness, she was complete" (p. 29). This moment encapsulates the paradox of her identity — excluded from her ancestral cultural continuum, yet discovering an unexpected sense of wholeness within the very solitude that isolates her.

Shafak (2021) intertwines intimate personal memories with the broader historical experience of displacement to illuminate the intergenerational complexities of diasporic identity. Ada is haunted by memories of the past."Something was strangling [Ada] – the past, the memories, the roots" (p. 257). The metaphor of "roots" conveys both the grounding and constraining dimensions of inherited memory. Ada's struggle to express herself reflects the paralyzing effect of displacement, wherein identity becomes caught between the burdens of the past and the pressures of negotiating the present.

In a passage that subtly conveys themes of memory, resilience, and cultural continuity, Shafak (2021) writes, "That night in her bedroom, listening to the singer…Ada opened the curtains and stared into the darkness…Invisible as it was, she knew the fig tree was there… growing, changing, remembering" (2021, p. 264). The fig tree's unseen yet enduring growth serves as a metaphor for heritage that persists, adapts, and survives despite obscurity. This scene situates Ada's reflection within a space of partial visibility, where the fig tree — unseen yet deeply present — operates as a symbolic anchor of memory, continuity, and belonging. Its quiet persistence in "growing, changing, remembering" parallels Ada's own subtle negotiation of identity in exile, in which physical displacement is tempered by an invisible yet enduring rootedness in cultural and emotional inheritance. Similarly, moments of interpersonal interaction illuminate the

complexities of diasporic belonging. In one instance, "Ada suppressed her smile this time, amused at her father's lame attempt to connect with her through emo rap, of which he hadn't got a clue" (2021, p. 263), the playful yet telling exchange underscores a generational and cultural gap intensified by the experience of migration. Ada's restrained amusement and her contemplation of "speaking his language" signify a conscious attempt to bridge this divide, reflecting the hybrid negotiations characteristic of second-generation immigrants. Here, the longing for mutual understanding parallels the diasporic desire for home — a space where communication flows naturally and identity is shared without translation.

Within the broader dynamics of diasporic identity formation, Defne's encounter with subtle prejudice highlights the ongoing negotiation of belonging in contexts of exile. When a man learns of Defne's heritage, his reaction —"Oh, she's T-T-Turkish?"— reveals implicit bias. Defne's immediate question, "Why?" signals her refusal to passively accept such assumptions. Her question —"Do you have a problem with that?"— functions as an assertion of cultural selfhood. The tension is momentarily eased when the first man uttered out, "'Hey, don't get upset! Yusuf himself is Turkish'" (p. 57). This brief but charged exchange encapsulates the precarious balance diasporic individuals often navigate — moving between cultural assertion and the need for social ease — while simultaneously confronting the biases embedded in everyday discourse. In this sense, Defne's reaction embodies the broader diasporic struggle to claim identity in spaces where cultural belonging is conditional, contested, and perpetually in need of defense.The man's initial stutter and change in facial expression reveal an instinctive reaction to Defne's Turkish background, hinting at deep-seated bias or discomfort. Defne's immediate challenge, marked by her hardened gaze, reflects a refusal to passively accept prejudice. Yusuf's interjection — emphasizing their shared heritage — attempts to diffuse the tension, yet the exchange exposes how ethnic identity remains a delicate subject, often shaped by assumptions or inherited divisions.

Ada demonstrates a keen awareness of the complex familial and cultural tensions between her Greek father and Turkish mother, acknowledging the historical animosities that shape their union. She is conscious of the social backlash her parents faced upon marrying and the limited effort from relatives on either side to cultivate meaningful connections. Their absence — most poignantly felt during her mother's funeral — intensifies Ada's experience of rootlessness. Rejecting superficial conformity to cultural expectations, she insists on genuine familial relationships that confront rather than obscure historical conflicts. As she remarks to her father, "You're Greek, Mum is Turkish, opposite tribes" (p. 55), emphasizing the enduring weight of inherited divisions and the need for honesty within family bonds. Here, Shafak (2021) captures the tension between inherited

divisions and the second generation's resistance to perpetuating them. Ada's refusal to adopt cultural traditions or proverbs that mask deeper grievances signals a rejection of both romanticized heritage and imposed identities. Through Ada's character, Shafak (2021) illuminates the layered nature of diasporic rootlessness: a product of linguistic erasure, fractured family ties, and the intergenerational transmission of unresolved historical conflicts. Ada's journey reflects the struggle to reconcile a fragmented cultural inheritance while forging an autonomous sense of self that transcends inherited enmities and the silences of the past.

Shafak (2021) highlights Ada's experiences within educational settings to demonstrate how institutional narratives can subtly perpetuate feelings of alienation. When Mrs. Walcott asserts, "Without understanding our past, how can we hope to shape our future?" (p. 8), Ada's classmate dismisses the statement, and Ada herself finds little resonance with the singular historical perspective being presented. Her resistance to this pedagogical approach reflects a broader critique of curricula that fail to acknowledge the diversity of student experiences, thereby marginalizing those whose histories are absent from official accounts. The lack of personal contact with her extended family further intensifies her sense of cultural orphanhood, as Ada reflects, "What kind of people were they?...Would they recognize her if they passed by on the street…?" (p. 7). These unanswered questions highlight the void left by severed kinship ties and the embodied effects of diaspora, where identity is shaped as much by absence as by presence.

