

Rita Gross' Insider/Outsider Binary: Reflections on Elif Shafak's *The Island of Missing Trees*

Al-Asadi, Haider Qasim Jasim¹ , Elham Mohammadi Achachelooei^{2,*} 

¹ Al-Mutafawiqeen the Second Secondary School for Boys, General Directorate of Education in Karbala, Karbala, Iraq; haider_qasim@karbala.edu.iq

² Corresponding author; Department of English Language and Literature, University of Zanjan, Zanjan, Iran; em.mohammadi@znu.ac.ir

Received: 2025/10/19

Accepted: 2026/02/07

Available online: 2026/06/01

Citation:

Al-Asadi, Haider Qasim Jasim, and Elham Mohammadi Achachelooei. "Rita Gross' In/Outsider Binary: Reflections on Elif Shafak's *The Island of Missing Trees*." *Journal of Literature Across Borders*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2026, pp. 1-18.

doi:<https://doi.org/10.48308/cls.2026.000000.0000>

Abstract

This article undertakes a critical examination of Elif Shafak's *The Island of Missing Trees* through the feminist theological framework proposed by Rita M. Gross. Centered on the recurring motif of female awakening in Shafak's literary corpus, the study seeks to evaluate the extent to which the novel effectively portrays such awakening by foregrounding social and cultural tensions rooted in religious norms that shape women's lived experiences in the culturally diverse world of the novel. A feminist interpretation of the principal female and male characters' verbal interactions and actions via a religious lens is conducted, using Gross's theoretical lens, intended for a deeper inquiry into the treatment of gendered exclusion in the novel. Specifically, the analysis assesses whether Shafak's storytelling enacts a paradigmatic transformation of the dichotomy of androcentric versus androgynous—articulated by Gross—as "insider" versus "outsider" over the temporal scope of the novel, and whether it proposes a coherent androgynous alternative. The findings indicate that, although the novel is grounded in feminist themes, it does not achieve a fully integrated feminist interpretation; moreover, while in some cases it manages to confront prevailing patriarchal structures, it ultimately falls short of establishing a comprehensive androgynous model to supplant the entrenched androcentrism within the narrative.

Keywords: Feminist Theology; Androcentrism; Androgyny; Female Awakening; Gendered Exclusion

Copyright © 2026 The Author(s). Published by The Faculty of Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts and Tourism, University of Mazandaran. This is an open-access article under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0) license.

Introduction

Elif Shafak's novel, *The Island of Missing Trees*, *IMT* hereafter, intricately weaves a narrative that reflects the profound and multifaceted struggles experienced by the central character, Ada, along with her Turkish Cypriot mother, Defne, and her Greek Cypriot father, Kostas. This poignant tale delves deeply into their complex family's trauma while simultaneously examining the broader implications of loss and identity that arise from such intricate relationships and events. The story opens with a beautifully woven, yet ultimately forbidden, love story that unfolds between Defne, who identifies as Muslim, and Kostas, who practices Christianity. This relationship starkly highlights the intense ethnic and religious tensions that were prevalent during the 1970s in Cyprus. Such tension serves as a striking backdrop, capturing the complexities and conflicts inherent in their lives and shaping their experiences in ways that are both profound and far-reaching. As the plot progresses, the narrative traces their painful dislocation and eventual displacement to London, where their daughter Ada embarks on a heartfelt and poignant quest to uncover her family's past. In doing so, she seeks to piece together the fragmented histories that have profoundly defined her existence, exploring themes of heritage, belonging, and the scars of memory that linger through generations.

Considering the Literature reviewed, which will follow, a significant gap addressed in the case

of *IMT* is the intricate and nuanced treatment of religion and spirituality within the confines of the novel. To thoroughly address and explore this critical issue, the current study draws on Rita Gross's feminist theological arguments, particularly those concerning the deeply entrenched androcentric model of humanity. This model, which consistently defaults to male experiences, gives rise to the need for a critical examination of the dynamics at play. Thus, this study aims to investigate the potential for a rich and inclusive androgynous perspective within the novel that challenges and transcends traditional gender binaries. Specifically, this paper poses an important question: Does the storytelling of Elif Shafak enact a paradigmatic transformation of the prevailing androcentric dichotomy? Furthermore, does it succeed in offering a coherent and internally consistent androgynous alternative that redefines the existing narrative landscape? To systematically address these inquiries, the paper is organized into distinct sections. First, it synthesizes the current literature that examines these themes in relation to the novel. This synthesis provides a foundation for the subsequent analysis. Second, the study establishes Gross's theoretical framework, which will serve as a guiding lens for the analysis, and outlines the comprehensive analytical approach that will be employed throughout the study.

Finally, in the main body of the paper, a thorough and thoughtful analysis is conducted that

delves deeply into the novel's multifaceted representation of religious diversity, the complex concept of sacred defiance, and the profound interconnectedness that is articulated through the lens of ecological feminism. This exploration highlights how these crucial elements interact with one another and contribute significantly to the broader discourse surrounding feminism as portrayed within the text. Ultimately, the paper aims to conclude with a detailed and nuanced assessment of the novel's capable achieving a feminist theological perspective. It will also evaluate its potential impact on contemporary discussions and debates about the intricate interplay of gender, spirituality, and liberation in today's world, considering how these themes resonate with current societal challenges and injustices.

