

PLANT MIGRATION AND ENVIRONMENTAL CONCEPTUAL METAPHORS IN ELIF SHAFAK'S *THE ISLAND OF MISSING TREES*

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Abstract. This article is dedicated to the conceptual mappings of human experiences as perceived by plant life from an eco-critical paradigm. Following the theoretical cognitive-semantic studies of George Lakoff, Mark Johnson, and others, the paper sets off to decode conceptual metaphors of migration, transplantation and rebirth in the discourse of the arboreal character – Fig Tree – in Elif Shafak's most recent novel *The Island of the Missing Trees*. This is a book of love, war, migration and adventure, a psychological exploration of the human experience on two territories, whose story is told by a Fig Tree, which impersonates the protagonists' dramatic experiences, dilemmas, anxieties and love relationships. The linguistic analysis tries to trace the directions in which conceptual metaphors can lead us to explore possible interpretations of the novel, as well as various narrative paths connected to plant life, current environmental issues, interconnectivity in the natural environment, and their effects upon our human history. The research observes the conceptualisations of the underground life of plants, which is conceived on the vertical axis, and it also decodes the horizontal space, by analysing the transcultural movement and physical migration of both people and plants from the eastern Cyprus to the western Great Britain. The novel extensively explores environmental issues, with detailed discussions on plants pre-existing humans on Earth, and follows a deeply metaphoric narrative string to portray human feelings through the diary of a fig tree. Throughout the novel, the plant kingdom projects conceptualizations of migration, transplantation and rebirth, which are all metaphors for survival.

Key words: conceptual metaphor, environment, transplantation, rebirth

INTRODUCTION

In the present paper, the author investigates the conceptual mappings of human and plant experiences in *The Island of Missing Trees* (Shafak, 2024) from an ecolinguistic perspective. This approach was chosen in order to decode the environmental negative and positive stances of the characters' narratives mainly because it provides a framework for analysing how literature engages with environmental issues and contributes to broader cultural discourses about nature, sustainability, and ecological ethics. *The Island of Missing Trees*, the latest novel

written by Elif Shafak, is a metaphoric exploration of a mixed couple love story and the environmental challenges faced by a fig tree, which is one of the main characters, as well as a narrative voice in the book. The novel is an exemplary work of storytelling that intricately weaves together narrative elements with Cypriot history, themes of love, trauma, and resilience, as well as cultural issues such as migration, colonialism, and cuisine. Notably, the arboreal perspective and detailed biological research in the novel enhance the relevance of ecolinguistic interpretation since the novel highly explores current environmental concerns, interconnectivity in the natural world and different roles of the environment throughout human history. The impartial narrative voice of the fig tree helps the author tackle more sensitive topics, which include anthropocentrism, human destruction of the natural world and collateral environmental damages resulting from wars.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Although ecocriticism emerged in the 1990s with Glotfelty and Fromm's *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, it is still a contemporary trend because of a need to raise awareness concerning climate change, heavy pollution and other human activities that have increased the pace of environmental degradation. Nevertheless, ecocriticism has broadened the scope of literary analysis by emphasising the interconnections and co-dependence of literature with both culture in its entirety and the environment (Glotfelty and Fromm (eds.), 1996: XIX). Even if the present study is dedicated to analysis of a literary work, the author has chosen a rather linguistic approach instead of a literary analysis *per se*. Thus, the main theoretical background to frame the analysis is ecolinguistics, which is partly derived from critical discourse analysis and conceptual metaphor theory. Lakoff and Johnson's *Metaphors We Live By* (1980) was carried on and taken forward by its successors in cognitive linguistics research, Arran Stibbe (Stibbe, 2015: 9), and others – 'It [ecolinguistics] can investigate the stories we live by – mental models that influence behaviour and lie at the heart of the ecological challenges we are facing' (Stibbe, 2015: 1-2). Ecolinguistics is related to ecocriticism in its focus on environmental issues, but it differs from it by shifting its emphasis towards the study of language and how word choices shape the stories we live by, an obvious reference to Lakoff's metaphors we live by.

