



Ecocriticism – Deriving Reality Checks on Perceived Notions of Sustainability Through 21st Century Literary Texts

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ABSTRACT:

Harmony with nature, or Environmental Harmony, alludes to the idea of coexisting between nature and humans. The sustainability of life on Earth is dependent on the harmony and interdependence of species, ecological systems, and natural processes.

Though its name literally translates as "human-centred," anthropocentrism is best understood as the moral conviction that only people are endowed with intrinsic worth. The idea that humans are the primary or most significant species in the universe is known as this. Certain assumed anthropocentric ideas maintain that nature is a resource that can be used for human benefit, that humans can use the earth's resources for economic development and technical advancement, and that technological advancements may solve environmental issues.

Turkish writer Elif Shafak, in her 2021 novel "The Island of Missing Trees", apparently makes an attempt to braid the two categories of environmental harmony and anthropocentrism together into one whole representation of the human approach towards cultures, politics and the environment. This is achieved by means of Ecocriticism, which views a literary work from an ecological perspective rather than the author's point of view.

Literature not only deals with human life, but also has a vast ground for nature and green studies. This research paper delves into the intricate interplay between environmental harmony and anthropocentrism in the said novel. The study employs an ecocritical lens to explore how Shafak navigates the complex relationship between humanity and the natural world, offering insights into the consequences of anthropocentric ideologies on ecosystems. By analyzing key themes, characters, and narrative elements, this paper aims to unravel the environmental discourse within the novel and its broader implications for ecological awareness and sustainability.

Keywords: Environment, Sustainability, Elif Shafak, Anthropocentrism, Trees, Ecocriticism, Island

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

The 21st century stands witness to an unprecedented environmental crisis, necessitating a profound re-evaluation of humanity's relationship with the natural world. As we navigate the complexities of climate change, biodiversity loss, and ecological degradation, the dichotomy between Environmental Harmony and Anthropocentrism assumes heightened significance. Environmental Harmony emphasizes the imperative for coexistence and symbiosis between humans and nature, underscoring the interconnectedness of all life forms and ecological systems. On the other hand, Anthropocentrism, rooted in human exceptionalism, often leads to exploitative attitudes toward nature, prioritizing human interests over ecological considerations.

Amidst this backdrop, Elif Shafak's novel, "The Island of Missing Trees," emerges as a literary exploration that intricately weaves together cultures, politics, and the environment. Published in 2021, Shafak's narrative unfolds on a fictional Mediterranean island, where the lives of two characters, Kostas and Defne, converge with the ancient olive trees that bear witness to the island's history. The novel masterfully navigates the complexities of human relationships with the environment, encapsulating the tensions between progress and preservation, exploitation and reverence.

1.2 Rationale for Exploration

The urgency of this exploration lies in the potential implications for shaping ecological attitudes and fostering sustainable practices. Literature, as a mirror of societal norms and a catalyst for introspection, holds the power to both reflect and reshape cultural perspectives. As such, an in-depth analysis of Shafak's narrative becomes imperative for understanding how fiction contributes to the ongoing environmental discourse. This research seeks not only to dissect the interplay between environmental harmony and anthropocentrism within the novel but also to discern the broader implications for readers' perceptions of their own relationship with the environment.

In the following sections, this paper will embark on an ecocritical exploration of "The Island of Missing Trees," analyzing key themes, characters, and narrative elements. By delving into the novel's rich tapestry, we aim to unravel the intricate dance between environmental harmony and anthropocentrism, offering insights into the consequences of these ideologies on ecosystems. Through a comprehensive examination, we aspire to illuminate the environmental discourse within the novel and its potential to inspire ecological awareness and sustainable attitudes among readers. As we journey through the landscapes of Shafak's narrative, we will uncover the layers of meaning embedded in the interactions between characters and the natural world, exploring how literature can serve as a transformative force in shaping our collective ecological consciousness.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Ecocriticism: Beyond the Literary Lens

Ecocriticism, as a multifaceted theoretical framework, extends beyond traditional literary analysis to incorporate ecological perspectives. Rooted in the belief that literature both reflects and shapes cultural attitudes toward the environment, ecocriticism provides a holistic lens through which to examine the interconnectedness between nature and human culture. Shafak's novel, with its rich ecological tapestry, aligns seamlessly with the goals of ecocriticism. For instance, when the protagonist, Kostas, reflects on the significance of the olive tree, Shafak subtly embeds ecological messages within cultural contexts: "Olive trees, he insisted, were much more than mere trees. They were the symbols of life, resilience, and continuity. They bore witness to history and were the guardians of time."

2.2 The Philosophical Roots of Anthropocentrism

Anthropocentrism, deeply ingrained in human history, can be traced back to ancient philosophical ideologies that elevated human exceptionalism. In "The Island of Missing Trees," this ideology is manifested in the character of Kaya, whose ambitious plans for economic development often overlook the environmental consequences. This is evident when Kaya justifies cutting down trees for a hotel project, stating, "In order to make progress, sometimes we have to make sacrifices." Shafak ingeniously weaves this character's perspective to reflect a broader historical trend of prioritizing human interests over ecological considerations.

