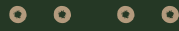


THE TREES SPEAK FOR THEMSELVES: HOW NON-HUMAN NARRATORS IN FICTION INFLUENCE MULTISPECIES ENCOUNTERS

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Elif Shafak's 2021 novel *The Island of Missing Trees* describes fictional events that occur on the real island of Cyprus during the war between the Greek and the Turkish inhabitants of the island. This story is told from multiple points of view at various points in time in both Cyprus and London, where the characters move to and live following the events of the war and their families' disagreements with their relationship. What is unique about Shafak's storytelling is her use of a fig tree as a primary narrator of events. While the use of non-human narrators is not a new strategy, most of these occurrences involve animal speakers rather than plants or objects. In delivering a fiction narrative from the point of view of a fig tree, Elif Shafak's *The Island of Missing Trees* introduces readers to multispecies

encounters by providing an example of how arboreal figures communicate and experience history alongside humans in an anthropocentric world, and further encourages prosocial behavior between human and non-human species. Based on Shafak's novel, theories of attentiveness and slow-violence, and studies on the effect of non-human narrators on readers, including these "non-living" narrators in widely accessible pieces of fiction not only informs audiences of the multispecies encounters that occur in everyday life, but also opens more avenues of multispecies conservation.

Our planet has existed for about 4.5 billion years, and in that time, five mass extinctions have occurred. Thanks to human action—and the lack thereof—Earth must now suffer through the sixth mass extinction in its history (Ceballos et al.). From rising temperatures to increasingly severe weather due to greenhouse gas emissions, human impact on the environment and biodiversity has never been more visible (United Nations). While there are debates over the definite start of this age of human influence, experts agree that Earth has entered the Anthropocene Epoch, a geological era marked by human activity that will be observable far into the future (Lewis and Maslin 171). Although it is true that many people learn of things like climate change and environmental systems from news reports and social media, a less popular and lesser-known source of information comes in the form of fiction stories. Fiction offers an avenue of learning without the pressure that comes from taking on academic texts or journalistic articles. In particular, fiction provides a place to showcase the world from non-human perspectives. This is demonstrated well in Elif Shafak’s 2021 novel *The Island of Missing Trees*. The novel is a fictional account of the Greek-Turkish war in Cyprus, told from multiple perspectives, but most memorably from the perspective of a fig tree. As explained in a review of the novel, “Shafak portrays different ways of life, expressed through the stories of various life-forms and connected to each other under the common denominator of grief...a sense of longing for wholeness, oneness, and harmony, not only between people but also between all elements of the wider ecosystem” (Atayurt-Fenge 76). In delivering a fictional narrative from the point of view of a fig tree, Shafak introduces readers to multispecies encounters by providing an example of how arboreal figures communicate and experience history alongside humans in an anthropocentric world, and further encourages prosocial behavior between human and non-human species. By including these “non-living” narrators in widely accessible pieces of fiction, authors can not only encourage attentiveness and inform audiences of the multispecies encounters that occur in everyday life, but also open more avenues of multispecies conservation.

Before exploring the possibilities of narrative fiction, it is important to understand multispecies studies and the theory of attentiveness. Multispecies studies considers the encounters between species and “the multitudes of lively agents that bring one another into being through entangled relations” (Van Dooren et al. 3). The purpose of a multispecies approach is to confront ecological challenges using a myriad of disciplines and bodies of research, achieving a deeper understanding of the causes and effects of issues touching countless species. With this approach, multispecies scholars can take existing knowledge of one species and apply it in the context of the other species it encounters. In contrast to other fields like ecocriticism, which often only uses how humans interact with nature and how we perceive it as a way to encourage change, multispecies studies expands beyond the world of humans and pays attention to the intricacies of other species, exposing us to other perspectives besides our own. This attention to how other species perceive and interact with the world is why the multispecies approach is the best way to analyze *The Island of Missing Trees*, whose narrator is not a human reporting how human action has changed the environment, but a tree sharing how it has experienced war, migration, and connection with all of the species it interacts with from its point of view.

