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## Posthumanism in Literature: Re-constructing Selfhood in Elif Shafak's *The Island of Missing Trees*

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### Abstract

The article brings to light the incongruities of Humanism that allow us interrogating its basic concepts which have already been complicated and undermined by over population, climate crisis, global warming, technological advancements etc. A close reading of "The Island of Missing Trees", a 21st century novel by Elif Shafak (Turkish-British) is considered here a textual site for exploring a new direction (posthumanism) towards the study of humanities. The text, if read and analyzed by application of the tenets under post humanism (still an emerging area) facilitates reframing our understanding of being/existence in contemporary culture. The process of constructing selfhood or self-identity beyond the scope of Humanism is an ongoing process in the novel that leads to reconfiguration of our selfhood by continuous interaction with other than humans. Having flourished recently, post humanism in interpretation of literature is grounded on certain key tenets put forth by some of the most influential theorists like Rosi Braidotti, Robert Pepperell, N. Katherine Hayles etc. Understanding the theme, narrative technique, style, form and structure of the selected novel comprehensively, the study shows the projection of the posthuman conditions where the construction of self in relation to technology, temporality and reality draws our attention. By doing so, the study will establish how Shafak's text challenges previous understanding of the readers and destabilize the dichotomy between self and the other.

**Keywords:** Post humanism, Selfhood, Interpretation, Self and the other

"...loneliness is a human invention...For us everything is interconnected." (Shafak 31)

In a conversation with Kostas, the Fig Tree ruminates over the state of loneliness that produces angst in human minds due to the constructed hierarchal position of humans over others in a world driven by anthropocentric values.

### Introduction:

The study brings to light the incongruities of Humanism that allow us interrogating its basic concepts which have already been complicated and undermined by over population, climate crisis, global warming, technological advancements etc. A close reading of "The Island of Missing Trees", a 21st century novel by Elif Shafak (Turkish-British) is considered

here as a textual site for exploration of a new direction (posthumanism) towards the study of humanities. The text, if read and analyzed by application of the tenets under post humanism (still an emerging area) facilitates reframing our understanding of being/existence in contemporary culture. The process of constructing selfhood or self-identity beyond the scope of Humanism is an ongoing process in the novel that leads to reconfiguration of our selfhood by continuous interaction with other than humans. Having flourished recently, post humanism in interpretation of literature is grounded on certain key tenets put forth by some of the most influential theorists like Rosi Braidotti, Robert Pepperell, N. Katherine Hayles etc. Understanding the theme, narrative technique, style, form and structure of the selected novel comprehensively, the study shows the projection of the posthuman conditions where the construction of self in relation to technology, temporality and reality draws our attention. By doing so, the study will establish how Shafak's text challenges previous understanding of the readers and destabilize the dichotomy between self and the other.

Humanist ideology embedded in our modes and structures of being in the world comes under scrutiny as technologies in diverse forms start intervening into our life and existence. Responding to the unavoidable interface of technology and our being in the world, certain writers in 20th/21st century through literary productions have been engaged in asking and answering the questions like "what does it mean to be human?" leading to reconfiguration of our identity or selfhood as human. In doing so, they have been inclined to unravel the incongruities of humanist ideology. Elif Shafak's novel "The Island of Missing Trees" problematizes the humanist ideology in a post-human landscape where animals, plants, species, technological innovations are constituents of our everyday life. In examining the construction of identity or in defining one's self as human in the changing landscape, there arises the need for posthumanist understanding of the world where we live today in order to make sense of and act within our current reality. Literature is not solely a mirror of life or reality; it responds to and constantly interacts with infinite realities around us. Literary imagination is not bound to the laws of logic but instead "makes possible the imagining of possibilities" (Ghosh 128 cited in O'Neill). To advance imagining or/and reimagining further possibilities, we need to consider how the technologically mediated current culture, environment and experiences have direct bearing on our subjectivity, shaping and altering it through constant contact and interaction. Fictions or other forms of literature produce an avenue to accentuate, distort and manipulate humanist ideology in an attempt to articulate posthuman condition. Nothing in the world can be external to a human because the extent of a human cannot be fixed. Posthuman condition proposes that human beings do not exist in the sense in which we ordinarily think of them as being separate entities in perpetual antagonism with nature that is external to them. Certain authors have used their fictional works to encourage a re-imagination of selfhood, one that is inseparable from its body, its environment, and its experiences, forcing readers to consider their interlocking significance in human lives. Adopting diverse genres, authors like Shafak, Patricia Lockwood, John Darnielle, Margaret Atwood et al. pave way to a new direction in literary studies.