Literature review

Elif Shafak's *IMT* presents a complex intertextual framework that interweaves narratives of trauma, migration, and ecological consciousness across the spatial contexts of Cyprus and London. Scholarly analyses of the novel have predominantly coalesced around three central thematic axes: postcolonial subjectivity, the transgenerational transmission of trauma, and ecocritical or posthumanist interpretations. Postcolonial and identity-focused scholarship forms a principal strand of critical discourse. Mohammed Iqbal et al. analyze bicultural identity

among migrant subjects through Homi Bhabha's conceptualization of the "third space," demonstrating how diasporic existence engenders hybrid subject positions. Zehra and Mohsin in "Rootless Identity" expand this inquiry by examining the destabilization of identity under colonial legacies, asserting that colonization disrupts affiliative ties to cultural and territorial origins, prompting an existential quest for selfhood. Aloseli advances a feminist critique within this domain, focusing on the reconfiguration of female identity across generational divides in diasporic settings, thereby foregrounding gendered experiences of dislocation (*Reconstructing Women Identities in Diaspora*).

A second major interpretive trajectory centers on trauma, particularly its persistence across generations. Piyush Raval ("The Suffering and Trauma of Fig Trees") situates intercultural relationships and inherited trauma within wider postcolonial and environmental literary traditions, emphasizing their narrative entanglement. Chaudhary and Munawar interpret silence as a strategic mode of survival in "Un-burying the Buried," illustrating how protagonists such as Kostas and Defne suppress traumatic histories to shield their daughter, thus framing trauma simultaneously as a concealed burden and a protective covenant.

Ecocritical and posthumanist readings underscore the novel's innovative engagement

with non-human agency. O'Neill in "*Arborealities*" argues that Shafak's narrative technique enables the articulation of arboreal narratives, positioning the fig tree as a mycorrhizal nexus that binds textual and biological life, thereby reconceptualizing trees as relational kin. Stotesbury supports this view by interpreting the anthropomorphized tree as a conscious narrator that mediates between ecological grief and emotional connection ("The Otherness of Trees"). Adopting a posthuman perspective, Shahzad asserts that human and non-human entities are ontologically intertwined—"enfolded and sedimented"—with the fig tree functioning as a living archive of historical suffering. Sutari similarly challenges anthropocentric paradigms, tracing the ecological devastation wrought by human domination through the novel's symbolic depictions of death. Hardison further aligns vegetal sentience with *IMT*'s polyphonic structure, advocating for a reconfigured understanding of human-plant interdependence. As it emerges, despite the depth of these critical interventions, the feminist theological dimensions of the novel remain insufficiently examined. This study addresses this gap by engaging Rita Gross's feminist theology to explore the spiritual trajectories of female characters amid displacement, inherited trauma, and patriarchal religiosity. It investigates whether these figures negotiate dominant religious frameworks and cultivate alternative spiritualities that resist

androcentric norms. The analysis further assesses whether *IMT* proposes an androgynous social imaginary—one that affirms gender equity and religious pluralism—and whether the novel posits interconnectedness as a restorative force in a fragmented world. Situated within ongoing feminist scholarship (e.g., Aloseli) and informed by ecocritical perspectives (O'Neill "*Arborealities*, or Making Trees Matter"; Hardison "My Philodendron's Favorite Music Is Beethoven"; Shahzad *Non-human Trauma and Agency*), this research introduces a crucial theological dimension to the scholarly interpretation of Shafak's narrative.

Theoretical framework

Rita M. Gross in her innovative work *A Garland of Feminist Reflections* criticizes the traditional patriarchal readings of religious texts and due social practices. Ravenna Michalsen in her review of the book states that, according to Gross, "all disciplines in the humanities and social sciences must shift from an androcentric methodology to an androgynous methodology" (384). Gross offers a feminist model for reviewing the representation of female life in society, centring on the conspicuous absence of women's religious lives and thoughts from scholarly accounts, and highlighting the significance of recognizing religious diversity to address and cover this gap.

Gross' intellectual path shows a moral concern to enhance the recognition of women's

religious experiences and criticize sexism in traditions. This goes hand in hand with her involvement in the “insider-outsider” debate in research. Beyond Western feminist norms, she draws insights from constructive works on Buddhism to question the limits, and include possible inputs of fe/male views. A crucial finding, she emphasizes, is how history tends to view men as actors and women as things to be studied. The heart of the critique of male-centeredness rests on three linked ideas: first, mixing up male norms with human norms (with spiritual-ideological justification); second, thinking that a general male approach to thought, speech, and research is enough to grasp all of humanity; and third, treating women as outside objects to “mankind,” needing explanation and fitting into a male-focused worldview (Gross *Garland of Feminist Reflections*, 57).

Gross pre-empts potential defensiveness in response to the history of religious methodology, contending that the core problem of the field is researchers’ potential androcentric bias, resulting in the dominance of male religious experience and ignorance of female participation. Asserting the generic masculine to include humans, it nevertheless tacitly acknowledges women’s essential difference and objectification, that “Men took themselves to be subjects and women only to be objects” (*Garland of Feminist Reflections*, 51). As this renders scholarship without proper conceptual instruments to examine ubiquitous sex

role difference in religious systems, it ends up having little knowledge of women (59). This acknowledgment comprises Gross’ concept of feminism as a paradigm shift in recognising women’s complete humanity, and a social vision oriented to freedom from limiting gender roles.