Conceptual metaphor theory is a multi-disciplinary approach which combines cognitive linguistics with social sciences. In this philosophy, metaphor is defined as comprehension of one conceptual domain in terms of another conceptual domain – 'metaphors allow us to understand one domain of experience in terms of another' (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980: 117). This study contributes to the field of literary and linguistic analysis broadly and to the interpretations of Shafak's

work specifically through the lens of ecolinguistics and conceptual metaphor theory. It emphasizes the importance of deciphering metaphorical subtleties within the discourse of the inanimate plant-main character, a fig tree. The aim of this study is to develop a framework for semantic interpretation and metaphor mapping by juxtaposing concrete and abstract concepts, thereby achieving elucidation through metaphor mapping and meaning creation.

NEGATIVE DISCOURSES OF THE ENVIRONMENT

The journey of reading this poetic prose leaves the reader with an engraved perspective on both the people and the nature that surrounds us. This awakening of awareness is projected by the fig tree, which is part of the story. Hence, the ecolinguistic – conceptual – metaphorical analysis, provides an ideal framework for decoding and understanding Shafak's distinctive choice of a tree as one of the main characters in the novel. Relying on the cognitive-semantic approach, which 'represents an approach to the study of mind and its relationship with embodied experience and culture, employing language as a key methodological tool for uncovering conceptual organization and structure' (Evans and Green, 2006: 180), this research focuses on the semantic mapping projection of the environment in the discourse of the fig tree.

For a long time, we have lived according to an anthropocentric story, where man has been in the centre and has been entitled to make use of everything around him. Therefore, the image that the industrialised world has projected about the environment has been that it represented a resource to be used for human needs and then to generate profit. 'Cognitive structures are mental models that exist in the minds of individuals – for example, a model of the world where humans are separate from and superior to other animals, or a model where humans are surrounded by an environment' (Stibbe, 2015: 6). Historically, metaphor theories and frameworks have primarily focused on human relations with other humans, but they can also be adapted and applied to broader ecological issues (ibid.: 9). Consequently, new approaches are trying to raise awareness of the destructive nature of this mental mapping, and they are encouraging writers and journalists to reframe this story. Once revealed, the stories can be questioned from an ecological perspective (ibid.: 2).

The conceptual metaphors projected throughout the novel move from a negative conceptualization of the relationship between humans and the environment towards a softer projection where plants become the advocates of natural preservation and culminate with a reframed idea about the environment by shifting the focus from human activity to the natural world. In this view, the research has depicted negative discourses which have to be resisted as well as beneficial discourses that must be promoted. Thus, the negative egocentric metaphors rely on human ignorance – HUMANS ARE IGNORANT / ARROGANT – and on criminal

actions enforced against the environment – HUMANS ARE ENVIRONMENTAL CRIMINALS.

People's preference to leave questions unexplored reveals a negative-egocentric character trait which maps the conceptual metaphor HUMANS ARE IGNORANT: 'Humans! After observing them for so long, I have arrived at a bleak conclusion: *they do not really want to know more about plants*. They do not want to ascertain whether we may be capable of volition, altruism and kinship.'¹ Hence, by employing the negative form of the verb *to want* followed by the verb *to know* the fig tree projects the conceptual metaphor HUMANS ARE IGNORANT through the semantic markers [+UNAWARENESS, +UNCONSCIOUSNESS, +NEGLIGENCE]. The quotation continues the idea of ignorance by stating that people prefer to distract themselves from finding answers 'they'd rather leave them unexplored, unanswered' (Shafak, 2021: 45), which supports the same conceptual metaphor by triggering the semantic markers [+CONSCIOUS IGNORANCE, +NEGLIGENCE]. Furthermore, people as portrayed by the fig tree, also avoid thorough research ('The subterranean, *contrary to what most people think*, is bustling with activity' (ibid.: 80) and opt for wrong assumptions ('They find it easier, I guess, *to assume* that trees, having no brain in the conventional sense, can only experience the most rudimentary existence' (ibid.: 45). All these views reinforce the conceptual metaphor HUMANS ARE IGNORANT by projecting the semantic markers [-CURIOSITY, -RESEARCH, +ASSUMPTION].