Shafak (2021) extends the novel's exploration of memory through Defne's observations of the island's elderly residents. She notes, "Occasionally, Defne noticed, a grandfather or a grandmother was keen to talk when there were no other family members around. For they remembered" (p. 249). Many of these individuals, having grown up in ethnically mixed villages, maintained fluency in both Greek and Turkish, while some — particularly those "in the throes of Alzheimer's, slipped down the slopes of time into a language they had not used in decades" (p. 249) — experienced a temporal and linguistic dislocation that underscores the fragility and persistence of cultural memory. Their recollections varied: some had directly witnessed atrocities, others had heard of them second-hand, while a few remained deliberately evasive. This passage foregrounds the fragility, selectivity, and linguistic dimensions of memory, illustrating how personal and collective histories are preserved, altered, or obscured across generations.

Shafak (2021) situates Defne's journey within a post-conflict Cyprus marked by layered memories, cultural hybridity, and intergenerational wounds. Clad in her blue trench coat, Defne navigates rain-soaked streets in search of "fragments of forgotten memories" embedded in the collective history of the island's diverse communities. Her encounters with families reveal a complex interplay of warmth and guardedness,

suggesting that even in moments of hospitality, mistrust shaped by historical violence remains. The reminiscences of elders — memories "like tufts of wool dispersed in the wind" (p. 249) — evoke a deep nostalgia for a time and place altered beyond recognition. Their use of both Greek and Turkish highlights the fluid, overlapping identities of the past, while the evasiveness of certain individuals signals unresolved trauma and the silences that displacement often enforces. Defne's ethnographic sensitivity is further revealed in her reluctance to push her interviewees beyond their emotional limits, a restraint born from witnessing "deep rifts between family members of different ages" (p. 250). The first generation of survivors, bearing the "splinters" of memory lodged beneath the skin, exemplifies the persistent, embodied nature of war's psychological wounds. In contrast, younger generations often choose suppression as a protective mechanism, creating a paradox where those farthest from the original events sometimes carry the most unspoken burdens. This dynamic illustrates how exile and its traumas do not dissipate but mutate across generations, shaping diasporic identity through both memory and its deliberate erasure.

Memory can be both complex and painful in the diasporic context,. Defne's life illustrates how displacement, war, and separation profoundly affect individuals: after concealing her pregnancy and giving her son up for adoption during the upheaval in her homeland, she later faces his premature death. Even after relocating to London with Kostas, her psychological state worsens, burdened by unresolved trauma and persistent, inescapable memories. For Defne, recollections of her homeland are dominated by grief and loss rather than idealized nostalgia, reflecting the ways in which forced migration often entwines memory with experiences of violence and displacement. Unlike Kostas, who adapts more readily to his new environment, Defne remains emotionally tethered to her homeland, yet this attachment is haunted by the residues of war. Bhabha's insight resonates with her predicament, emphasizing the difficulty, for some displaced individuals, of moving forward without confronting the burdens of the past: "The past is a dark distorted mirror [and when you happen to look at it], you [will] only see your own pain" (1994, p. 112). Defne's inability to reconcile her past with her present situates her in a liminal space, suspended between memory and reality Although she initially appears capable of adaptation — relocating to England with relative ease — her recollections of her homeland persist as a constant undercurrent, emerging involuntarily and amplifying her sense of alienation.

Food and cuisine emerge as significant markers of identity, functioning both as cultural anchors and as instruments of negotiation in the diasporic experience in *The Island of Missing Trees* (2021), food and cuisine emerge as significant markers of identity, functioning both as cultural anchors and as instruments of negotiation in the diasporic

experience. Culinary traditions represent one of the most immediate and tangible expressions of identity, serving to establish or, at times, transgress cultural boundaries. For immigrants, food can operate as a medium of assimilation into a host culture or, conversely, as a means of resisting cultural erosion. This duality is embodied in the character of Meryem, whose traditional Turkish upbringing has instilled in her the belief that a woman's role is firmly rooted in the kitchen and that proficiency in cooking is a measure of self-worth. Upon arriving in London to visit the Kazantzakis family, she reasserts her cultural heritage and resists assimilation through her culinary practices. By introducing "flavors, aromas, and heritage that have long been forgotten," she transforms the domestic space into a site of cultural preservation. Her statements that "food is the heart of a culture" and "If you don't know the cuisine of your ancestors, you don't know who you are" (p. 137) emphasize the intrinsic link between gastronomy and identity. For immigrants, homeland cuisine serves not merely as nourishment but as a vessel of memory and belonging. At the same time, the novel highlights that navigating new culinary environments can become one of the most significant challenges of the migratory experience.