Gross urges an absolute avoidance of androcentric elements and suggests “androgyny” as an alternative methodology. In essence, the phrase “both male and female” challenges androcentrism’s foundation principles by not correlating the male standard to the human condition, and thus, deeming the generic masculine perspective unsatisfactory, and discarding the “woman-as-object” paradigm (*Garland of Feminist Reflections*, 60).

This shift in mentality requires a shift from male-centered paradigms to those in which both men’s and women’s roles take primordial importance. It represents the very “female-male” aspect of humanity, going beyond just inserting females in the discourse. This means restructuring our understanding to validate the primordial duality inherent in humankind.

Notably, she proposes re-evaluating ritualistic and symbolic elements of religions through an androgynous perspective. This practice requires deconstructing male prevalence often encountered in the study of religious rituals, and reinterpreting religious systems of symbolism, as pivotal constructions in establishing codes of sociocultural life, to uncover interaction between

both feminine and masculine points of view in conceptualizing the Ultimate, respectively. The chief aim refers to achieving an in-depth understanding of human religious experience as social practice, which combines divergent gendered points of view. She suggests examining religious experiences and functions of women in terms of an "exclusion and participation" framework (*Garland of Feminist Reflections*, 61). She presents as developing an academic framework, in terms of cultivating all relevant information, aptly represented under the field of women's studies. Feminism and feminist theology, as constituting integral elements, form social theory, probing and reconstructing contemporary religious, cultural, or academic settings. Empathy becomes understood as a cross-cultural research instrument, indispensable to preclude further entrenchment and derision, even in engaging in sensitive topics, before establishing normative assessments.

In conclusion, Gross' contributions have significantly influenced the domain of feminist theology. Her scholarly work has challenged conventional patriarchal interpretations of religious traditions and has paved the way for innovative feminist religious scholarship. By emphasizing the roles of women within religious contexts and advocating for a more inclusive and

gender-equitable understanding of spirituality, Gross has motivated numerous scholars and activists to pursue a more just and equitable society.

This study employs a comparative, character-centered approach to operationalize Gross's theoretical framework for literary analysis of *IMT*. It systematically discusses the principal female figures—Defne, Meryem, and Ada—and their narrative developments according to Gross's conceptual dichotomy of "exclusion and participation." Through a close examination of key textual moments in which these characters engage with or are subjugated by patriarchal norms and religiously sanctioned honor systems, the analysis assesses their positional shifts between objectified marginality ("outsider" status) and agential inclusion ("insider" status).

Religious diversity and inclusivity in *IMT*

This feminist theological study investigates the male-female interaction in *IMT* based on Rita M. Gross' androgynous perspective. Considering Elif Shafak's feminist mindset,¹ it will probe the reflection of female agency in the novel with respect to spiritual understanding and practice. As such, it seeks to see whether the story envisions an equitable world, or whether the death of the main

¹ She refers to herself as a humanitarian feminist. For some details, you may refer to: Shafak, Elif. Elif Shafak: "When women are divided it is the male status quo that benefits." Interview by K. Kellaway. *The Guardian*, 2017.

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/feb/05/elif-shafak-turkey-three-daughters-of-eve-interview>. Accessed 15 July. 2025.

female figure of the story signifies the internalized androcentric understanding in the humanities, as discussed by Gross.

This research examines the representation of religious diversity and how social religious codes can either constrain or liberate women from restrictive ideological principles in the novel. This analysis considers the spiritual challenges female characters face in *IMT* as well as those they adopt to persevere. It draws upon Gross' critiques of religious understanding and practice as a naturalized patriarchal discourse and her discussion of "sacred defiance."

Gross's feminist theological perspective integrates gender studies and religious scholarship, aiming to challenge and reformulate narratives traditionally dominated by male perspectives by androgynous alternatives. Androgynous scholarship seeks inclusivity and a more balanced understanding of human experience in religious contexts. This call for inclusivity is particularly crucial in religious communities that have historically marginalized women's voices under the guise of respecting their chastity and unworldliness.

The intersection of these ideas is evident in Shafak's *IMT*. The novel endeavors to include diverse perspectives, including female ones, through various narrators such as Ada, a Fig Tree as a first-person narrator, Defne, Meryem, and Kostas, encompassing both past and present in a culturally vibrant atmosphere shaped by the

presence of various religious understandings. This inclusivity apparently introduces a spiritual context that acknowledges diversity and transcends androcentric gendered religious classifications. As the narrative unfolds, the novel presents individuals' experiences affected by civil conflict, interweaving male and female narratives to highlight the interconnectedness of personal and collective histories. This narrative strategy aligns with Gross' advocacy for recognizing diverse perspectives in narrating life stories (*Garland of Feminist Reflections* 28), thereby offering a comprehensive view of identity and history. However, it is essential to consider the continuity or discontinuity of this vision throughout the novel.