Taking a multispecies approach requires paying attention to the actions, reactions, and interactions among species, both human and non-human. Part of this attention comes from “ask[ing] how specific worldings come to matter, and to matter differently, for given beings” (Van Dooren et al. 13). When one is exposed to the lives and histories of other species, one can develop the “art of attentiveness” and begin to gain more awareness of other beings that function alongside the realm of human activity. As Van Dooren et al. explain, “attention to others is vital to responding appropriately” (16). Thus, if one hopes to encourage multispecies relations and ensure mutual conservation, one must first attempt to understand the complexities of other species and their ecosystems. While there are many ways to learn attentiveness, reading fiction narrated by non-human characters

can prove to be a particularly impactful practice.

Due to the broad interpretations of the terms “non-human” and “non-living,” understanding how they will be used in relation to Shafak’s novel is important. In their article “Towards a theory of nonhuman narrative,” Biwu Shang breaks down non-human narrative into four distinct categories: narrative about natural things, narrative about supernatural things, narrative about artificial objects, and narrative about artificial humans. While each category includes multiple examples of non-human species, the fig tree of Shafak’s novel falls into the category of natural things. Because this category also includes animals, narrators like the fig tree are referred to as non-living in this analysis. Non-living in this case refers to species that are inanimate, that is, not alive in the way humans and animals are perceived to be. Trees and other non-humans that are not insects, animals, or things that are obviously living are still coparticipants with us living on this planet. Scholarship has tended to look at animal life rather than other natural objects, and while it might raise questions to refer to trees as non-living, this is deliberate in this essay to call attention to how we largely ignore objects that we do not classify as living. In this way, non-human narratives can “deconstruct anthropocentrism” and teach humans about their varied roles in “the more-than-human world” (Shang 70). It is through these non-living characters that humans can become exposed to other perspectives of the world, perspectives that serve as a reminder that the world is not a solely human one.

Though the world is “more-than-human” in reality, the non-human aspects of the world hold little stake in the scheme of human life, according to most humans. However, as discussed by Rob Nixon in his book, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, the goings-on of the non-human realm are real and pertinent for humans to acknowledge. Nixon defines slow violence as “violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all” (2). The questions that Nixon asks us to consider revolve around bringing

the truth of slow violence to masses in one form or another and making it interesting enough that something may come of it. This can be challenging when one considers how the stories of slow violence “are anonymous and ... star nobody” (3). Nixon suggests creative solutions, “ways of drawing public attention to catastrophic acts that are low in instant spectacle but high in long-term effects. To intervene representationally entails devising iconic symbols that embody amorphous calamities as well as narrative forms that infuse those symbols with dramatic urgency” (10). I argue that Shafak does just that in her novel *The Island of Missing Trees* through her use of compelling non-human narration to tell the story of multiple species over years of growth and hardship.

The Island of Missing Trees follows the story of war-torn Nicosia, Cyprus in 1974 and the lives that the conflict touches. Partially narrated by a fig tree growing in a tavern in the divided capital, the novel covers the ways the war impacted nature alongside the secret love between Kostas, a Greek Christian, and Defne, a Turkish Muslim, and later the grief felt by Kostas and his daughter, Ada, following Defne’s death in London. Shafak, who has a personal connection with Cyprus after growing up in Turkey, has wanted to tell this story for many years, but “could never dare” until she “found the fig tree” (Penguin Books Limited Editor). According to Shafak, the fig tree was a “calmer, wiser” narrator of events, able to navigate the complexities of borders, inherited trauma, and civil war better than a human narrator on the Greek or Turkish side might have. Due to its relative recency, there is not much literary scholarship on this novel. What scholarship does exist approaches the novel’s commentary on inherited trauma, generational grief, diaspora, or displacement rather than its use of trees and multispecies encounters. This essay expands discussion on this subject by looking at the tree’s role as narrator and further considering how wars in distant places can affect our own lives and futures.

