

The Legacy of Transgenerational Trauma: A Qualitative Study of Elif Shafak's *The Island of Missing Trees*

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Abstract—Elif Shafak is regarded as one of the most acclaimed authors of the twenty-first-century Turkish literature. Her works are authentic and distinctive, and most of her characters personify the enigma of displacement and the ensuing trauma—an experience that Shafak herself encountered. The protagonist of the novel, Defne, grapples helplessly with her past after being uprooted from her motherland, and this hinders her ability to live a pleasant life in the present. Defne, a native of the war-torn Cyprus, is burdened by displacement, and she bears the brunt of the past that ruthlessly infiltrates her present. Another appalling impact of displacement is that not only does the victim undergo the traumatic trials but the repercussions are also transferred to the succeeding generations. This paper tries to explore the magnitude of such an impact as well. Taking recourse to the metaphor, “the Sword of Damocles,” which exactly expresses the emotional turmoil that endangers Defne’s life, this paper examines how the past wreaks havoc on her existence and how her tribulations are transferred to the succeeding generation, Ada, her daughter. Though Defne wrestles with her daunting images and emotions of the past, helplessly anticipating recovery, the octopus-like grip of the past crushes and suffocates her to death. In the light of the novel’s events, the paper chronicles the interconnected sequences of forced displacement, the gradual but lethal progression to the disruption of one’s self, and the culmination in the form of the disintegration of her mind and body.

Index Terms—displacement, uprooted, repercussions, tribulations, trauma

I. INTRODUCTION

The term ‘transgenerational trauma’ refers to the instances whereby the traumatic events are passed down from directly traumatized generations to their offspring who have not been exposed to the initial traumatic event. If a person has gone through a devastating past of genocide, famine, or forced migration, the children might inherit the same stress response. The effects of trauma are physiological and psychological, resulting in vulnerability to physical and mental health issues. The repercussions, in the form of stress responses, invariably dismantle the affected person’s demeanour, spur stress disorders, and cause social disputes. Ultimately, the affected person becomes socially vulnerable and reclusive, retreating into a shell of isolation. Literature serves as a powerful tool in reflecting this traumatic state by linking the characters to the incident that changes their entire life. Through the characters, the writer projects how this trauma transcends from one generation to the next and explores its consequences.

Elif Shafak’s novel *The Island of Missing Trees*, published in 2021, is a captivating and sweeping novel about love and loss, identity and displacement, and trauma and renewal. At once heart-breaking and hopeful, traumatic and tranquilizing, the story spans several points in time, taking the readers from the beauty of the island of Cyprus to the brutal destructions caused by the military presence and from there to London. The story goes on to explore personal trauma on an intimate scale and collective trauma on a larger scale in countries divided by conflicts, through the character Ada. Ada carries with her a sadness that is not quite her own and grapples with an inner rage, loneliness, and a sense of trauma that makes her feel as if she does not belong anywhere. Against this background, the novel presents the traumatic state across generations and its consequences.

The novel *The Island of Missing Trees* is the best illustration of traumatized generations as the author effectively presents this concept through the realistic portrayal of major characters. Set against the historical and political turmoil of Cyprus, which forms the foundation of the narrative, the novel weaves together themes like war, exile, memory, love and reconciliation. It reveals the inherited trauma of the protagonist and her generation, highlighting its impact on relationships and personal identities. Through the platform of displacement and rootedness, the author provides insight into the impacts and implications of transgenerational trauma. This paper examines how the novel represents the continuation of trauma across generations, the force that stimulates its transmission, and the psychological consequences.

II. DISCUSSIONS

A. Displacement and Trauma

The bond with one's motherland is pristine and perpetual, and closely intertwined with one's physical and psychological existence. The motherland is a sublime emotion that takes root at birth, and gradually the bond grows so deep that any attempt to uproot it results in inexplicable trauma. The harrowing experiences of dislocation, disintegration, and displacement occur in different parts of the world in different forms. Displacement is a scar that can never be healed, a wound that can never be soothed, and a bleed that can never be stopped. The trauma of displacement is the scar of disintegration, a wound of dislocation, and a bleed of dissection. The demands of life, such as scouting for means of sustenance, may force one to endure such hardships, but the heart will always long for the solace and soothing spirit of the motherland. This is the reason why many people, who have migrated to other countries, searching for better pastures or a better life, yearn to return to their motherland in the twilight of their lives.