Religion as a site of gendered distinction

This study examines the characters' awareness of the mechanisms through which sexist-gendered norms function as a systematic entity, as well as the characters' interactions with or reactions against these norms. This section centers on investigating the layers of the novel through which these two aspects are addressed. It suggests the role of religion in the story acts less like belief, more like control, especially shaping how female characters are pushed into margins by rituals tied to dignity and custom. Lives unfold inside tightly policed spiritual settings where gendered rules weigh heavily, making daily survival harder. Instead of unity, divergence shows up sharply

when comparing Dafne's resistance with Meryem's compliance - one pulls away, the other folds inward. Such contrast reveals how deeply male-centered values have settled into personal choices, almost unnoticed yet powerfully present. In the first layer, the couple contends with the realities imposed by their conflicting religious-cultural backgrounds. Defne grapples with the expectations and limitations imposed upon her as a woman within a conservative Muslim Turkish community, while Kostas faces the pressures of conforming to the nationalistic fervor of his Christian Greek community. Both are acutely aware that their respective families and friends perceive their relationship as a betrayal, yet their bond seems sufficiently strong to bear the weight of these societal burdens. Defne's narrative exemplifies how her affection for Kostas transgresses the ethno-religious boundaries imposed by the Turkish Cypriot community's male-centric sensitivity toward honor, echoing Gross's assertion that religions sacralize gender roles, institutionalizing male dominance—(*Buddhism after Patriarchy*, 89).

The novel's depiction of honor culture illustrates how individuals perceive Defne's decision to pursue her own path as a betrayal (Shahzad *Non-human Trauma and Agency*). This perception works to dehumanize Defne by subjecting her to gender norms that mandate adherence to stringent social and religious conventions. However, she asserts her right to

autonomy, choosing to engage in a romantic relationship with an individual from a "rival" faith, thereby rejecting the oppressive expectations imposed upon her as a Muslim Turkish Cypriot woman. This is underscored in Meryem's statement:

She'd put pillows under bedcovers and slip out of the house in the middle of the night. She was brave – and foolish.'.... 'Your mum was a free spirit. ... If you told her not to touch fire, she'd go and build a bonfire! (Shafak 129)

In this narrative, there is an apparently compelling depiction of the realization of women's rights to determine their own destinies, challenging the inequitable systems that seek to constrain their autonomy and individuality. However, does Shafak effectively convey this awareness and the self-conscious, subjective responses it elicits? To address this question, it is necessary to examine the characterization of other significant figures in the story, as well as Defne's death, which may reflect an internalized androcentrism within the novel's world.

Defne and her sister Meryem are the main female figures in the first section of the novel, both subjected to the controlling religious patriarchy governing their family and community. They both suffer from what is imposed by family, culture, and community. For instance, both sisters experience hardship in their marriages. Nevertheless, Defne defies her family's wishes by

choosing her beloved, causing her parents to disown her, as they perceive her actions as betraying their religion and tarnishing their community reputation. She alludes to this when describing her father to Kostas:

In his eyes, I had dishonoured our name. ... for him honour was everything, and when he found out that I wasn't the daughter he thought he had, it just destroyed him. He wouldn't look at my face, he wouldn't speak to me anymore. (Shafak 250)

This act, while rebellious against the established religious tradition of her community, seems like an alternative spiritual practice, to employ Gross' stand, and environmental imagery functions at its best here. The fig tree, as a silent witness and archival entity (O'Neill "Arborealities, or Making Trees"; Shahzad *Non-human Trauma and Agency*), functions as a sanctified point here: a nonhuman, yet, sacred space where Defne's and Kostas' love exists outside doctrinal condemnation, recreating a parallel spiritual world of love and care flourishing "in the margins of institutional religion" (Gross *Buddhism after Christianity*, 211).² This runs against their religious

backgrounds, which are acting like barriers to stop their interaction.

On the other hand, Meryem marries for the sake of community, not her own will. Later, she explains: "My parents were my priority, my community was my priority. I had responsibilities" (Shafak 138). This means she undergoes the community pressure to do things based on patriarchal norms. As the story unfolds, unlike her sister, she acts as a guardian of patriarchal traditions. This matches Gross' insight that "women often uphold patriarchy to claim scraps of power" (*Feminism and Religion*, 67). When Meryem tells to Defne "A woman's honour is the family's honour" (Shafak 120), she reflects the deep-rooted sexism that orthodox religious discourse promotes. This, of course, renders women inferior before men. Then, what happens? Her husband abandons her. He puts her aside like a useless object, because of the community traditions that reproach the woman who cannot give birth to a child, though she emphasizes: "We tried ... for years we tried, but nothing worked" (119).

Years later, after Defne's death, Maryam arrives in London to meet Kostas and Ada. As it

² In all religions, the fig tree is considered sacred. For instance, in Buddhism, it is said Buddha achieved enlightenment "sitting under the sacred fig" ("The Queen of the Trees", 2008). In the Bible, it provides cover for Adam and Eve in Paradise. Children of Israel are also symbolized as fig trees. In Islam, God swears by the fig in the Quran, as well (95:1). For further information, you may refer to: "The Queen of Trees; Fig Trees: From the Sacred to the Strangler." *Nature*, season 24, episode 10, PBS, 2008,

<https://www.pbs.org/wnet/nature/the-queen-of-trees-fig-trees-from-the-sacred-to-the-strangler/1353/>. Accessed 2 Oct. 2025.