In comprehensively understanding "who are we?" amidst fluctuating realities, fiction can allow us a space to re-examine contradictions of our identity. Contemplating on our current location, Rosi Braidotti reminds that we enter into post-human condition after

passing through the conditions of the postmodern, the post-colonial, the post-industrial, the post-communist and the post-feminist conditions. Posthumanism in a much broader sense draws us to the cracks that have been there in the watertight description of the human. The cracks are visible in the context of scientific and technological advances, artificial intelligence, novel biotechnologies that blur the boundaries of human/non-human. Thus in "The Posthuman" Rosi Braidotti states that

"...the posthuman condition introduces a qualitative shift in our thinking about what exactly is the basic unit of common reference for our species, our polity and our relationship to the other inhabitants of this planet. This issue raises serious questions as to the very structures of our shared identity- as humans- amidst the complexity of contemporary science, politics and international relations." (1-2)

We are living in a world/reality mediated by new technology, science and knowledge and anthropocentric world view undergoes radical changes. Humanism reaches its heyday during Enlightenment period and its ideology makes us know that human brain determines or causes mental phenomenon by undermining the body and the world beyond. Pierce argues that

"Humanism imbues the humans with intrinsic values and places them above the earth, environment, animals, non-living objects and dehumanized humans by considering the historical criteria of being educated, white, male, protestant, and land-owning." (3)

It is undeniable that western world for ages seems to be valuing the legacy of the centrality of humans and the progress of humankind. The ideology of the west that had been functional since the dawn of civilizing mission based on humanism. Posthumanism, however, is a theory born out of a need to rectify the problematic structures and belief systems of Humanism, a philosophy that dates back to ideas conceived during the Enlightenment period in Western Europe. Post humanism stands as a counter to the conceptualization of human consciousness as advocated by humanist thinker, Descartes and this is visible in his oft-quoted pronouncement "...I think; therefore I am..." (Descartes 25). This creates the hierarchy of mind in relation to the body. Rosi Braidotti contends that "the human, [instead of] being sacralized as a pre-established given, is posited as process, interactive and open-ended" (60) and thus emphasizes the evolving understandings of what it means to become and be considered human. In *The Posthuman Condition: Consciousness beyond the brain*, Pepperell says: "However we should not be too conceited about this position, since it is only with the benefit of the technical and scientific advances described herein that we can conceive of a universe in which humans and nature are not separated." (33) To him, this distinction is invalid and he states that we hold the view for understanding our present condition only. Pepperell is of the opinion that an embodied and extended view of consciousness pose a challenge to the traditional idea of human exceptionalism that allows him exploring the profound interconnections that exist among humans, technology and environment. The schema of posthumanism, instead of treating the human as an agency upon other than humans, emplaces humans, nonhumans, objects and the environment around us on an equal plane, each co-constructs dynamic subjectivities. Posthumanism calls into question if consciousness and reality are discrete categories. It relies on blurring line between the thing that thinks and the thing that is

thought about. Theorists like Braidotti, Pepperell and Hayles are of the opinion that we are quite inseparable from not our bodies but our environment, other people and non-living objects. To Braidotti, post human predicament puts in place “a displacement of the lines of demarcation between structural differences, or ontological categories, for instance, between the organic and the inorganic, the born and the manufactured, flesh and metal, electronic circuits and organic nervous systems” (89). Parameters of humanity that are seemingly distinct seem to unravel under close scrutiny, such as human/machine, human/animal and in the same way, the distinctions of what is real, natural, or organic as we think, invite interrogations.