Beyond simply being entertainment, fiction can be beneficial to promoting multispecies attentiveness because the act of reading narrative

fiction can be crucial in the development of morals and empathy (Johnson et al.). This development comes primarily from the imagery that is generated when reading, that is, the way the reader becomes immersed in the experience of the characters they are reading about and thus interprets the world from another perspective. Through this practice, readers can develop affective empathy, which is “an individual’s ability to feel for another” (Johnson et al. 306). Additionally, recent studies in social learning theory and the general learning model indicate that narrative fiction that includes prosocial behavior can influence readers to behave similarly (Johnson et al.). To use an example from Shafak’s novel, *Kostas*, one of the main characters and an expert in studies of trees and certain animals, shows an attentiveness and responsibility toward non-human species on multiple occasions. From reading about Kostas’s interactions with these species, the reader can be inspired to take on similar behaviors in their own life. Fiction has historically been used by organizations and groups to promote prosocial behavior toward animals. A previous example of this is the book *Black Beauty* by Anna Sewell, which is the story of the titular horse’s journey being owned by humans that could be both kind and cruel. What makes the depictions of cruelty more impactful is that the events are narrated by the horse, which allows readers to experience human cruelty from the horse’s point of view. This tactic influences readers subtly rather than explicitly, placing them in situations where they might come to their own conclusions about issues as well as providing an avenue that is less outright informational and more entertaining than nonfiction (Małeckki et al.). Within stories of animal narratives, the non-human characters detail their experiences of interacting with humans, “in particular, how their lives are changed by human activities, thus drawing readers’ attention to the importance of human-nonhuman co-existence” (Shang 64). The success of *Black Beauty* demonstrates the effectiveness of prosocial fiction, as membership in humane societies and laws prohibiting animal abuse increased following its publication. Of course, that novel used non-human narration of an animal rather than a “non-living” object like in Shafak’s novel.

One of the most important things the fig tree accomplishes as narrator is to raise non-human species to be just as important as humans. Most fiction focuses on the impact humans feel following war or disasters, mostly, if not completely ignoring the other species that must also recover from such events. The fig tree serves as a sort of advocate for non-human species, working to make space for their stories to be heard:

But on an island plagued by years of ethnic violence and brutal atrocities, humans were not the only ones that suffered. So did we trees - and animals, too, experience hardship and pain as their habitats came to disappear. It never meant anything to anyone, what happened to us. It matters to me though and, so long as I am able to tell this story, I am going to include in it the creatures in my ecosystem - the birds, the bats, the butterflies, the honeybees, the ants, the mosquitoes and the mice - because there is one thing I have learned: wherever there is war and a painful partition, there will be no winners, human or otherwise. (Shafak 190)

Through the fig tree's narration, the reader is exposed to non-human stories in a form that they have seen before, but through unfamiliar eyes. As noted by Kostas, "the world humans saw was only one of many available" (Shafak 226). Humans tend to view events only in regard to how their own lives are changed or impacted, but that does not mean that other ecosystems and species cease to exist, nor does it mean that the human world is the most important. However, even though some may try to speak for other species and make space for them in the conversation, as Shafak points out, "in a land besieged with conflict, uncertainty and bloodshed, people took it for indifference, an insult to their pain, if you paid too much attention to anything other than human suffering" (147-148). In Shafak's novel, readers find themselves paying attention to non-human suffering simply from engaging with storytelling.

To allow readers to effectively take in the experiences of non-human narrators, human-like consciousness is often a necessity in the narrator. By projecting traits of human consciousness onto non-human beings, readers

can better approach unfamiliar experiences. That said, it is important to simultaneously remember that the narrator is not human and thus their experiences “may question (defamiliarize) some of readers’ assumptions and expectations about human life and consciousness” (Bernaerts et al. 69). As defamiliarization occurs, the text becomes a tool for delivering scientific knowledge about the non-human species and how they perceive human events (Bernaerts et al.). The use of non-human and non-living narrators in fiction is not widespread or conventional, perhaps due to the preference to consider humans as the superior species rather than to place them as equal to non-humans. Rare as they are, when non-human narrators are utilized, the impact of these stories can be found in the greater defamiliarization and empathy produced by the reading of other perspectives (Bernaerts et al.). For example, in *The Island of Missing Trees*, the fig tree’s narration forces readers to pivot their perspective and view reality from another’s experience. In the case of the fig tree, not only does the reader experience the war on Cyprus and other events through the fig-tree’s eyes, but the reader learns valuable information about how trees feel and communicate with each other and other species. Because “object narrators collapse the cognitively basic distinction between animate and inanimate entities,” it is possible that the effect of defamiliarization can be felt more intensely in object narrators than in animal narrators (Bernaerts et al. 89).