The novel's exploration of food culture also extends into public and communal spaces, most notably through the representation of The Happy Fig, a restaurant founded in 1955 by Yusuf and Yiorgos, a gay couple whose establishment becomes a symbolic "migrant utopia." This tavern is described as "a popular hang-out frequented by Greeks, Turks, Armenians, Maronites, UN soldiers, and visitors to the island" (p. 87), a rare space where ethnic, religious, and political divisions dissolve in the shared enjoyment of food, music, and conviviality. The presence of a fig tree growing through the ceiling, a vividly colored parrot, and the sensory richness of the environment transform The Happy Fig from a simple restaurant into a near-mythic space of harmony and coexistence. As the narrative describes, "Between its walls, strangers turned into friends, friends into lovers; old flames rekindled, broken hearts mended or shattered once again" (p. 87). In this way, The Happy Fig not only represents the potential for peaceful multicultural interaction but also serves as an allegorical counterpoint to the fractures and dislocations experienced by diasporic individuals, illustrating how shared cultural spaces — often centered on food — can momentarily bridge the distances imposed by exile.

The theme of intergenerational silence is poignantly articulated in Ada's conversation with Meryem, in which she reflects on her parents' marriage and the resistance it met from "a different generation" (p. 248). Ada's inability to reconcile her parents' silence about the past with her own need for connection reflects a diasporic subject's struggle to bridge the gap between inherited history and lived experience. Meryem's hesitance, coupled with Ada's decision to stop the recorder — "This is not for

school… It's for me" — underscores the intimate, personal stakes of recovering these histories. Such moments reveal the central tension in diasporic life: the yearning for belonging and self-understanding in the face of familial and cultural reticence. Through these layered narratives, Shafak (2021) demonstrates how nostalgia and homelessness operate not merely as emotional states but as enduring conditions of exile, shaped by both what is remembered and what is left unsaid.

Ada's return to the tavern becomes a sensory gateway to a lost world, as "delicious odours of steaming food" and the sounds of "chatter and laughter" (p. 231) summon memories of communal warmth, shared labour, and the pride of creation. This space, once animated by figures like Chico, Yiorgos, and Yusuf, embodies a form of belonging rooted in shared history and collective identity — now fractured by time and displacement. Shafak (2021) extends this meditation on memory through the fig tree's symbolic voice: "a tree is a memory keeper… the ruins of wars nobody came to win, the bones of the missing" (p. 186), binding personal recollections to the deeper historical scars embedded in the land itself. The tavern and the tree thus converge as repositories of lived experience, holding the echoes of both joy and violence. In contrast, Ada's schoolroom confession — "I did something awful… now I'm too embarrassed to go back" (p. 145) — reveals the micro-level ruptures in belonging that mirror the larger diasporic dislocations in the novel. Her sense of exclusion, though arising in a contemporary British context, resonates with the inherited wounds of exile, illustrating how displacement operates not only across borders and generations but also within the intimate spaces of everyday life.

Shafak (2021) uses intergenerational dialogue and moments of historical recollection to illuminate how exile is experienced not only as geographical dislocation but also as an emotional homelessness within one's own identity. In a tender exchange, Meryem's compassionate counsel to Ada reveals both nostalgia and the generational gulf shaped by historical trauma; while she recalls a past scarred by ethnic conflict, she idealizes Ada's youth as free from such dangers (p. 145). Yet Ada's embarrassment and desire to escape her immediate circumstances mirror the dislocation her elders knew in more overtly violent contexts, suggesting that exile can manifest in subtler, contemporary forms. This is paralleled in Defne's memories of intercommunal violence, where ethnic segregation confined her indoors, replacing public life with isolation and longing for the harmony of a shared past (p. 142). The tavern's imminent closure and the hurried departure of British expatriates further symbolize the fracturing of communal life; those left behind, including Defne, face uncertainty, fear, and the erosion of familiar spaces. Here, nostalgia surfaces as both a refuge and a reminder of loss: the letter from Kostas offers a fragile thread of connection amidst the chaos, while Yusuf's quiet plea — "let's not lose hope" — encapsulates the resilience that persists in exile. Across these moments, Shafak

entwines (2021) the personal and the political, showing how displacement reverberates through memory, place, and the struggle to belong.

5. Conclusion

The Island of Missing Trees provides a nuanced and multilayered examination of identity formation in contexts of exile. By weaving together personal narratives, historical memory, and ecological symbolism, the novel frames diaspora as a space where experiences of loss, displacement, and hybridity coexist alongside resilience, adaptation, and the preservation of cultural continuity. Through the unique perspective of the fig tree, Shafak (2021) highlights the interconnectedness of individuals, landscapes, and histories, suggesting that exile is experienced as much through place as through personal identity. The novel's dual temporal and geographical settings — the conflict-ridden Cyprus of the 1970s and contemporary diasporic Britain — illustrate how the consequences of war and migration extend across generations, shaping identities in complex ways. By tracing her characters' efforts to reconcile fragmented pasts with uncertain presents, the narrative emphasizes that identity in exile is fluid, continually redefined through memory, belonging, and adaptation. Ultimately, Shafak's work reconfigures the notion of diaspora, portraying it not solely as displacement but as a site of enduring renewal and cultural resilience.

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