The Fig tree is a Biblical Symbol of Israel: Fig Leaf Aprons are the Foolishness of Human Works. *Church Ages*. 2022. <https://churchages.net/en/study/fig-tree-is-biblical-symbol-of-israel/> Accessed October 2, 2025.

emerges from her conversations with Ada, she is highly concerned with Turkish community traditions: "If our father had caught her, it'd have been a disaster! I was scared out of my wits" (Shafak 129). Elsewhere, she asserts:

I always wanted to come and visit you
How could I not want to meet my sister's
child? But I had made a promise. ... That I
would never see any of you, so long as my
parents were alive." (69)

Aloseli in *Reconstructing Women Identities* points out that some women in diaspora communities form their identities, trying to stick to traditional norms of their mother land. As such, she, categorizes Meryem as belonging to a group "concerned with the roots, and roots represent traditions and norms" (39). A concern here is whether Shafak has an Orientalist perspective? The ways she represents Defne and Meryem in the novel, create a dichotomy of modern/traditional, were orthodox religious identity, with deep sexist androcentrism, is associated with tradition. Meryem is the embodiment of this association. It seems Shafak is engrossed by what Aloseli discusses as the imitation of Western feminists by some secular Eastern/Muslim feminists who superficialize Eastern/Muslim women's sociocultural restrictions or problems within Modern/traditional contrast (18-20). But, to what extent is the representation according to the reality of Turkish communities in either the mainland or diaspora? There have been "claims that equal

rights were a top-down policy during the westernization period in the early Turkish Republic and can therefore be seen as patriarchal in nature," being preceded by some movements by independent women affected by what was done by some Arab, Kordish, and Circassian women elsewhere (Hanso).

Some Turkish feminists, Shafak among them, apparently represent the very generation brought up in such a context. Yet, this is not the whole entity of Turkish women movements; belonging to these heterogeneous movements are feminists who define themselves as "practicing Muslim feminists" (Hanso "Treating Feminism as a Western Invention"). They don't follow the Western trope of representing strong Eastern/Muslim women as imitating or refiguring another "Western knowing subject" (Kieu "Women's Substantive Representation in Turkey"). This imitation is what Defne stands for and, exactly, the depiction of her married life, supposed to be the opposite of her previous life within her controlling Turkish family, repeats the very pattern Western feminists criticize. Defne is trapped within the masculine world up to the end of her life, where the power relation is always to the benefit of masculine side, and Defne, not knowing what to do, remains silent. This is what Gross criticizes as the dominant feature of Western life. The notion of respected religious diversity highlighted through juxtaposing Muslim and Christian life as equal alongside in the novel

fails to create that atmosphere of compromising difference for the sake of mutual love and understanding, as well. Considering Kostas' characterization, it remains on the surface.

Kostas' characterization in *IMT* envisions Gross' feminist criticism of dominant androcentrism in human interaction. According to Gross, women are assumed as "an object exterior to mankind, and they need to be explained and fitted into one's worldview" (Michalsen 384). Kostas' interaction with Defne and Ada relates to this mentality. When he leaves Defne for the first time, he does not feel the necessity to inform her. Maybe he considers her as an "outsider" whose expectations or feelings are not of that seriousness as his own understanding, even if he has the vision of coming back and taking her later on: "I will return soon, I won't let this happen again. And maybe next time, one day, we will go to England together, who knows?" (Shafak 167).

In another time and place, and before taking Defne to London, he addresses her from a superior, patriarchal position, blaming her for the lost baby: "I don't care about the psychic, I care about what happened to our baby. ... You had no right to hide the pregnancy from me" (Shafak 218). Struggling to defend herself, Defne stands against Kostas and, "as if she had touched a hot iron" (218), reproaches him:

Do you know what it's like to try to hide a pregnancy when the world feels like it's collapsing and you have no one to talk to?

Where were you? If you weren't there then, you have no right to judge me now. (218)

This is the very reaction Meryem has shown too, addressing Kostas: "Stay away from her. God knows, you make me nervous, Kostas Kazantzakis. You left her when she was pregnant" (212). Interestingly, the very reactions show that the two women try their best not to be objectified by the dominant patriarchy and practice—"the paradigm shift involved in recognizing that women are human beings"—and have "the social vision of freedom from the prison of gender roles" (Gross *Garland of Feminist Reflections*, 51). This reflects a kind of power play between the masculine and feminine worlds in *IMT* where, even the most conservative sister, Meryem, who is the mere obedient one before the religious traditional community norms, cares to raise her voice. However, the point is that Meryem's protest is mostly because of her dedication to the honor culture of the community, and the anxiety she has about the scandal that will follow her sister's situation. But Defne's protest is a striving to have her expectations and feelings equally recognized by Kostas; the very vision reinforces criticism about some Eastern/Muslim feminists' Orientalist stand discussed earlier.

The next point that shall be considered in the paradigm shift of power play in the novel is Kostas' actions and reactions. Even after Defne's death—possible depiction of the unaltered

continuation of traditional masculine understanding in family/social life—Kostas is not eager to let his daughter know about the family's past. While it reflects his vision that it is not the right time to let his daughter touch the history because she, maybe, does not understand it, yet it implies his very internalized vision of being the only responsible decision-maker before whatever and whoever is related to his life.

In the next row stands Ada. She emerges as the one who does not let this masculine power play go on unchecked. Ada's journey to Cyprus, against her father's wish—digging up “the memory of her parents' life in Cyprus” (Raval 167)—is profoundly transformational. It not only helps her understand her parents' experiences and the scars they bear, but also lets her begin the process of healing resulting from “her own feelings of homelessness, hinting at her emotional attachment to a past that holds significance in her heart” (Irshad et al. “Homelessness and Nostalgia in *The Island of Missing Trees*”). Reconnecting with her roots, Ada navigates her identity with newfound clarity and strength. Here, Ada enacts a subject that realizes Gross' call for women to “reclaim agency” (*Garland of Feminist Reflections*, 178) by searching for the hidden past. She confronts her father's androcentric thinking that hides the past to get his daughter away from it, though it is a necessary part of her life.