Moreover, in ecolinguistics, the most crucial discourses to resist are those that propagate ideologies contributing to ecological destruction and are highly pervasive. The approach to addressing these destructive discourses is through resistance. Resistance involves raising awareness that the ideology conveyed by the discourse is merely a narrative, and that this narrative has detrimental effects (Stibbe, 2015: 28). Consequently, the most important discourses to resist are the ones which convey ideologies that strongly oppose multiple aspects of ecosophy, i.e., are considered to play a role in ecological destruction and are highly widespread (ibid.: 24). To support these theories, the conceptual metaphor which permeates the novel is HUMANS ARE ENVIRONMENTAL CRIMINALS. Consequently, sometimes crimes are committed accidentally: 'Or that, until not long ago, there was an acacia in the Sahara Desert [...], *until a drunken driver knocked it down*? [...] *Most arboreal suffering is caused by humankind*' (Shafak, 2021:45), but crimes are cruelly committed in full conscience most of the time. There are multiple examples given by the fig tree, starting with people plucking leaves and breaking out branches from trees, continuing with the habit of carving one's name or hammering the sharpest nail into trunks,

¹ Some parts of the quotations are provided in italics by the author of this article in order to highlight the meaning projected by the conceptual metaphors to be analysed.

and ending with the practice of industrial logging. One of the most appalling images involving environmental crimes is the removal of trees with the purpose of improving the view: 'sometimes *they chop us down* because we obstruct their view' (ibid.: 45-46).

The use of phrases 'drunken driver' and 'arboreal suffering' carries the semantic markers of accidental violence via ignorance and inflicting pain on plants, whereas 'pluck leaves', 'break branches', 'carve names', 'split' and 'chop', or 'hammer nails' represent premeditated crimes operated by humans who consciously commit atrocities to their environment for their own pleasure. In the case of 'decimated forests' and 'constant logging', we are dealing with governmentally supported criminal activities under the cover of economic need. Selfish crimes are revealed by the activities of poaching, fire vendettas and waging wars, which usually happen because of human greed.

After describing the most atrocious forms of torture applied to nature, the story also presents a refreshing optimistic view by sharing the perspective of a kind and environmentally concerned character. Kostas Kazantzakis is the main male character in the novel, who is a botanist, and an environmental promoter. His actions and language shift the negative balance towards hope and beneficial environmental discourses. 'Positive Discourse Analysis could be described as the search for new stories to live by' (Stibbe, 2018: 169) and in this view, the analysis turns from negative – resistant discourses to reframing anthropocentrism by progressing from HUMANS ARE EGOCENTRIC to HUMANS ARE ECOLOGICALLY CONSCIOUS.

The transitional negative conceptual metaphor, HUMANS ARE EGOCENTRIC, is projected by the human narcissistic nature of appreciating whatever is more similar to their own image: '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, *an image that mirrors theirs as closely as possible*.' (Shafak, 2021: 46). Therefore, the conceptual metaphor HUMANS ARE EGOCENTRIC is triggered by the semantic markers [+SELFISHNESS, +VANITY, +NARCISSISM]. From an evolutionary standpoint, certain narcissistic traits, such as confidence, assertiveness, and ambition, may have been advantageous for survival and reproduction, which can help individuals secure resources, mates, and social status. Nevertheless, when narcissism becomes excessive and maladaptive, it can lead to an inflated sense of one's own importance, a lack of empathy for others, which may lead to exploitation and manipulation. Consequently, this leads to anthropocentrism, as the fig tree points it out: '...I can tell you one thing about humans: they will react to the disappearance of a species the way they react to everything else – *by putting themselves at the centre of the universe*' (ibid.: 149).

The shift from the negative to the positive or beneficial discourses in the novel is interpreted by means of conceptual metaphors, which emphasize the reverse,

i.e., some humans do preserve the environment. Thus, to reveal the positive discourses that promote preserving the environment the research immerses into a ‘detailed examination of texts to reveal hidden ideologies that are subtly conveyed by the use of particular linguistic features’ (Stibbe, 2018:174). Not only do we turn from egocentrism to altruism, but we also find that one of the main characters – Kostas Kazantzakis – advocates in favour of environmental issues and permeates the story with the conceptual metaphor (SOME) HUMANS ARE ECOLOGICALLY CONSCIOUS. If the previously decoded egocentrism refers to the tendency of individuals to focus on their own needs, perspectives, and interests, ecology emphasizes the interconnectedness of all living things and the importance of maintaining a balanced, healthy ecosystem. Passionately speaking against environmental crimes (*‘He spoke about the impact of deforestation with a passion his counterparts reserved for fluctuations in their personal stock portfolios’* (Shafak, 2021: 10)), considering the idea that plants may have their own language: ‘I think there’s still so much we don’t know, *we’re only just beginning to discover the language of trees.*’ (ibid.: 41)) and intuitively knowing that trees have a soul (*‘They know, deep within, that when you save a fig tree from a storm, it is someone’s memory you are saving.’* (ibid.: 24)) prove Kostas’ openness and consciousness of the plant kingdom.

