



Identity Crisis as Intergenerational Trauma Progeny in Shafak's *The Island of Missing Trees*

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Abstract

The current study seeks to highlight the role of magical realism as a literary technique in communicating and processing the neurosis of intergenerational trauma to overcome the protagonist's identity crisis in Elif Shafak's novel, *The Island of Missing Trees*. In her latest novel set in Cyprus and the UK, the Turkish-British novelist pictures Ada's identity confusion as a progeny of repressed collective memories and traumas. Shafak funnels such a psychopathological load by inserting magical realism as a medium to convey and likewise liberate such repression. To unearth and surface the traumatic repression that was intentionally subdued into the abyss of oblivion- this analysis brings about the conception of the uncanny as theorized by Sigmund Freud, for whom the unconscious construction of the psyche is asserted as the engine behind one's fluid identity formation. Accordingly, Shafak incorporated an uprooted talkative fig tree, to voice traumatic narratives and surface the buried-alive psychic accumulations that have been silenced and evaded by Ada's parents for years. Even though such a plant has been a displaced outgrowth of a small branch from the original tree, its perseverance of the mother tree memories incarnates Ada's belief of collective memory as an inevitably inherited legacy.

Keywords: Collective Memories, Identity Crisis, Intergenerational Trauma, Magical Realism, Uncanny

Introduction

Elif Shafak, of *The Bastard of Istanbul* fame, rose to the fore as a prolific and award-winning writer of contemporary Turkish literature. Shafak writes in both English and Turkish, encapsulating both worlds in diasporic micro-cosmos. Her novels mine into the confines of Turkish women's cultural and social struggles in exile. Shafak is fond of culturally hybrid and ambivalent spaces, as she claims in her interview, "The feeling of being 'in between things' is good for [writers]." (Shafak, 2014) Accordingly, she sets a stage to promote cultural exchange and negotiation. Shafak is engrossed in the reappraisal and re-writing of historical events and conflicts from a different perspective, where women and socially disregarded voices are recognized.

Shafak traces diasporic stories of first and second generations drawing on changes and intergenerational challenges of miscommunication. A particular focus is shed on the young generation's relation with his/her homeland and cultural heritage. Her narratives provide a

neutral space for the other to enunciate his/her side of the story, as she opines "We need to tell different stories, to humanise the other." (2020) Shafak seeks reconciliation with the past. Her discourses call for confronting the dark side and overlooked corners of society's past instead of burying them. Particularly, she foregrounds stories of civil wars, partition, and segregation, as "People are constantly trying to erase the past, but the past resists." (Shafak, 2014)

An epitome of Elif Shafak's writing in the realm of cross-culturalism, ideological confusion, and hybridity, is her monumental and most recent novel, *The Island of Missing Trees* (2021) The novel revolves around a family's strive to survive society's repulsion and antagonism in a period of a brutal civil war, bringing about the parents contradictory cultural and historical pertinence and dilemma of belonging. The novel storyline advances to and fro bringing the past and present, the "here" and "there", side by side in an intriguing intergenerational saga. Ada Kazantzakis, a sixteen years old orphan teenager living with her father in London, mines into the hidden past of her parents, a Greek Christian Cypriot Kostas, and a Turkish Muslim Cypriot Defne, who grew up, met and loved each other in their homeland island, Cyprus, in spite of the partition and the cultural divisions that rendered them later poles apart.

Ada is torn between the sense of exclusion due to her classmates' intolerance and the sorrows of losing her mother which accumulate in a sudden and unexplained breakdown in the history class. Aside from her botanist Father, whom Ada finds different from her surrounding Londoners with his baggy and rather ragged clothes, she lives with a fig tree in the backyard that was brought from the island. The latter serves as a narrator for some parts of the novel and a connection between Ada and her to-be-discovered origins. However, the next pages bring about another link to Ada's origins, which is her maternal Aunt, Meryem. Although Ada was not fond of the recent visitor, the two succeeded to get closer. Such a bond offered Ada the chance to know more and more about Cyprus's myths, cultural mores, and most importantly her mother, who committed suicide by overdosing herself.