In current culture, our mundane reality is intervened by technological innovations and as a result, our identities become unmoored from their spatio-temporal confinements. Against this backdrop, questions regarding understanding of subjectivity in relation to time, reality, and technology function within them and how a new configuration is produced for the need to articulate a societal shift in meaning and knowledge. Humanistic philosophy from the Renaissance to the period of Enlightenment internalize the humanist ideology which produces a narrative that humankind is the master creator of all modern and contemporary inventions but this ideology never acknowledges the ways in which we are being recreated and redefined or reconstructed every day. Technologies are the products of human creative activity and “... become in turn the media within which human ontology is realized” (Graham 224). So, we are bound to hold a belief that technological advancements made possible by humans play a crucial role in the process of our generating subjectivities or our being in the world.

Understanding the theme, narrative technique, form and structure of the select novel, the study projects the construction of self in relation to technology, temporality and reality. In doing so, the text seems to be challenging the previous understanding of the readers. The study puts forth the post humanist contradictions to Humanism to support the framework that selfhood is neither fixed nor constant and is (re)-produced through continual interaction with our surroundings by reshaping our knowledge of the world. Thus, the assumed truths are subject to change and evolve as the world and technology change and evolve, supported by theorists like Braidotti, Pepperell, and Hayles. The study is based on the contradictions for current understanding of ourselves and our world. Edward Said in *Orientalism* argues that “...society and literary culture can only be understood and studied together.” (27) Citing Rita Felski (new literary history critic), Pierce is of the view that one of the functions of literature is to draw us towards certain attitudes, postures and modes and engagement (Pierce 10). The act of reading a literary text helps us re-imagining our being in the world and our identity.

Shafak exploits a multi-layered narrative that weaves together human stories of love, loss, and displacement due to ethnic/political conflicts of Cyprus with the perspectives of a narrating fig tree. The first-person narration of the fig tree establishes a connection between the natural world and the world of humans. The stories of Ada, Kostas and Defne become interspersed with the fig tree's perspectives. Readers understand the shared experiences of the humans and other than humans in the text.

### **Shafak's writing strategy beyond anthropocentrism:**

“The Island of Missing Tree” is not written about the tree but the novel is a writing with tree. The most effective narrative strategy adopted by Shafak is her inclusion of both

human and non-human characters in a parallel plane. Being ethically responsible, the novelist is very critical of the anthropocentric ranking of the plants as inferior to other animals in the world. Hence the novel makes a claim that "Human life is about becoming, but a becoming -with other life forms." (Nayar 31) Shafak re-imagines the human system as having become-with other life forms on the earth planet. The fig tree witnesses and remembers alongside human characters. Le Guin's *The Word for World is Forest* (1972) also reflects the Athshe forest having a collective consciousness that resists human mastery. Most of the posthumanists take issue with human exceptionalism. Trees are the actively communicating actors that co-create a world they inhabit. We are drawn into a close, emphatic encounter with other than humans without instilling human consciousness in them. Ethical engagement with non-human suffering allows literature to recognize damage and loss in the non-human world with interspecies responsibility. The question arises as "is it possible to write with trees, avoiding both the projection of human traits onto them and the denial of that agency?" It is true that when a tree is given a consciousness or a narrative voice by use of metaphors or other figurative devices, this process reproduces human centred logic that is overtly challenged by the novelist. It is true that war, violence and security threats do not affect only humans as *Homo sapiens* does not exist in isolation as a bounded entity but in a relation with multiple others (Clark 19). The fig tree survives war, displacement, and environmental degradation. The novelist does not want to humanize the tree by reducing it to a mere projection of human emotion. The tree reflects on the consequences of migration and displacement. Though it is always attentive to human behaviour, yet it retains its own perspective.