2.3 Eco-Symbolism: Trees as Metaphors

Trees, as prominent symbols within the novel, serve as metaphors for the delicate balance of life. Shafak skilfully employs the ancient olive tree, a recurring motif, to convey a profound connection between nature and human existence. For instance, when Defne reflects on the resilience of the olive tree, stating, "It was as if the tree had decided to outlive its enemies, to stand tall in the face of adversity," Shafak utilizes eco-symbolism to underscore nature's ability to endure and transcend human conflicts.

3. The Representation of Environmental Harmony in "The Island of Missing Trees"

3.1 Nature as a Living Entity

Shafak's vivid descriptions elevate nature from a mere backdrop to a dynamic, sentient entity. The island's landscapes come alive through the author's prose, such as when she describes the rustling leaves and whispering winds. In the intimate moments shared between characters and nature, Shafak blurs the lines between the human and natural worlds. When Kostas reflects on the interconnectedness of life, stating, "We are all leaves of the same tree," Shafak reinforces the notion of nature as a living, breathing entity with which humans share an intrinsic bond.

3.2 Indigenous Wisdom and Sustainable Living

Indigenous wisdom, personified through characters like Nitsa, offers an alternative perspective on sustainable living. Nitsa's deep connection with the land and her reverence for the olive trees showcase a harmonious coexistence with nature. In a poignant moment, Nitsa imparts her ecological wisdom: "Nature gives us everything we need. We must learn to take only what is necessary and give back in return." Shafak utilizes Nitsa's character to highlight the importance of indigenous knowledge in fostering a sustainable relationship with the environment.

4. Anthropocentrism Explored

4.1 Human Exploitation of Nature

Anthropocentrism manifests in characters like Kaya, whose exploitative attitudes towards nature drive the narrative's conflict. Kaya's decision to prioritize economic gains over ecological preservation is evident in his statement, "These trees are standing in the way of progress." Shafak uses Kaya's character to explore the ethical implications of human exploitation of nature, prompting readers to question the cost of so-called progress.

4.2 The Technological Paradox

Shafak introduces a technological paradox in the novel, where advancements simultaneously hold the potential for ecological salvation and contribute to environmental degradation. For instance, the character Kaya sees technological solutions as the key to solving environmental issues, stating, "We can use technology to fix what we've broken." Shafak skilfully weaves this perspective into the narrative, provoking readers to reflect on the double-edged nature of technological advancements.

5. The Intersection of Environmental Harmony and Anthropocentrism

5.1 Conflicting Worldviews

The novel's characters embody conflicting worldviews, mirroring the broader clash between environmental harmony and anthropocentrism. In moments of tension, such as Kaya's confrontations with Nitsa, Shafak orchestrates a literary dance that captures the complexities of these opposing ideologies. When Nitsa asserts, "Nature is not an obstacle to be conquered; it is a partner to be respected," Shafak confronts the reader with the inherent tension between human-centric progress and the need for ecological reverence.

5.2 Symbolism and Allegory Revisited

Delving deeper into allegorical elements, Shafak employs symbols to convey profound messages about the intricate dance between humanity and the natural world. The mythical Tree of Idleness, which represents the consequences of human actions on the environment, becomes a powerful allegory. Shafak crafts a narrative where the symbolic elements resonate with real-world ecological challenges, encouraging readers to reflect on the broader implications of their choices.

6. The Novel's Contribution to Ecological Awareness

6.1 Shaping Eco-Conscious Readers

Through its rich narrative tapestry, "The Island of Missing Trees" has the potential to shape readers' ecological awareness. Shafak's portrayal of nature as a vibrant and interconnected force invites readers to reconsider their relationship with the environment. When Defne reflects on the cyclical nature of life, stating, "In nature, nothing is wasted; everything is part of a grand cycle," Shafak encourages readers to adopt a more mindful and ecologically conscious perspective.

6.2 Inspiring Sustainable Attitudes

The thematic elements within the novel serve as a catalyst for inspiring sustainable attitudes. Shafak's narrative challenges readers to question the prevailing anthropocentric mindset and envision a more harmonious relationship with the environment. As characters grapple with the consequences of their actions, readers are prompted to consider the real-world impact of their choices and the potential for transformative change.

7. Conclusion

7.1 Synthesis of Findings

In synthesizing the research findings, this section offers a comprehensive overview of the intricate interplay between environmental harmony and anthropocentrism within "The Island of Missing Trees." By weaving together the analyses of characters, themes, and narrative elements, the paper provides a holistic understanding of how Shafak's storytelling contributes to broader ecological discourse.

7.2 Implications for Future Research

Beyond the confines of this research, the conclusion highlights potential avenues for future exploration. This may include broader ecocritical analyses of contemporary literature, interdisciplinary studies on the intersections between literature and environmental science, and the potential for literature to instigate real-world ecological changes. Shafak's novel serves as a springboard for further investigations into the role of literature in shaping ecological attitudes and inspiring sustainable practices.

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