While the use of objects, specifically plants, is not conventional in modern literature, it is certainly not a new practice. Plants have been used in stories throughout history and across cultures and religions. Shafak’s fig tree provides examples of the roles trees play across the globe:

The Bedouin settle their disagreements in our shade, the Druze kiss our bark reverently, placing personal objects around us, praying for *ma’rifah*. Both Arabs and Jews make their wedding preparations beside us, hoping for marriages sturdy enough to weather any storms which may lie ahead. Buddhists want us to blossom near their shrine, and so do the Hindus. Kikuyu women in Kenya daub themselves with the sap of fig trees when they want to get pregnant and it is the same

women who defend us bravely whenever someone tries to cut down a sacred *mugumo*. (Shafak 65)

Despite their inclusion in previous narratives, their role has often been limited to acting “as metaphorical means to anthropocentric ends: to tell human, perhaps all-too-human, (hi)stories” (Middelhoff and Peselmann 177). A popular example of this sort of role is found in the 2003 novel *The Tale of Despereaux* by Kate DiCamillo, in which a mouse narrates his quest to save a human princess. The mouse and his journey stand as metaphors for breaking stereotypes and becoming a hero no matter how small you are. In this case of non-human narration, the focus is on the human world and how the mouse can act as human as possible to earn the love of the princess. Little emphasis is placed on multispecies encounters, with the main purpose of the novel being to entertain and deliver a message of individuality.

In contrast, the goal in using trees in stories, and what Shafak manages to do in her novel, is to present the trees as characters in their own right, with thoughts, feelings, and agency, rather than reducing them to background objects in human lives. However, if trees are to be presented as accurate characters and narrators, authors must take care to research the species’ physiology and culture, ensuring that it is *the trees’* stories that are being told (Middelhoff and Peselmann). In Shafak’s case, thorough research on trees has been done, so when the audience is introduced to the fig tree, they are interested in both learning and hearing what the tree has to say. Not only does this sort of narration educate readers on trees as cognizant beings, but it allows for a perspective on events like war that is separate from divisive human politics. Shafak has claimed that the narration of the fig tree allowed her a certain degree of freedom to tell the story of the war on Cyprus from neither a Greek nor a Turkish side, but rather from the side of natural objects impacted by the human conflict (O’Neill). One of the biggest things that sets trees apart from humans is their longevity. Trees have existed longer than humans, and they will remain long after humans are gone. As the fig tree explains, “a tree’s rings do not only reveal

its age, but also the traumas it has endured, including wildfires, and thus, carved deep in each circle, is a near-death experience, an unhealed scar” (Shafak 45). During their long lives on Earth, trees have seen civilizations rise and fall, and felt the effects of human action. Their connection to and awareness of the many species in their environment allows them to recognize how every action has an impact within multispecies encounters:

A tree always knows that it is linked to endless life forms – from honey fungus, the largest living thing, down to the smallest bacteria and archaea – and that its existence is not an isolated happenstance but intrinsic to a wider community. Even trees of different species show solidarity with one another regardless of their difference, which is more than you can say for so many humans. (Shafak 100)

As evidenced in the final line of this passage, there is sometimes a bitterness toward humans in the fig tree’s narration that is not often apparent in other forms of narration. Part of this comes from the writer’s intention; Shafak wants to indicate that humans are doing something wrong, while other authors might just want to tell a human story from an outsider’s point of view. A tree is a good medium for communicating this message because of the length of time they have experienced and understood multispecies encounters.

As discussed previously, Shafak’s *The Island of Missing Trees* presents a tree as a main character, a narrator of events being experienced not just by humans, but by other species that are often overlooked. One of the most important things Shafak does to adjust readers to the narration of the fig tree is to give her a familiar voice, one similar yet different to our own: “I am a *Ficus carica*, known as the edible common fig, though I can assure you there’s nothing common about me” (Shafak 23). Throughout the fig tree’s narration, the reader is able to get a sense of a personality that is similar to other narrations they have encountered. The fig tree shares her thoughts and emotions, ruminating on her environment and the other characters around her, as is characteristic of any human or animal narrator. Though there is humanization of the nonhuman object, there is still a dis-

tinct otherness found in the fig tree that comes from the unfamiliar ways it views the world.