Even in the twenty-first century, conflicts continue to force people flee from their countries as refugees or displaced persons, which leaves a permanent scar on their minds that affects subsequent generations. Even though technology and economic development have made migration easy, and enabled the migrants to stay in touch with the family and roots, the effect, the impact, the consequences, and the conflict that migration inflicts have always been persistent and permanent, creating confusion and tension not only in migrants but also in the subsequent generations. Migrants constantly feel nostalgic for their homeland, from where they were uprooted, and find themselves in a new land with their pain, agony, and lost identity. As migrants, they have to cope with other issues like cultural, social, and psychological hurdles, which make them feel alienated. The recent aggression of Russia on Ukraine can very well be cited as an example. The desperate faces of people fleeing for their lives, the helpless victims queuing up and begging for one square meal a day, and the heart-wrenching cries of people for help have fallen on deaf ears. Though these victims are able to take asylum in other countries, the wounds inflicted on them from being uprooted from the lap of their motherland can never be healed and will have lifelong implications. The pulse of the motherland is strongly and innately cemented as a life-nourishing and life-supporting source, so any forced uprooting and replanting will have disastrous consequences, as reflected in *The Island of Missing Trees*. This is why the roots of existence in an alien country cannot derive nourishment from the foreign soil and always yearn for the flourishing in the native soil.

B. Memories of Homeland

Memories of a person are like echoes, resurfacing whenever an object or individual triggers them. Such memories often occur when one is far from a place or moment, repeatedly flashing in the mind like reminders. For immigrants, these memories are inseparable as they adapt to an entirely different environment. This leads to several problems such as identity crises, the search for roots, alienation, stress, and trauma. For those who eventually return to their homeland, these problems may diminish. However, for those who continue life in a new land, the challenges can become overwhelming. In *The Island of Missing Trees*, the major characters, Defne and Kostas, illustrate this experience, while their daughter Ada embodies its lasting impact through transgenerational trauma.

The plot of the novel moves between Cyprus and London. Defne and Kostas secretly meet at a bar called Happy Fig, which gets its name from a large, thriving fig tree standing tall adjacent to it. As Defne is Turkish and Kostas is Greek, their love is prohibited in a setting where both ethnicities are at odds with one another. As the civil war breaks out, Panagiota, Kostas's mother, decides to send him to live in London under her brother's control. With the expectation of returning within a few days, Kostas departs without realizing that his stay away will have no end. He leaves a note for Defne, but it is not received by her. Meanwhile, her family discovers that she is pregnant. Defne initially goes to British gynaecologist, Dr. Norman, who offers to assist her in getting an abortion. But unable to carry out her plan, she gives birth to a child and gives it up for adoption. Unfortunately, the infant passes away from malaria at the age of one.

Dr. Norman contacts Kostas who goes on to become a well-known botanist and ecologist. He writes to Defne often after arriving in London, but she never replies. Determining to visit Cyprus 25 years later, he discovers that Defne is employed by the Committee for Missing Persons (CMP), a UN organization dedicated to locating those who went missing during the conflict in Cyprus. They reunite and move to London. Before leaving, they visit the tavern and take the remains of a fig tree and replant it in their home in London. "The tree thus becomes a silent spectator to their relationship", say Nikita and Porselvi (2024, p. 151).

After their daughter Ada Kazantzakis's birth, Defne returns to work in the CMP in London. Both Kostas and Defne make a conscious decision to cut all ties with their motherland and also not to tell their daughter about their life in Cyprus. "I don't want Ada to be burdened by the things that hurt us. I want you to promise me, Kostas. You won't tell her much about our past" (Shafak, 2021, p. 317). Later, Defne's work with CMP triggers her haunting memories of her homeland, and, being unable to shed the garb of her past memories, she takes recourse in drinking, and gradually develops an excessive drinking habit. "...whether it's your own memory or your parents' or your grandparents,' this fucking pain becomes part of your flesh. It messes up your psychology and shapes how you think of yourself and others" (Shafak, 2021, p. 317).