THE STORIES WE LIVE BY – REFRAMING ANTHROPOCENTRIC VIEWS

Following George Lakoff’s view that ‘frames are the mental structures that allow human beings to understand reality – and sometimes create what we take to be reality’ (Lakoff, 2006: 25), this novel reframes the idea that plants are passive objects in our world, or even worse, that plants are resources for humans to use. The fig tree is depicted as a voice which pleads in favour of the environment, as a living being, it becomes an environmental advocate, projecting positive/beneficial discourses of the natural environment that are meant to trigger natural protection and the preservation of our planet.

‘The purpose of Positive Discourse Analysis is to describe linguistic features that could be selectively combined, with careful consideration of the context, to promote particular value systems’ (Stibbe, 2020: 416). Since it is widely acknowledged that ‘different frames tell very different stories about how the world is, or should be in the future’ (Stibbe, 2015: 47), Shafak validates the importance of the natural world and turns our attention to its relevance for the wellbeing of our ecosystems which forces us to start envisioning its equal part, if not its superiority vis a vis human kind. On the grounds that nature is superior to man, and its life has been longer, fig tree’s discourse projects the conceptual metaphor NATURE IS IMMORTAL, by surviving a destructive fire: ‘A part of my trunk was singed and *several of my limbs were charred completely, but I was alive. I would be all right. I could recover from this horror unscathed – unlike the people who were there that*

night' (Shafak, 2021: 170). Nature's immortality, or rather its multiplication, in the sense of procreation, is also supported by the idea that the fig tree continued living as a new tree, in a different country, although it went along telling the story as the same character: '*You can grow a fig tree from a cutting*. If we plant her right away in London, and look after her, there's a chance she'll survive.' (ibid.: 292). The choice of using 'alive' and 'grow' project the conceptual markers [+LIFE, +DETERMINATION, +EXPANSION, +PERSISTENCE], which support the conceptual metaphor NATURE IS IMMORTAL, thus reframing the negative discourse of environmental destruction and consumption into the beneficial perspective of revival.

Ecolinguistics defines reframing as 'the act of framing a concept in a way that is different from its typical framing in a culture' (Stibbe, 2015: 47) and, by projecting the conceptual metaphors NATURE IS HUMAN RULEBREAKER, Shafak reframes the discourse which considers nature a resource to increase profits into a discourse of natural superiority – nature crosses political borders: '*There are many things that a border – even one as clear-cut and well-guarded as this – cannot prevent from crossing*. The Etesian wind [...]. The butterflies, grasshoppers and lizards. The snails, too, painfully slow though they are' (Shafak, 2021: 3). The same positive reframing is constructed by using the conceptual metaphor PLANTS ARE BETTER THAN PEOPLE, where nature is a better companion to humans in difficult situations: '*No matter the time of the day, her father seemed to prefer the company of trees to the company of humans*' (ibid.: 11).

Further on, the environment is projected as a means for interconnectivity and communication. Norman Fairclough considers that 'discourses not only represent the world as it is, they are also imaginaries, representing possible worlds that are different from the actual world' (Fairclough, 2003: 124). In this view, the tree into an environmental activist projecting positive discourses regarding our perception of the natural environment. Accordingly, the following conceptual metaphor is ENVIRONMENT IS COMMUNICATION, as trees talk to one another: '*Would they be pleased to discover that by sending signals through a network of latticed fungi buried in the soil, trees warn their neighbours about dangers ahead – an approaching predator or pathogenic bugs*' (Shafak, 2021:44). Communication is also emphasised by the abilities to hear and speak, but in this case the fig tree transmutes its physical ability to hear into the metaphorical sense of hearing, the fig tree expands its capacity to hearing 'in all directions', thereby acquiring historical-memorial value: '*A tree has a thousand ears in all directions*' (ibid.: 80). Plant communication is a constant process on different spatial levels: '*Under and above the ground, we trees communicate all the time. We share not only water and nutrients, but also essential information. [...] we still remain connected across entire swathes of land, sending chemical signals through the air and across our shared mycorrhizal networks*' (ibid.: 99).