Sacred defiance and alternative spiritualities

This analysis examines Ada's path toward healing and self-understanding using Rita Gross's idea of “reconstructed spirituality.” Her story unfolds not as quiet acceptance but as resistance, facing directly the deep scars left by Cyprus's past, carried silently by her parents. Rather than remain on the edges, defined by exclusion, she pushes forward with questioning eyes and restless hands. Unsettled by silence around family secrets, she pulls at threads long tucked away. Boundaries built by old customs do not hold; they crack under persistent inquiry. Power shifts slowly—not granted, but taken—through acts of memory, voice, and refusal. What was once handed down as weight becomes material she reshapes. Centering herself does not happen easily—it emerges from effort, fracture, and rebuilding. The narrative bends where it seemed fixed. She stands now not beneath inherited grief but within her own light.

Ada's rejection of inherited traumas by facing the past replicates Gross' advocacy for “hybrid spiritual identities that transcend patriarchal binaries” (*Feminism and Religion* 131). She tries to understand who she is and what the cultural wounds of Cyprus are. Gross' spiritual ideas help us see Ada's search as a quest to become whole. Shafak also talks about why it is crucial to know your roots to get rid of fear and confusion: “the path of an inherited trauma is

random; you never know who might get it, but someone will" (120).

This will be meaningful by considering the first chapters of *IMT* where Ada's abnormal, stressed reactions at school and home are described. The sentence reveals Ada's awareness of the necessity to tackle the emotional burdens her parents passed down via the unresolved pain from war and being forced to leave their home like unwanted "outsiders." She does not want to be an "outsider" despite her father's verbal or even unconscious dedication to it, and here appears the moment when "the generic masculine habit of language ... is no longer adequate. Then the whole 'woman-as-object' syndrome also collapses." (Gross *Garland of Feminist Reflections*, 59). As Ada thinks about her feelings of sadness that seem to go beyond her own experiences, she wonders is "it also possible to inherit something as intangible and immeasurable as sorrow?" (Shafak 18).

This self-examination shows her difficulty, and yet determination, to make sense of her personal identity, with the shared pain of her background. Ada chooses to uncover things that her dad is hiding, emphasizing that she is not a child anymore, and she knows the story of forbidden love between him and her mother; she stresses: "Nothing excuses this type of behaviour" (Shafak 69). This is a clear implication that she is no longer an "outsider"; rather, she is now at the center of the events and stories of the past.

Theological ecofeminist reflections in *IMT*: human and nonhuman relatedness and equality

This section examines connections among ecological awareness, historical pain, and male-dominated power through religious sensitivity, as pointed to by Gross. A key focus here is the fig tree, which acts like a living observer placed alongside the gendered theme of silence. Together, these highlight the tension between nature-based spirituality and structured, male-centered systems of control. The tree's unique voice and Ada's bold defiance apparently serve to push back against these power structures. They present a reimagined identity that ties into feminist and ecological restoration. On the other hand, Defne's limited choices and ultimate disappearance highlight how patriarchal control keeps its power.

This raises questions about whether religious, ecological, and feminist ideas challenge rooted gender oppression in *IMT* or not. We believe that the fig tree's awareness reflected through its conscious voice is highlighted to prefigure a challenge to the religious systems that place humans at the center. Feminist theologians often critique these systems as overly focused on men. In *IMT*, the tree shifts from being just a part of nature to becoming "kinfolk" with its own spiritual role. The chapters "Trunk" and "Roots" back this up with evidence. Hardison explains that in these sections, "the fig tree shows recognition

of kin in retelling its 'family' history (including Kostas and Ada amongst its family)" (94). The personified fig tree shakes up the anthropocentric religious order that is criticized as deeply androcentric by many critics.³ This gives the tree human traits and flips traditional narratives that put human lives above nature's stories. As Stotesbury explains, the inexplicable grotesqueness and absurdity of death, specifically that of Defne, is transformed by the tree's anthropomorphic narrative into a "voice" that links the arboreal with the human and their respective histories (159). Viewing trees as sentient beings shifts how people interpret sacred tales. It challenges the idea of human beings being the "masters of the universe," a perspective reinforced by many monotheistic beliefs, and places humanity and nature on the same spiritual level. Hardison highlights that recognizing trees as aware beings creates a view of them as "subjects as active," encouraging people to think of their relationship with trees as mutual and interactive (94).

However, the researchers need to ask if this tree-like voice confronts the "colonizing" and exploitative silence used by the male-dominated world in *IMT*. Even though the tree offers a different type of spirituality opposed to the anthropocentric/androcentric one criticized by

feminist theologians like Gross, it still connects to the idea of silence, which reflects the power of the male-centered view. Silence is a motif diversely repeated through *IMT*. Chaudhary and Munawar discuss the silence of Kostas and Defne as a means to endure and cope with hardship ("Un-burying the Buried"). On the other hand, Rita Gross, in some cases, discusses silence as rebellious, arguing it can often be the only choice left for those who are oppressed (*Garland of Feminist Reflections*, 203). But with Ada, we witness a rare instance of spiritual (based on Gross's stand) disruption. Ada screams in front of the whole class (Shafak 222), creating a break that forces her father to face their past.