Later, due to an alcohol overdose, Defne falls into coma and eventually passes away. Defne's death was the result of her haunting memories of her homeland. She struggled to establish herself in London but failed miserably as she was

heavily weighed down by the intensely nostalgic memories of her past. Her funeral is not attended by any of Defne's family members. Ada was conceived in Cyprus but was born and brought up in London. She has never visited her home country or met any of her relatives, and has never spoken either of her parents' languages, Turkish or Greek. Ada once had a close bond with her father, but Defne's death creates a distance between them. Though Ada mourns for her mother and longs for her presence, she develops a sense of anger towards Defne, believing that her mother's death was caused by her own selfish behaviour, as her happiness rested solely on returning to her homeland rather than being with her daughter in London, which contributed to the manner of her death. Ada believes that her mother's death has been caused by the haunting memories of her homeland. The traumatic life journey of Defne and Kostas as depicted in the novel cannot be viewed as a fictitious one or a figment of the writer's imagination.

The character of Ada slowly unravels under the burden of the tragic death of her mother, Defne. The increasing distance in her relationship with her father, and the estrangement from their family in Cyprus, who didn't even attend her mother's funeral, bring subtle and multifarious impacts on Ada's character. Ada was not told much about her past because her parents did not want her to be affected by the sorrows of their past. They never informed her about the island of Cyprus, to which they belonged. But Ada had always been curious and sensed the troubles of her shrouded past from absences and silences.

C. *The Inheritance of Transgenerational Trauma*

According to numerous studies, trauma affects at least one-third of the population in cases of displacement. The emotional need to return home- the place where one no longer belongs, and yet the place which is always carried within oneself as a dear emotion and the preceding and trailing trauma branching therefrom, is common features of displacement, whether forced or voluntary. In this age of political unrest and conflicts, marred by the angst of Manipur Ethnic Violence, the uncertainty of Israel-Palestine conflict, and the anxiety of Rohingya Refugees, the term 'Transgenerational trauma' has gained prominence arousing widespread deliberations about its premises. The biological and psychological components of this trauma are interconnected, as trauma begins when a parent experiences it. If these patterns are not processed and treated, the triggers of trauma will transit from parents to children and impact across generations. As generally viewed, the life experiences of parents' shape who they are, and, in turn, they influence the way their children develop.

In the novel *The Island of Missing Trees*, Ada is bound by the same spirit that ties her parents to their heritage. Defne and Kostas take pieces of the island with them such as the branches from the withering fig tree, when they move from Cyprus to London, which they plant in their household. Their daughter Ada had already been conceived in Cyprus. It is no wonder that Ada, who grows up in a house inundated with the remnants of her parents' Cyprus clutch, is inadvertently tailored to absorb the spirit of Cyprus. Ada has inherited her mother's sadness, which Shafak makes evident at the outset, even though Defne strives hard to keep it away from her daughter. Ada is caught in an inextricable maze of confusion, scouts helplessly for solace, not knowing how to unearth the root cause of her melancholy. "They ooze down slowly, a flow so slight as to be imperceptible, moving across time and space, until they find a crack in which to settle and coagulate. The apathy of an inherited trauma is random: you never know who might get it, but someone will" (Shafak, 2021, p. 128).

Ada's feelings of alienation and the frustration of adolescent life, intensified by her mother's death, build up over time and unexpectedly explode in the classroom. Ada was asked to share her opinions on family customs and memories during a class session. Ada found it difficult to reply because she did not know much about her family history. Consequently, Ada's most peculiar reaction—shrieking in frustration at the top of her voice, while the teacher and the students stared in horror, was the result of the humiliation of being exposed in front of the class as someone without a strong family history and strong family bonds. Ada screamed in frustration and was not sure why she was screaming. With family secrets fiercely kept from her and silences firmly preserved, this scream seems to be a symbolic verbalization of suppressed trauma. Ada released the feelings that had been accumulating inside her through this turbulent action. As there was no narrative, Ada was unable to relate to her past or her parents' home country, which was the cause of her outburst and tears. This finally thrust her feelings into an identity crisis. She unleashed her emotions that have been building up inside her through her scream that rattled her surroundings. Though the readers know that the obliterated past is the underlying cause of her trauma, there is none to unravel it until her Aunt Meryam steps in. Bharathi and Parameswari (2024) examine that "...the characters are experiencing emotional conflict in positioning the present that is very much burdened by their past" (p. 24).