Dissimilar to most exilic narratives which are limited to the clash between the culture of a homeland and that of the host country, *The Island of Missing Trees* portrays a division that stems from the very motherland demographic makeup. Cyprus sheltering Muslim and Christian, Greek and Turkish, Easterners and Westerners has been a home of contradictions and a battlefield of a gory civil war. Screening memories and events in Cyprus and London alike, the novel is saturated with themes of traumatic dislocation and relocation. In spite of their dwelling in London, their existence is rather trapped in a distorted dimension of another distant space and time. They escaped the war but its traumatic burden accompanied them. Having Cyprus as a setting in *The Island of Missing Trees*, renders the concept of displacement as a rather generational inheritance.

In *The Island of Missing Trees* Elif Shafak dissents the decision of diaspora parents, of traumatic past, who cut their children from their roots in hopes to amputate an intergenerational trauma and stop the spread of an inborn historically-laden burden. It is rather suggestive of an alternative vision where second-generation diaspora subjects are brought up to reconcile with their parents' traumatic past, reconnect with their origins, and embrace their hybrid affinities. This paper addresses Shafak's adoption of magical realism as a functional and potent literary technique to convey and articulate the heavy and convolute intergenerational trauma. In addition, it highlights the depiction of an identity crisis as an aftermath of such past traumas.

Magical Realism as Trauma Processing Narrative Mode

The Island of Missing Trees foregrounds the civil war and partition aftermaths on Cyprians, with a great focus on the oft-neglected side that is beyond the physical causalities. The intergenerational trauma with its psychic side effects over the upcoming offspring is detailed. Shafak brings attention to Grigam's theorem that heredity is beyond gene transmission "Every cell in the body is impregnated with consciousness that is laden with the thought forms and imprints passed down from generation to generation." (Grigam, 1988, as cited in Coetzer, 2007) To liberate such a traumatic and repressed narrative Shafak opts for magical realism as a psychically expressive apparatus.

The literary term, compressing the oxymoron of the real, the magical, and the intricacy of their antithetical encounter opens a space of expression beyond the constraints of each binary opposite. Salman Rushdie defines it as the "commingling of the improbable and the mundane." (Rushdie, 1982, as cited in Bowers, 2004, p. 3) In effect, to a large extent, the term's prevalence and circulation are granted to its paradoxical peculiarities. (Bowers, 2004, p. 1) As García Márquez elucidates, an indisputable part of common people's everyday life reality is the inherited and narrated superstitions, myths, and legends. So the presence of such recounted stories seeps into people's perception of reality and even their response towards the world around them. (Williams, 1985, p. 79 as cited in Bowers, 2004, p. 38) Remarkably, magical realism has been used most in the novels and poetics of postcolonial and diaspora writers. Numerous postcolonial critics, such as Brenda Cooper, have expressed the role of the literary mode in promoting and celebrating non-fundamental and counter purity discourses.

Being a juxtaposition of contradiction itself, it bestows narratives beyond racial and ethnic purity glorification. (Bowers, 2004, p. 4) Lois Zamora and Wendy Faris believe that the multiplicity of worlds and perspectives in magical realism tend to showcase and display the liminal and in-between position of its writers amongst those worlds. (Zamora and Faris, 1995, as cited in Bowers, 2004, p. 79) Conspicuously, Chanady points out that magical realism endows a standpoint of narrative that mirrors the "absence of obvious judgements about the veracity of the events and the authenticity of the world view expressed by characters in the text." (Chanady, 1985, as cited in Bowers, 2004, p. 3) Hence, depending on the magical realist mode, the postcolonial writer can reproduce discourses and retell stories about events, histories, and cultural legacies, regardless of the already written imperial narratives. The very emergence and development of magical realism are birthed in formerly colonized countries that have been marginalized, repressed, and silenced. This literary mode, hence, becomes a container that accommodates the amalgam of intergenerational repressed histories, memories, and traumas.