### **Intervention of Technology and Ada's Construction of Selfhood:**

Selfhood, in posthumanist terminologies, is an entity produced through continual interaction with our surroundings and it is neither fixed nor constant. Our knowledge of the world, reality and truth are subject to change and evolve as the world is mediated by technologies change. Technology has advanced so much that it becomes difficult to tell what is real or fake. For Ada, technological devices play a significant role in her identity formation. She is by nature techno-savvy and in moments of identity crisis, technology facilitates her relationship with the past though it is left unshared by her parents and other members in her family. She desires to access her family history and roots through internet by breaking the spatio-temporal barriers. Ada's connection with the digital world reflects her primary struggle with trauma, cultural rootlessness and the profound silence surrounding her family's Cypriot past. A teenager born in London, she experiences existential crisis and confusion about her place in the world caused by deliberate silence about her parents' origin in Cyprus. Her uncontrolled scream in history class at school makes her feel shame and this event expresses her inability to share her inner turmoil in her physical environment. Failure to locate herself in between London and Cyprus, she creates the "Third Space" in virtual world to make a search for exploring the fragmented cultures and histories, her parents suppressed. Ada is colonized by her parents and thus she fails know who she is now. She is a Cypriot migrant who never had the opportunity to visit the island of her parents. The London setting and her distance from past form a backdrop to her struggle with a rootless identity. With that burden, she is a misfit for the present and the past. She knows well that one's identity is never constructed in avoid. Third space for her is more liberatory and productive where she is able to construct her

new identity. Digital world is another avenue to understand about who she is by a range of cultural materials found online to reconstruct her identity that is equally authentic though disconnected from lived experiences.

Perturbed by the inherited trauma /intergenerational which is unspeakable, Ada being obsessed with the digital world comprising of Internet, Mobile wants to get free from human identity in crisis due to her suffering from rootless past or present diasporic position. Her obsession with the world of technology is an escape route to stabilize her identity constructed by interconnectness between human and non-human as the novelist states that "Despite her father's warnings not to use technology at night, which he claimed delayed circadian rhythms, she liked to browse the web when she couldn't get to sleep" (Shafak 89). Here the hierarchy between real and unreal is noticeable in the humanist world. Belonging to the older generation, Kostas (Ada's father) always bemoans the obsession of her daughter's disconnect from the so-called real world and even he warns her not to use technology at night. Here father's construction of the Humanist self is implicitly threatened by her daughter's obsession with technological innovations of contemporary society. For her, both human and technological subjects are co-constructing, that a posthuman subjectivity is enacted. She is living in avoid at present due to their parents' suppression of their past full of traumas. Her cultural obsession is with what is real? Because the digital world is made up of human and non-human actors, online personas, trends, codes, clouds, algorithms, and machines, it integrates all of these entities into a collective subjectivity, one which cannot be sustained within Humanist delineations of Self. As posthumanist scholar, Elaine Graham argues, the liberal humanist subject remains "untouched and unpenetrated by invasive technologies" (288) and develops through reason and scientific rationality. But the "...posthuman subject is an amalgam, a collection of heterogeneous components, a material-informational entity whose boundaries undergo continuous construction and reconstruction" (Hayles 3). Getting a link from an unknown mobile number, Ada had the chance again to see her "awful video" (Shafak 90) made viral in internet by her techno-savvy peers and followed by many comments, then a stab of shame lanced through her affecting her self-esteem. The whole world can witness the insanity of her. For Ada, virtual world is more credible than that of the real one. The boundary of private and public space gets blurred due to the intrusion of technology. For her, there is no significant difference between the lived reality and the virtual world. As an avid user of Internet, she is seen enmeshed in online space most of the times. For her Cyprus (homeland) is a bigger mystery and to unravel it, she "...had seen pictures on the internet, but she had not once travelled to the place after which she was named." (Shafak 17) This implies that this is the posthuman condition of attempting to reconceptualise self in relation to changing technological advancements. Following the directions of posthumanism, we are in a position to think that reality turns into a construct which is mutually agreed upon with a supposed logic, privileging certain truths over others. That agreed upon constructions with regard to what is real/unreal becomes problematic in their inability to incorporate the massive technological advancements around us that start reshaping our realities.