When Meryam arrives during Ada's winter break, she becomes a means through which Ada expresses her frustration, inquisitiveness, and the desire for connection. Ada loves to listen to Meryam's accounts and starts to learn more about her parents' past in Cyprus and gradually gets reconciled with her past. Though a large portion of the novel recounts the tale of Defne and Kostas, it is Ada who is instrumental in unraveling the occurrences and obligations of the realm of transgenerational trauma. In Turkish, the name Ada means 'Island.' The choice of this name for their daughter itself reflects the couple's devotion to their native country and their attachment to their homeland. When Ada bears the name that her parents are inexorably linked to, it becomes a conjuring agent of the memories of their Cyprus past. O'Neill (2023) comments, "The novel suggests that the traumas of the past, embodied in the recovery of those disappeared in the conflict, resurface in second and third generations" (p. 798).

In this novel, Defne's inability to escape from her pain, her psychological suffering, and the dreadful reality of her affliction were passed on to the subsequent generation, as her daughter Ada also inherited them. It is through the character of Ada, that Shafak establishes the theme of 'transgenerational trauma', which is the key tone of the novel. Though Ada did not personally experience the agony and anguish of displacement, the trauma of her mother was passed on to her. To convey the magnitude of the suffocating and strangulating pain of Defne, Shafak uses the metaphor of the fig tree, which marvellously depicts the precarious and fragile balance of life that she struggled to establish in London. The roots of fig trees are deep and spread broadly in soil. When trees are uprooted and replanted, profuse care must be given to enable them to adapt to their new environment. And even with extreme nurturing, most of them fail to survive the displacement. The image of fig tree runs as an undercurrent throughout the novel explicating the trauma that Defne goes through. The novel portrays Defne's silence as a protective barrier against the potential, psychological and emotional damage that could have been caused by the disclosure of their experiences such as extramarital affair, the death of her unborn sibling, the separation, and the pain, suffering, and trauma.

D. Overcoming Transgenerational Trauma

In real life, unlike in history books, stories come to us not in their entirety but in bits and pieces, broken segments and partial echoes, a full sentence here, a fragment there, a clue hidden in between. In life, unlike in books, we have to weave our stories out of threads as fine as the gossamer veins that run through a butterfly's wings. (Shafak, 2021, p. 262)

With transgenerational trauma evolving as a universal phenomenon, escaping from its clutches needs a strong supporting system and proper channeling of emotions to mitigate the catastrophic effect. Ada had bottled up her emotions until she reached the verge of explosion and the external exhibition of trauma signs. "Through the preservation, transformation, and transmutation of traumatic memory, children of survivors strive to assimilate, redeem, and transform their tragic historical legacy" (Adelman, 1995, p. 365). The scream let out by her in the classroom signified the magnitude of the weight that she was carrying within herself. To release her from the jail of emotions, there was the therapeutic intervention of her Aunt Meryam, which resulted in her catharsis.

Ada knew that something was troubling her, but did not know how to articulate it until her mother's sister Meryam came to visit her. It was through Aunt Meryam that Ada realised much of her lineage, which no one had shared with her, the undisclosed trauma of her mother, and how the trauma had impacted Ada and imprisoned her present life as well. The revelations about her past and the unravelling of reasons which led to the tragic death of her mother had a tranquilizing effect on Ada. She underwent a purgation of pent-up emotions which had been corroding her life and eroding her existence. Eventually, Meryam's conversations with Ada about her mother and her life in Cyprus helped Ada to re-establish a connection with her parents' past. The dents in her personality, induced by the blow of Defne's painful past, were sealed. By giving Ada, the history of Cyprus and her parents' background, Meryam fills the gap in Ada's life and acts as a surrogate mother, helping her to mend the wounds. Sabbah and Ayuningtyas (2022) say, "...Meryam appears to be the character that challenges those who seem to be lost between past-present" (p. 68). Releasing herself from the deafening silence that had been strangulating her, Ada is free to move on with her life.