In their critical collection, *Magical Realism as Narrative Strategy in the Recovery of Historical Traumata*, which trails the intersection between trauma studies and the insertion of magical realism as a mode of narrative, Eugene Arva and Hubert Roland (2014) describe the way such a literary mode caters to "a comparative approach to literary history." (p. 7) So this reflects the way Shafak impersonated the fig tree as a narrator to tell the untold and liberate narratives beyond the written history. She highlighted the occurrences which are beyond the recognition of the senses and that are rather attributed to the supernatural. The magical realist mode of narrative has become an expressive and symbolic medium for communicating "extreme events". It has proved its intensity in transporting the psychological laden of repressed histories, wars, forced displacement, and genocides. (Eugene & Hubert, 2014, p. 9) Kostas and Defne's extreme feelings of pain and dread due to displacement, the loss of their child, and the grief for the disappearance of their beloved friends are magically transformed into a felt reality. Magical realist texts and trauma victims share the same "ontological" state. Both are a part of reality that is evading "witnessing through telling." (Eugene & Hubert,

2014, p. 9) Such a mode weaves literary passages that “re-present the unrepresentable. Repressed and painful memories, which are estranged and eliminated from narrativization” due to traumatic encounters, are resurfaced as “magical-realist writing is in fact apt to simulate pain because it can turn it into ... perceivable objects that language is able to capture ...” (Eugene & Hubert, 2014, p. 10)

Magical Realism and the Uncanny Manifestation

Irene Guenther explicates that “The juxtaposition of ‘magic’ and ‘realism’ reflected...the monstrous and marvellous Unheimlichkeit [uncanniness] within human beings.” (1995, as cited in Bowers, 2004, p. 9) The psyche’s hidden, buried, and forsaken experiences and encounters are implicitly seeped, revealed, and uncovered. Bowers adds that the magical enclosed in the concept’s terminology is to a great extent affected by Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalytical studies and findings about the unconscious and its repression mechanisms. (Bowers, 2004)

As has been induced, magical realism enclosing the contradiction of the magical and the real side by side confers a space of equivocation for the manifestation of the uncanny. Since the uncanny itself as defined by Sigmund Freud is a feeling of contradiction. It is when familiar objects and situations become messengers and unfamiliarly suggestive, insinuating feelings of horror, fear, and dread. (Felluga, 2015, p. 316-317) Schelling further defines the uncanny as the thing that was supposed to remain hidden and secret, and yet comes to light. So such a feeling is best expressed by a narrative mode that magicalizes the normal reality. Homi Bhabha attributes the uncanny peculiarities to the disturbing and unsettling narratives of postcolonial writing which unveil and voice repressed memories and histories in a manner that dissolves the division between one’s private world and the public: “it captures something of the estranging sense of the relocation of the home and the world ... that is the condition of extra-territorial and cross-cultural initiations.” (p. 9, as cited in Felluga, 2015, p.317)

Through those magical realist lines, the uncanny stances are unleashed. It prevails in moments of unexplainable confusion. As Nicholas Royle (2003) “explains “the uncanny is destined to elude mastery, it is what cannot be pinned down or controlled.” (p. 15-16) Such a description brings about Ada’s uncontrolled and unexplained scream. The uncanny encounter seems to proceed with the history class teacher’s statement, “We’ll be studying migration and generational change next term” (Shafak, 2021, p. 10). A normal subject triggered in Ada an abnormal response, which brings about Freud’s explanation of the uncanny, stating that “As soon as something actually happens in our lives which seems to confirm the old, discarded beliefs we get a feeling of the uncanny.” (p. 148 as cited in Felluga, 2015, p. 317) The teacher’s words about “migration and generational change” triggered repressed and disregarded feelings and memories. The novel depicts Ada’s screaming incident as “what she experienced right now was a different kind of dizziness. She had the sense of entering a trap, a door locking behind her, the click of a latch falling into place. She felt paralysed.” (Shafak, 2021, p. 143).