This moment, it seems, is contrasting Gross's remark on silence as the rare left choice, yet reverberates Gross's idea of becoming a subject "inside" instead of being just an objectified "outsider." By rejecting the idea of staying "so hush-hush like all this is some kind of secret" (Shafak 108), Ada disrupts the silence in the male-dominated world. This change pushes toward recognizing reality and stepping away from the blindness caused by patriarchal secrets.

Unlike Ada's awakening, Defne's journey shows how patriarchy continues to erase women's voices tragically. Even though she resists Kostas' selfish choices, her voice lacks enough power to

³ For further information please refer to: Ruether, Rosemary Radford. *Gaia & God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing*. Harper San Francisco, 1992.

Hampson, Daphne. *Theology and Feminism*. Basil Blackwell, 1991.

oppose his ideas. She tries to fit in as an “insider,” but doing so costs her relationships and her home and life in Cyprus and, later, London. Noticeably, the act of burying the tree in the cold season reflects Defne’s role in her marriage, where she remains quiet and without agency. Though O’Neil elucidates it as “the silent logos of plant life to express a rich arboreal knowledge base that extends to the fig tree a quality associated with the human, disrupting traditional hierarchies of human/vegetal being in favor of a relationality” (809), reflecting a posthuman vision away from anthropocentric/ androcentric hierarchical understanding⁴. This association is simultaneously negative.

The case is that the tree is illustrated as being buried in cold seasons, while, for sure, it signifies survival, yet it holds passivity as Defne ends up buried along with the past that Kostas buries by staying silent. Feminist theologian Hampson explains that while men often hold onto power by being private and silent, women focus on building connections and expressing emotions (34). By staying silent, Defne adopts a behavior seen as masculine, which leads to her downfall. This situation shows a harsh truth about the social rules imposed on women. In myths and fairy tales,

as Shafak points out, “a woman who breaks social conventions is always punished... An uncivilized end for a woman who didn’t want to be part of civilization” (62).

Looking at *IMT* through an ecotheological perspective brings to the fore a possibility for the deconstruction of the very feminist vision that critics have approved as a determining aspect of Shafak’s work; Defne undergoes the very masculine practice by practicing silence. There is a passage in *IMT* that possibly reflects Shafak’s realistic understanding of the very challenges against feminist visions within the novel: “In all the myths and fairy tales, a woman who breaks social conventions is always punished. And usually the punishment is psychological, mental. An uncivilized end for a woman who didn’t want to be part of civilization” (62). It is useful to point to a traditional feminist understanding here, according to which women are always associated with nature and emotion. At the same time, men are the representatives of culture, civilization, and wisdom.⁵ Defne here is talking about the hard conventions of human societies against women and the extent to which they can destroy possibility of normal life. In this quotation, there is a crystal-clear acceptance of the androcentric

⁴ It will be very useful to refer to: Salih, Sara. “Filling up the Space between Mankind and Ape: Racism, Speciesism and the Androphilic Ape.” *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature*, vol. 38, no. 1, 2007, pp. 95-111.

⁵ Puleo has argued this distinction as a running androcentric concept normalized by some feminists.

She believes the very understanding buttresses the dichotomy of female/human in itself. For more explanation, refer to: Puleo, A. Hilda. “For an ecofeminism of equality.” *Multitudes*, vol. 67, no. 2, 2017, pp. 75-81.

dominance before which women alongside nature are just objects moved by men's desires to control. To sum up, having a feminist theological analysis of *IMT*, we looked at the novel as narrating the life story of three women in different religious-social contexts, trying to change their lives to better by confronting and interacting with the androcentric traditional conventions surrounding them. This was done by struggling to be "insiders" despite the dominant trends facing them as "outsiders." This put forward a challenge for a paradigm shift in the masculine/feminine power play in the novel that, despite positive trends and changes symbolized by a young daughter's struggles plus environmental imagery, could not fully dismantle the androcentric system and mentality reflected in the novel.

Conclusion

This study examines Elif Shafak's portrayal of female subjectivity in *IMT* through a feminist theological lens, with particular attention to the dynamic transitions between "insider" and "outsider" positions within sociocultural and religious contexts. The analysis assesses whether the narrative enacts a transformative shift toward an androgynous realization of feminist subjectivity or instead reflects a more fragmented, contested process. The results indicate a pattern of deconstructive oscillation rather than a conclusive transformation. Although characters engage in substantial resistance against androcentric norms,

the narrative underscores the enduring influence of patriarchal systems, which impede complete spiritual emancipation. The investigation reveals divergent pathways in the negotiation of gendered binaries. Defne's arc exemplifies the constrained efficacy of rebellion; despite her rejection of orthodox Turkish Muslim conventions, her relocation to London leads to a reconfiguration of subordination, wherein her husband's authoritative control eclipses her agency. In contrast, Meryem embodies the internalization of patriarchal values, with her internalized sense of shame obstructing the formation of an autonomous, subjective belonging. Ada, however, emerges as the most pivotal figure in disrupting this cyclical repression. Through her confrontation with paternal silence and her subsequent journey of personal restoration in Cyprus, she shifts from being a passive inheritor of familial trauma to an active agent of self-definition. Central to this transformation is the fig tree, which functions as a dual emblem: it signifies both the resilience of rooted self-determination and the lingering dominance of an androcentric order that historically suppressed maternal voice.