Liberated from her worrisome past and wilting pain, Ada steps into the bright horizon of cheer and contentment. She starts a new chapter of happiness in life and goes back to school without being loaded with the baggage of apprehension and ambiguity. However, the yearning to walk on the soil trodden by her mother, to relish the fragrance of the air so cherished by her mother, and to be soothed by the breeze which her mother always pined for, had always been throbbing in her as a flicker of light that refused to be extinguished. Ada's happiness knew no bounds when her father promised to take her to Cyprus to experience the island, which she knew would enrich her future and embolden her foundation. When Ada says, "I'll come to the Island, I just want to meet islanders, like myself" (Shafak, 2021, p. 338), the readers can experience the profuse gush of suppressed desires being given an outlet.

E. Psychic and Physical Implications of Trauma

If the psychological exertion of trauma is disastrous, its physiological exertion is equally perilous. While the psychological impact is more on a personal level and the grip is mostly subjective, the effects of the physiological impact are more outward and ostensible for the family and society, prompting them to be active participants in the process of recovery of the affected. Atkinson (2017) suggests that trauma is a "complex, repetitive structure of feeling that actively organizes the present" (p. 1).

The help and moral support extended by outside agents such as family members, friends and relatives go a long way in speeding up the reconciliation process. To navigate further into the intricacies involved, it will be instructive to cite a few man-made disasters such as the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings, the Bhopal Gas Tragedy, and the Chernobyl disaster. Turning the pages of history since then, it has been accurately documented that the physical deformities, genetic disorders, and neurological impairments are permanently stamped on these hapless victims of the aforementioned tragedies. The hard-hitting reality is that the vicious air of man-induced calamities is still and will forever be, permeated by man's avarice and animosity, so that generations born thereafter breathe in that air.

When a person is born with physical deformities as a result of the distortive forces that have been passed through generations, no explanation and no argument can give a convincing answer to the victim when a legitimate question is raised on who is responsible for his physical trauma. As the physiological trauma is extremely explicit and cannot be

blanketed by the suppression of one's feelings internally, it is inevitable that along with the victims, the people surrounding them also walk through the lanes of trauma while watching them being in a crippled state. "Traumatic affect rumbles, spills, bursts forth, erupts, leaks, emits, fumes, whispers, screams, and acts from its restless grave, because at the deepest level it seeks recognition. It demands witnessing and memorial and it haunts until it gets it" (Yusin, 2017, p. 131).

It is inferred that both physiological and psychological trauma are two sides of the same coin. The degree of grip may vary: sometimes the psychological trauma will be ruling the personality and sometimes the physiological one. In some other cases, both will crush the victim mentally and physically. In the backdrop of the events in the novel *The Island of Missing Trees*, the psychological facet of trauma is unravelled through the victim Ada, though the same doesn't inflict the violation of her physicality. "Physically fit but mentally unfit" can be the summing-up statement of Ada's personality. Though the varying magnitude of invasion in the varying altitudes of psychological and physiological spheres can be the feature of trauma, the crushing effect in both the cases will be ferocious and far-reaching.

III. CONCLUSION

"Is it really difficult to shed the weight of one's troublesome past?" "How does one navigate through the remnants of the past without being choked by its pressure?" These are two poignant questions that Defne's life raises before the readers. Though the binding thread of the novel is rooted in transgenerational trauma and is embodied by Defne, the readers have more encounters with Kostas than Defne. Defne is given a more subdued presence in the novel, maybe to figuratively implicate that the burden of past breaks one's confidence, pulling one into a trench of torments. While following the progression of the story line, it is brought to notice that the character Defne is mostly hidden under various masks of vulnerability, disappointment, detachment, dejection and death. On gaining further insights into the novel, the readers can conclude that the different character shades painted on Defne are an effective writing mechanism adopted by Shafak to forcefully convey her mental struggle. This technique comes across as an effective writing tool and is more powerful than words, as the readers get to inhale the intricacies of her character and feel along with her.

Generational trauma, like an untended wound, does not go away on its own, and unresolved trauma gets worse over time. Prolonged exposure to trauma can also put a person at the risk of mental and physical derailment. Even though the shock waves left by traumatic experiences can continue beyond a lifetime, coping strategies and effective supportive mechanisms will regulate emotions and manage stress. The novel *The Island of Missing Trees* amazingly addresses the topic of transgenerational trauma and sets the ground for constructive and productive discussions about this reality and the related coping mechanisms. In a world of escalating violence, this book is the harbinger of hope, reassuring the people around the world affected by the trauma of displacement that they can come out of the dim alleys of isolation and shield their successive generation from the scorching heat of trauma.

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