Identity Crisis and In-betweenness

Identity crisis is traced in the sense of dissonance between one’s inner self and the self perceived by society, which Shafak (2021) alluded to as “Nothing about her belonged to her previous self...” (p. 23) The implications of such estrangement are further noted after Ada’s fit of screaming as she ceases to recognize the boundary between the inner self and the self constructed by her social surrounding, “Was it another student who had whispered these words or a spiteful voice inside her own head? She would never know.” (Shafak, 2021, p. 22)

As James Clifford (1997) clarifies in his book, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*, the spectrum of alienation within diaspora subjects is manifest in ‘the mix of coercion and freedom in cultural (dis)identifications, and the pain of loss and displacement.’ (p. 257-258) Indeed, alienation experienced by Eastern diaspora subjects in the Western exile is manifest in the paradoxical scenes of cultural loss, nostalgia, freedom, and adoption of the Other’s properties. In a similar context, Ada’s identity confusion is a crisis of alienation. As Bill Ashcroft et al. (2002) describe, such an issue is a struggle of “alienation of vision” and a “crisis in self-image” (p. 9), as the questions of who one has become too convoluted to answer.

She is estranged from her roots, as Shafak (2021) narrates, “If her relatives remained a mystery, Cyprus was a bigger one” (p. 11), and she lives with the double consciousness of her discrepancy from the rest of her classmates. The sudden emergence of Cyprus in Ada’s life fissures deep cracks of confusion between the self and the other. She is cornered with the feelings of self-estrangement, for she is no longer the pure Londoner she thought herself to be, and alienation from the rest of the society, which she was unable to be in accord with as a hybrid diaspora offspring. Ada is sketched as an outsider in her current communal dwelling and remains an alien from her newly discovered land of origins.

Sinari (1970), on the other hand, regards alienation as one’s “awareness of the Other” (p. 127) and sense of estrangement from this Other. Particularly, in tandem with such a consciousness, one develops a need to eliminate such a repulsive feeling. (Sinari, 1970, p. 127) Similarly, Ada exerts herself to be homogeneous with her surroundings in an attempt to cover the estrangement she senses from her classmates. Another embodiment of alienation is singled out by Modarres Ali where immigrants, in spaces of in-betweenness and hybridity, are “Desiring the ‘other,’ yet longing for the lost ‘we.’” (2005, p. 3) Likewise, throughout the novel, Ada is portrayed as thirsty to know more of her origins yet she unconditionally lives in attempts of becoming the Other. The “we” is nebulous in Ada’s case, as for a great part of the novel the Other was personified by Meryem, her relatives, and Cyprus. For another part, the Other was her Londoner classmates.

The Island of Missing Trees unfolds a contradicting story of a throttled at root mother and a rootless daughter. The former, Defne, is unable to transcend the past to live in the present exile. The latter, Ada, with a foot in the UK, struggles to put the other in the homeland. The daughter’s journey seems to be opposed to that of her mother. Ada departs from the exile in hopes of reaching the truth behind her origins that have been hidden, whilst the mother leaves the motherland in an attempt to seep into the exile. Ada’s mother, Defne, was drowned by her past and failed to pass the bridge of in-betweenness into a settled present in the UK. As her husband, Kostas, explains it was not suicide that terminated Defne’s life but rather was plagued and sickened to death with an incurable illness that rendered her unable to recover from past attachments, traumas, and sour experiences. Defne was like an uprooted tree that was “strangled by its own roots.” (Shafak, 2021, p. 291) Even love failed Defne’s attempts to escape the sorrows and the inflicted pains of the past. Ada, on the other hand, is saved from losing herself in the host country’s culture and balanced and guided towards her past heritage and origins by her Aunt. Ada became a hybrid in the presence of Meryem who nurtured the Cyprian roots of her identity. She became conscious of the existence of another world, an eastern one.