In sum, the novel does not culminate in a feminist utopia nor present a fully actualized androgynous paradigm. Rather, it offers a sober, realist depiction of the challenges women face in asserting spiritual and social autonomy within deeply institutionalized androcentrism. This research contributes to existing scholarship—

predominantly focused on postcolonial and ecological interpretations—by introducing a theological dimension. It demonstrates that the novel's notion of "secular spirituality" remains entangled with inherited cultural and religious frameworks. This insight invites further inquiry into Turkish subjectivity, particularly through the application of Islamic feminist theory, which could illuminate how traditional spiritual discourses simultaneously inform and constrain the pursuit of reimagined, gender-symmetrical identities.

Works Cited

- Ahmed, Shene. "A Feminist Approach to Shafak's *The Island of Missing Trees*." *Anbar University Journal of Languages & Literature*, vol. 16, no. 1, 2024, pp. 65–85.
<https://doi.org/10.37654/aujll.2024.144853.1058>
- Aloseli, Lara A. *Reconstructing Women Identities in Diaspora in Elif Shafak's The Island of Missing Trees and Etap Rum's A Woman Is No Man*. 2024. Middle East University, master's thesis.
- Chaudhary, Fariha, and Anieeqa Munawar. "Unburying the Buried: Exploring Silence and Generational Trauma in Elif Shafak's *The Island of Missing Trees*." *Pakistan Journal of Social Sciences*, vol. 43, no. 2, 2023, pp. 203–15.
- <https://pjss.bzu.edu.pk/index.php/pjss/article/view/1264>.
- Gross, Rita M. *A Garland of Feminist Reflections: Forty Years of Religious Exploration*. University of California Press, 2009.
- . *Buddhism after Patriarchy: A Feminist History, Analysis, and Reconstruction of Buddhism*. State University of New York Press, 1993.
- . *Feminism and Religion: An Introduction*. Beacon Press, 1996.
- Hampson, Daphne. *Theology and Feminism*. Basil Blackwell, 1991.
- Hanso, Hille. "Sanem Güner: Treating Feminism as a Western Invention Perpetuates a Myth from Which Turkish Conservatives Have Benefited Greatly." *Feministarium*, 2021, <https://feministarium.ee/en/sanem-guner-eng/>. Accessed 17 Aug. 2025.
- Hardison, Milo. "My Philodendron's Favorite Music Is Beethoven: Considerations of Plant Sentience in Elif Shafak's *The Island of Missing Trees*." *Digital Literature Review*, vol. 11, no. 1, 2024, pp. 84–97.
<https://doi.org/10.33043/q599x7c22>.
- Iqbal, Mohammad, et al. "Biculturalism Leading to Third Space Identity: A Postcolonial Analysis of Elif Shafak's *The Island of Missing Trees*." *Al-Qamar*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2023, pp. 73–82.
<https://doi.org/10.53762/alqamar.06.01.e06>.

- Irshad, Saira, et al. "Unveiling Homelessness and Nostalgia in *The Island of Missing Trees*: A Postcolonial Study." *PalArch's Journal of Archaeology of Egypt/Egyptology*, vol. 20, no. 2, 2023, pp. 1981–92.
<https://archives.palarch.nl/index.php/jae/article/download/11989/10569/23714>.
- Kieu, An Nguyen. "Women's Substantive Representation in Turkey: Socio-cultural and Political Constraints on Collaborative Efforts for Women's Empowerment." *Discovery Polyphony*, 22 Dec. 2023, .
- Michalsen, Ravenna. "Review of *A Garland of Feminist Reflections: Forty Years of Religious Exploration*, by Rita M. Gross." *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, vol. 18, 2011, pp. 382–88.<https://blogs.dickinson.edu/buddhistethics/files/2011/09/JBE-Michalsen1.pdf>.
- O'Neill, Stephen. "Arborealities, or Making Trees Matter in Elif Shafak's *The Island of Missing Trees*." *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, vol. 31, no. 4, 2023, pp. 796–816.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/isle/isad040>.
- Raval, Piyush. "The Suffering and Trauma of Fig Trees in Elif Shafak's *The Island of Missing Trees*." *IIS University Journal of Arts*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2024, pp. 165–74.
- Shafak, Elif. *The Island of Missing Trees*. Viking, an imprint of Penguin Books, 2021.
- Shahzad, Umra. *Non-human Trauma and Agency Embodied in The Island of Missing Trees*. 2023. International Islamic University Islamabad, master's thesis.
<https://www.academia.edu/111115689/>.
- Stotesbury, John A. "The Otherness of Trees: Factness and Fiction in Recent Narratives of Arboreal Survival." *Armenian Folia Anglistika*, vol. 18, no. 2 (26), 2022, pp. 146–62.
<https://doi.org/10.46991/AFA/2022.18.2.146>
- Sutari, B. H. Laila. *Anthropocentrism and Its Impact on the Environment in Elif Shafak's The Island of Missing Trees*. 2022. Universitas Islam Negeri Maulana Malik Ibrahim, undergraduate thesis.
<http://etheses.uin-malang.ac.id/42217/>.
- Zehra, Samar, and Liaqat A. Mohsin. "Rootless Identity in Shafak's *The Island of Missing Trees*: A Postcolonial Perspective." *Journal of Policy Research*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2023, pp. 395–401.
<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.8000551>.