Moreover, communication is extended to interconnectivity among different organisms and their environments, where changes in one part of an ecosystem can affect many other parts, illustrating the delicate balance of natural systems. The fig tree suggests the vibrant unacknowledged social life of plants by projecting the conceptual metaphor NATURE IS INTERCONNECTIVITY in its detailed biological and physical explanations of how trees communicate underneath, as well as above the earth: 'But no matter what kind of trouble it may be going through, *a tree always knows that it is linked to endless life forms* [...] and that its existence is not an isolated happenstance but intrinsic to a wider community' (Shafak, 2021: 100). Moreover, by stating that everything is interconnected in the natural world ('For us, *everything is interconnected*.' (ibid.: 30), where sending signals and warning neighbouring plants is a fact ('*They can send signals to other plants and help each other*. They are much more alive than most people realise' (ibid.: 42), the novel pleads in favour of environmental issues without creating a political matter, but rather as an example of artistic action to underpin the efforts aimed at protecting and preserving the natural world. The goals of environmental action typically include reducing pollution, conserving natural resources, protecting ecosystems and biodiversity, and addressing climate change; therefore, in her endeavour to raise ecological awareness, Shafak provides detailed and insightful explanations of plant sensitivity to various aspects of life. Through the voice of the fig tree, the plant kingdom comes alive, gaining new traits that broaden human understanding and appreciation of the natural world. 'Plants can *pick up vibrations*, and many flowers are shaped like bowls so as to better trap sound waves, some of which are too high for the human ear' (ibid.: 81). Therefore, the collocations 'linked to endless life forms', 'send signals' and 'pick up vibrations' support the conceptual metaphor NATURE IS INTERCONNECTIVITY by projecting the semantic markers [+ CHANNELLING, + CONNECTION, + TRANSMISSION].

MIGRATION – ADAPTING TO NEW ECOSYSTEMS

The final part of the analysis deals with plant migration and the environmental challenges faced by the fig tree in its new homeland – England. The fig tree copes with a situationally imposed exile, driven by both voluntary action and forced political reasons. Waging wars and inflicting oppression by humans upon other humans make exile inescapably secular and intensely bound to history. Like death, but without the final release death offers, exile has severed millions from the sustaining roots of tradition, family, and homeland (Said, 2000: 181). The tree is saved by Kostas from a fire by cutting a small part from the mother tree, and it is smuggled across the continent to England, where the male protagonist had escaped from war. Readers are shown the gloomy uprooting and a dark perception of migration (MIGRATION IS CONFUSION / LONELINESS / SADNESS), which gradually moves towards an adaptation phase, imbued with

melancholic ruminations of the lost homeland. Migration often entails profound experiences of loneliness and isolation, as individuals find themselves separated from familiar environments, loved ones, and cultural touchstones. The displacement inherent in migration can exacerbate feelings of alienation and solitude, compelling migrants to seek new forms of connection and solace. Thus, displacement engenders confusion, hence, the conceptual metaphor MIGRATION IS CONFUSION which is projected by the fig tree's inability to instantly recognise its spatial proximity: 'I might have become a British tree, but some days *it still takes me a moment to fathom where I am*, on which island exactly' (Shafak, 2021: 81). Migration frequently brings about significant confusion as individuals navigate unfamiliar cultural landscapes, languages, and social norms. This disorientation is compounded by the complex emotions tied to leaving behind a known environment and adapting to a new one. The resulting confusion can impact one's sense of identity and belonging, leading to a heightened need for clarity and stability amidst the upheaval. This process of adjustment often requires considerable mental and emotional effort as migrants strive to make sense of their new reality and struggle with feelings of alienation.