The origins Ada longed to be acquainted with were represented by the Aunt, Meryem, who was neither similar to her mother nor likable. Cyprus was unveiled through myths and customs Meryem narrated and performed, which Ada failed to grasp in their essence. An unbridgeable intergenerational gap loomed large between Ada and her newly revealed roots.

Her father's confession of treating her as a detached, independent, and rather separate entity, 'not an extension' of them (Shafak, 2021, p. 137), explains the hollowness of the familial rift Ada ought to bridge to reconcile with her parents' past, traumas and origins. Through similar lines, Clifford's comment on forced displacement further pictures Ada's onerous task, "Peoples whose sense of identity is centrally defined by collective histories of displacement and violent loss cannot be "cured" by merging into a new national community." (1997, p. 250)

As a second generation raised in exile, Ada's identity crisis stems from the simultaneous sense of incomplete belonging to Cyprus and the UK, in either setting she is rendered self-aware of her family's difference and unconsciously urged to conceal and disguise such differences and discordance as not to give her surrounding such as classmates "yet another reason to conclude that she – and her family – were weird." (Shafak, 2021, p. 9) Ada was accepted, as far as her odds are not visible. She was "no part of this chain. She was no part of anything." (Shafak, 2021, p. 23)

She was left with one rope end to her origins, which is her name Ada, which translates as island in the Turkish language, yet she was not allowed to trace the other end of those roots "she had not once travelled to the place after which she was named." (Shafak, 2021, p. 19) She was raised with identity confusion. Ada was conceived and named after Cyprus yet grew up to believe that her name "referred to Great Britain, the only island she had ever known." (Shafak, 2021, p. 11) Ada's uncontrollable and unexplained scream which lasted for nearly 52 seconds marks the climax of the utter confusion she grappled with. Such an unearthly scream broke out, in the history class, just at the moment when the topic of migration and generational change was indicated by the teacher. As she states, she felt angry at everybody. Indeed, she was inadequate and a misfit in either world, Cyprus or UK. The co-existence of both worlds in an unstable compound left Ada bereft of peace and harmony.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the portrayal of identity crisis as an offspring of intergenerational trauma. In particular, traumatic and uncanny encounters have been mediated through the magical realist mode of narrative as a psychic dynamic to process traumatic repression. Magical realist narrative, embodied by the fig tree, proved its expressiveness in wording the ineffable. This article further contends that, as hinted by Elif Shafak, familial disconnection deepens the wounds of intergenerational traumas rather than curing them. Shafak pictures Diaspora offspring's identity formation as a critical process, that is cemented through connection to the cultural heritage of both lands. Indeed, the damage of uncertainty, of not knowing who one is, and to whom one belongs has been Ada's real challenge. In numerous passages, Shafak narrates that "The path of an inherited trauma is random; you never know who might get it, but someone will." (2021, p. 112) Cutting grandchildren from their grandparents will not cut the invisible yet firm strings of familial trauma. She confirms that suppressing the traumatic past from the children is not a feasible solution to shield its ravages.

Shafak suggests intergenerational reconnection, and conscious collective confrontation with the past as a reasonable path to healing. Ada's identity crisis did not stem from everyday encounters and struggles as much as from not embracing and balancing the existence of both worlds since birth. She was born in Cyprus but she was denied any cultural nexus to its legacy. Ada's parents' trimming and concealing of the hybridity of her identity, left Ada in a tussle of confusion and alienation. Ada bore the pains of what Homi Bhabha describes as, being "almost the same but not quite." (1994, p.86) The perpetual sense of (not) belonging to either land fuelled her identity crisis.

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Bio-note

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