Though some of the fig tree's narration is meant to comment on the other main characters, each chapter narrated by the fig tree provides some insight into the fig tree's world and their interactions with the other life in Cyprus and then in London. After being buried underground to prepare for winter in London, the fig tree comments on the unfathomable number of microorganisms that live and work within the soil and how trees can hear the vibrations of creatures both above and below ground level (Shafak 80-81). The fig tree narrates an instance where another tree communicates with her: "I picked up an odd sound...it turned out it was my old friend the hawthorn tree, a native species, a gentle hermaphrodite, sending signals through roots and fungi, asking how I was doing" (99). Later she explains how "In nature, everything talks all the time" (341) indicating that there is a whole realm of communication and social order separate from human understanding. Further research into the complexity of arboreal communication is explained by the fig tree:

Under and above ground, we trees communicate all the time. We share not only water and nutrients, but also essential information. Although we have to compete for resources sometimes, we are good at protecting and supporting each other...Even when we might seem stand-offish, growing away from others or at the edge of forests, we still remain connected across entire swathes of land, sending chemical signals through the air and across our shared mycorrhizal networks. (99)

This explanation of connection between trees beckons the idea of sentience, a concept previously thought to be reserved for humans and certain animals.

Sentience, which the Oxford English Dictionary defines as "the condition or quality of being sentient, consciousness, susceptibility to sensation," is typically assigned to beings that display a nervous system. Species like plants, fungi, and bacteria have been labeled as unconscious

due to the lack of nerves in their anatomy (“What beings are not conscious”). However, research done by German forester Peter Wohlleben strives to disprove this theory. In *The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate – Discoveries from a Secret World*, Wohlleben attempts to redefine trees, displaying them as beings with intelligence and physical reactions to stimuli. He discusses how trees learn and react to pain with distressed sounds like screaming, like humans, though they can only be heard with advanced machinery. This is a trait that the fig tree also references, asking if humans would wish to know “that many plants, when threatened, attacked or cut, can produce ethylene, which works like a type of anaesthetic [sic], and this chemical release has been described by researchers as akin to hearing stressed plants screaming” (Shafak 45). While the strength of Wohlleben’s argument depends on a certain degree of pathos, and the presence of sentience in plants has not yet been proven, his assessment of tree consciousness does open the door for further studies into the possibility of plant sentience.

Aside from her commentary on the ways different species communicate with each other, the fig tree also demonstrates her own understanding of how other species’ actions affect her own life and environment. She shares her sorrow at the widespread death of bats in Cyprus, referring to them as her friends and acknowledging their importance in the ecosystem and their close connection with the pollination of trees (Shafak 150). When reflecting on a time a honeybee got stuck inside an office, she claims that she “had a deep respect for her kind. No other species embodies the circle of life quite like the Apidae. If they were to disappear one day, the world would never recover from their loss” (294). The fig tree’s understanding of the importance of each species and how they work together heightens the trust a reader can place in her narration and expands a reader’s empathy for species that they might not have otherwise considered. This ability of the fig tree to teach and inspire empathy, and in turn prosocial behavior, fulfills Nixon’s recommendation for drawing attention to slow violence. In using the fig tree as an intriguing narrative device,

Shafak finds a creative way to tune audiences in to the long-term effects of war and human action on all species without losing interest.

Though narrators like the fig tree in Shafak's novel are not found often in popular media, there is no doubt of their benefit to multispecies studies and the understanding of multispecies encounters. With their unique ability to view the world from non-human perspectives, non-human narrators do the job of educating humans in the ways in which major events in the human realm of experience also impact the many non-human realms of experience. Humans beg for and provide humanitarian aid during times of strife, yet little to no aid is given to "non-living" inhabitants of the planet, despite how they may beg for help in their own way. Texts like *The Island of Missing Trees* not only show us how we might pay better attention to our co-inhabitants, but also inspire us to act in the best interest of all beings, human or not. As the earth progresses into the Anthropocene and the climate crisis continues, texts that spotlight non-anthropocentric perspectives will continue to hold increasing value as mediums of education and advocacy.

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