Following this idea, the textual analogy to estrangement translates into the conceptual metaphor MIGRATION IS LONELINESS: 'First-generation immigrants talk to their trees all the time – *when there are no other people nearby*, that is. They confide in us' (Shafak, 2021: 24). This struggle with loneliness is not just a personal ordeal but also a psychological and social challenge, necessitating mechanisms for emotional support and community integration to mitigate the adverse effects of such profound life changes. The act of confessing, even symbolically to a tree, implies an acknowledgment of wrongdoing or conflicting emotions stemming from morally questionable behaviour. This stands in contrast to the psychological desire to see oneself as good and moral. Furthermore, given that the confession arises in the context of migration, the need for solace and the release of psychological burdens becomes a coping mechanism in response to an overwhelming influx of new experiences. Furthermore, cognitive dissonance triggers the conceptual metaphor MIGRATION IS SADNESS which is induced by loneliness: 'The pattern of my branches would not be exactly the same, but we were similar in every other detail, who I was in Cyprus and who I would become in England. The only difference was that *I was no longer a happy tree*' (ibid.: 55).

Individuals fleeing conflict or persecution may migrate to safer countries or regions, just as Kostas was avoiding the Greek-Cypriot war. This form of migration was actually his mother's response to immediate threats, and Kostas, together with his fig tree, was forced to find a way to adapt to a challenging new society, whereas the tree had to cope with new unwelcoming weather conditions. Consequently, along its ruminations on migration, the fig tree projects the conceptual metaphor MIGRATION IS SILENT ADAPTATION: 'First-generation immigrants are a species all their own. They wear a lot of beige,

grey and brown. Colours that do not stand out. *Colours that whisper, never shout* (ibid.: 23). Invisibility is pointed out as being a core adaptation mechanism, since the migrants will have to mingle with the locals, and due to their obvious difference manifested in race, colour, behaviour and culture, being as invisible as possible would seem a successful strategy.

Nevertheless, migration is also the carrier of cultural backgrounds moving to different places, clashing with local cultures and necessitating careful preservation. Thus, the following conceptual metaphor, MIGRATION IS TRANSPLANTATION, or MIGRATION IS PRESERVING TRADITION tackles the subject of human inter-connectivity with the natural surrounding which turns into the local cultural expression of motherland customs: '*Burying trees in trenches* underground during the harshest winters *and unearthing them in spring is a curious if well-established tradition*'. Italians settled in sub-zero towns in America and Canada are familiar with it. So are Spaniards, Portuguese, Maltese, Greeks, Lebanese, Egyptians, Tunisians, Moroccans, Algerians, Israelis, Palestinians, Iranians, Kurds, Turks, Jordanians, Syrians, Sephardic Jews [...] and us Cypriots' (ibid.: 23).

Migration frequently necessitates the reinvention of one's identity and adaptation to new circumstances. This transformative experience, in the case of our fig tree, is depicted as a physical rebirth – 'Kostas Kazantzakis took a cutting from one of my branches and put it into his suitcase. I guess I will always be grateful to him for doing that, *otherwise nothing of me might have remained*' (ibid.: 55), but also as cultural adaptation to a new island – 'Because that is what migrations and relocations do to us: when you leave your home for unknown shores, you don't simply carry on as before; *a part of you dies inside so that another part can start all-over again*' (ibid.: 55), a fusion where elements from the old and new cultures combine to create something unique and to project the conceptual metaphor MIGRATION IS REBIRTH. In psychology, rebirth can represent a process of psychological renewal, self-discovery, and healing. Characters or individuals moving to a new land often undergo a symbolic death of their old selves and emerge renewed in their new environment, just as Edward Said vividly described exile as 'the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted' (Said, 2000: 180). This could involve overcoming past traumas, shedding old identities, and rediscovering one's true self. We observe a profound expression of homesickness and a yearning for familiarity, entrenched in memories of a better existence, an ideal habitat, and the essential need for roots that define our tree character. The processes of migration and transplantation, along with the associated burial and replanting, impose considerable stress on the fig tree. This narrative intertwines nostalgia and trauma, capturing both the romanticization of the past – when people coexisted peacefully, celebrated, mourned, and shared meals – and the haunting presence of experiences and losses that are too painful to articulate, yet persist and resonate through future