### **Digital Truth Seeking:**

The novel makes Ada to search for another reality/truth/post-truth or identity. She uses the internet to overcome parental silence. She often uses digital resources to enquire the

historical violence and colonialism that her parents try to hide from her eyes. Pointing out to the weaknesses of her father, she says that "He doesn't seem to realize that everything's on internet... The world has changed" (Shafak 106). This is a critique on Kostas's inability to cope up with technological innovations. Ada wants to construct her identity through technological means while her aunt, Meryem always relies on oral memory and history for construction of identity. At any time, she (Ada) is more interested to access "world wide web" for information of the homeland of her parents. The viral video filmed by her classmates in history class creates a digital interconnectedness on the one hand and on the other, she contemplates that the "... humiliating video would be on the internet forever, her whole life" (Shafak 89). Here the crisis of humanist self in Ada is visible allowing the readers to understand shifting realities/truths in contemporary world. She experiences anxiety of the two different worlds. She is scared of if her video remains forever in the internet. The novel acknowledges that real is no longer a stable signifier and that different realities can still be integrated into material embodiment. The technology can have an unexpected outcome, one that directly affects and influences living agents. Strangers around the world start recording their own videos of screaming for global solidarity. This act reflects a shared human desire to be heard for overcoming the silences imposed by traumatic histories. Post-humanism asks us to associate consciousness with the material world (which encompasses digital and imaginary worlds as well as it is through and within the material world that they are constructed), and further to integrate them.

#### **Kostas connection with non-humans:**

The novel challenges the traditional notion about the human as the active agent in the world. The fig tree is the central character with its own consciousness, memories and narrative voice. The novelist subverts anthropocentric standpoints and makes our existence more meaningful in a shared world. Characters try to grapple with fluid and multiple identities shaped by displacement, diaspora and their entanglements with nonhuman entities reflecting the nomadic subjectivity as introduced by Rosi Braidotti in "Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory." It appears in the novel that the normative subjectivity that defines and categorizes life forms into groups like 'animals', 'plants' and 'humans' comes under scrutiny for its exclusiveness. The fig tree in the novel very openly criticises the human world. As it says,

"I believe one reason why humans find it hard to understand plants is because, in order to connect with something other than themselves and genuinely care about it, they need to interact with a face..." (Shafak 45).

The fig tree lays bare the limitations of humanist ideology. Kostas is a botanist and defender of wildlife. He finds more order and solace in trees than in human society. It is true that selfhood is not an innate, fixed given, it must be shaped. That shaping is done by the world around us, through our constant interactions with other people, animals, objects, and the environment. Kostas (father of Ada) creates an entirely new self in order to make sense of how vastly he has changed in London by being a scientist (a botanist). Instead of acknowledging traumatic experiences, he thinks that abrupt environmental changes might alter his subjectivity and he will no longer recognize the same.

**Conclusion:**

Though some of the characters in the novel believe in humanist ideology, yet some continue their struggle to negotiate with post humanist landscape. The novel subverts the traditionally held assumption of a human centred hierarchy by implying that trees can be written with, beyond the nature-culture binary. This allows literature to actively participate in multispecies worlds based on relationality, communication and ethical imagination. The novel provides us an understanding that we need to reconfigure our identity at the present moment by re-drawing the boundaries of socio-cultural location. The posthuman process of reimagining subjectivity necessarily requires reimagining how non-human entities are incorporated into and are part of our process of becoming. This necessarily requires redefining our cultural reality. The screens, technology influence human decision. This agency again desolidifies the boundaries of our cultural reality, as something constructed begins to construct its creators. It is rather through our changing dynamics and emergent structures of being, of which both human and technological subjects are co-constructing, that a posthuman subjectivity is enacted. The novel challenges the exclusionary practices of humanism in categorizing living beings into groups like humans, animals, plants in a hierarchal ordering which is very close to white man's invention.

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