generations. ‘The achievements of exile are permanently undermined by the loss of something left behind forever’ (*ibid.*: 180). The end of the novel culminates with the regeneration, rebirth and transmutation of a human spirit in a tree – the fig tree, thereby projecting concepts of oneness, unity, interconnectivity between all living beings. Rebirth can be interpreted metaphorically as personal growth, transformation, or starting anew. Thus, Defne, the female main character moves from her human body to the fig tree’s inner space and ends the story with the human-nature symbiosis. ‘Shafak comingles the figures of metaphor and metamorphosis as a “rhetorics of becoming”, with the narrating tree referring to a literal fig tree – it stories that green matter and provides a resemblance to one – and *becoming* one through the narrative’s actualising of arboreal sentience’ (O’Neill, 2023: 801). This final metaphor symbolizes the cyclical nature of life, where endings are followed by new beginnings. Rebirth can be seen in the context of the natural world, where ecosystems undergo cycles of renewal and regeneration. This includes processes such as birth, growth, decay, and rebirth in the cycle of life. Environmentalists advocate for practices that promote ecological sustainability and regeneration, ensuring the planet’s ability to support life and facilitate the rebirth of ecosystems.

CONCLUSIONS

The study has contributed to the field of literary analysis in general, and to the interpretations of Elif Shafak’s work in particular, from the perspective of conceptual metaphor theory and ecolinguistics, so as to emphasise the need to decipher metaphoric subtleties in the discourse of an inanimate plant, the main character – the fig tree. Metaphors are not simply poetic expressions, but rather the foundation of the human brain’s conceptual system – ‘our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature’ (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980: 3), which signifies that metaphoric projection is the core mechanism that helps people understand, perceive and interpret both themselves and their actions and reactions to other people and the world. The intention of this research was to create a cognitive linguistic framework for semantic interpretation and metaphoric mapping decryption by emphasising frame and reframing destructive discourses into positive ones, in order to explain thought projection and meaning creation – ‘we see metaphor as essential to human understanding and as a mechanism for creating new meaning and new realities in our lives’ (*ibid.*: 196).

The most important aspects related to conceptual metaphors offer interpretations of the relations between the action, narration, emotional reaction and cultural interpretations of the fig tree, as well as its constant concern with environmental crimes, human ignorance towards nature in general, as well as other ecological nuances and subtleties. The metaphoric abilities to see, hear, speak, feel

attributed to the fig tree create an aura of wisdom and shape this inanimate character into becoming a guide which provides a sense of purpose along the narrative line. This analysis has traced the directions in which conceptual metaphors can lead us in exploring the possibilities of understanding how teaching individuals about the importance of ecological balance and the consequences of environmental degradation can foster a sense of responsibility. The conceptual metaphors NATURE IS IMMORTAL and NATURE IS INTERCONNECTIVITY investigate the positive discourses that can advance attitudes to preserve and protect the environment.

The second part of the study has decoded migration metaphors which involve multiple symbolic levels in relation to identity, displacement and belonging. Thus, MIGRATION IS TRANSPLANTATION refers to Kostas's and Defne's uprooting from Cyprus to England and it mirrors the physical transplantation of the fig tree, which stands for the characters' struggle with feelings of displacement and adaptation. The fig tree's journey from Cyprus to London, as well as its burial in and resurrection from the British soil symbolises the pain, loss, and difficulty, yet also the possibility of survival and growth despite all trials and tribulations. Moreover, MIGRATION IS TRANSPLANTATION becomes MIGRATION IS REBIRTH, as the fig tree reflects the idea that nature, unlike humans, has the ability to regenerate, therefore, Defne's spirit chooses to transmute into the fig tree so as to continue living close to the love of her life and to her daughter. Rebirth in the novel reflects both the cyclical nature of plant life, as well as the possibility of healing and renewal for the main characters – Kostas, Defne and their daughter, Ada.

The novel in itself is an ode to nature, and to its insurmountable capacities of interconnectivity, communication and rebirth, and, by addressing the egocentric tendencies that contribute to environmental issues, Shafak attempts to create a more sustainable and equitable world that respects and preserves the delicate balance of our ecosystems. The essential discourse which permeates the entire novel is the positive one. The novel advances change, transformation and a deeper level of environmental awareness towards its readers, thereby promoting beneficial alternative discourses to describe the natural world and its relationship to humankind.

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