

Biculturalism Leading to Third Space Identity: A Postcolonial Analysis of *Elif Shafak's* The Island of Missing Trees

Muhammad Iqbal

MPhil Scholar, Department of English, Northern University Nowshera

Maham Imran

Lecturer Textile Design, National College of Arts - Rawalpindi Campus

Hassan Babar

Assistant Professor (Art and Design), University of Sargodha, Sargodha

Abstract

The current paper aims to highlight biculturalism in immigrants which leads to Third Space Identity in host countries. The study will explore the construction of third space identity in the protagonist Ada Kazantzakis by analyzing the theme of hybridization in Elif Shafak's novel, 'The Island of Missing Trees' (2021). Homi K. Bhabha's theory of third space and hybridity is the key to maneuver the existing research. Bhabha's leading role in postcolonial theory provokes the study towards the world famous book *The Location of Culture* (2021) by scoring the conceptual imperatives and political consistency of postcolonial Cyprus during 1974 in the novel, 'The Island of Missing Trees' (2021). Qualitative method is used for data collection. The objective of the study is to find out how biculturalism in immigrants leads to third space identity and how it affects the protagonists' life in the novel. This research will be beneficial in bringing of modern themes and the way Shafak's dealt with these themes artistically.

Keywords: Biculturalism, Third Space Identity, Postcolonialism, Ada Kazantzakis, Shafak's Cyprus

Introduction

Millions of people move and live as minorities in various locales of the world. They adopt existing culture and become assimilationists setting aside



indigenous culture, traditions, norms, ethnicities etc. Being integrated means following the recurring cultural practices in the host country. The paper in hand highlights biculturalism and an increasing significance of third space identity's dilemma. Shafak endeavors to shift in her novel *The Island of Missing Trees* (2021) numerous cultures collide through different voices and characters undergo in the situation of excruciation. Bhandari (2022) states that Bhabha's dictum of third space identity aims to outrun the colonial dominance by proposing in-between space.

Elif Shafak earned fame for her world famous literary landmark such as *The Bastard of Istanbul* (2006), *The Forty Rules of love* (2009), *The Daughter of Eve* (2016), *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This strange World* (2019) and her latest novel *The Island of Missing Trees* (2021). The under research novel narrates story of belonging and identity on the island of Cyprus during 1974 when civil war breaks out and two teenagers suffered from separation, Costas, who is Greek Christian and Defne who is Turkish Muslim. They experience immigration, colonialism, racial and identity crises and ethnic conflicts. Ada Kazantzakis, sixteen year daughter was Greek to her parents' past. She is treated as Other even she was British by birth. She was victim of bruised identity which leads her to ambivalence; she is confused to understand her place in the world. Ada is befuddled in the diasporic world of multiculturalism and is torn between past and present. It goes without saying that cultural interactions paved the way for multiculturalism.(Laxmiprasad, 2020). Biculturalism correlates to the postcolonial themes such as displacement, alienation, identity crisis, nostalgia, and assimilation...all these themes are pictured in Elif Shafak's *The Island of Missing Trees* (2021). The current paper focuses on the core concerns of postcolonial themes including belonging, identity, culture, biculturalism and third space identity through postcolonial lens in the backdrop of Cyprus in 1974.

The novel unfolds the island of Cyprus in 1974. Two individuals named Kostas and Defne meet at a tavern under a Fig tree. They are attracted to one another. They belong to different religious communities as Muslim and Christian respectively, but love knows no celestial or terrestrial borders As later in his letters Kostas writes, ' I've been thinking that you are my country '(183). The fig tree becomes an eye witness and observes their

forbidden relationship from a romantic distance. Meanwhile war takes place between Greeks and Turks. The city is sabotaged but the tree survives miraculously and they are parted with.

Years later in London, Ada Kazantzakis their daughter, who had never visited this very island, visited this birth place of her parents. She is of sixteen years but doesn't know about her parents' past. In a nutshell, *The Island of Missing Trees* is a diasporic novel which deals with the themes of identity, belonging, biculturalism, and Third Space identity etc. The novel portrays the social, political, cultural and religious conditions of Cyprus in 1970s; it also discusses Greek-Turk war in a fictional way. It also brings together people of different religious backgrounds. The Fig tree is a symbol of spiritual key role in the setting of the novel. Fig tree also represents the superstitious nature of Cypriots. The tree is taken as a sacred entity. The tree symbolizes the recurring culture and norms as well. Fig tree is the manifesto of the present Greek culture, in a sense tree is the reservoir of culture. Shafak says, ' Fig tree is interpreter of human's storylines, nature was always talking, and telling things through human ear was too limited to hear them (207). Kostas takes meticulous care of the tree means Kostas is the protector and defender of his culture, he brings the cutting of tree with him to London when he returns. He couldn't live without his culture, as culture is one's identity. During war the Fig tree is damaged, means the culture is affected crucially. Ada is inclined to native culture instinctively, she likes indigenous food, when her aunt cooks food, and she likes it. Her aunt says, ' Food is the heart of a culture '. Every character feels grieved and badly affected by the bleakness of war. 'Someday this pain will be useful to you '(307). The past is withheld from Ada, Defne says, ' We have to remember in order to heal.

Objectives

The researcher endeavors to seek the following objectives:

- To identify the construction of Third Space Identity
- To analyze the theme of Biculturalism

Literature Review

This research is primarily a compilation of the pertinent research which will serve as a solid foundation for the future study and a clear path for analysis. Under the same circumstances, the concept of biculturalism is seen as an

imperative essential of modern novels like *The Island of Missing Trees* (2021). In the same way third space identity is thought to be a significant element of the paper in hand. Moreover, the relevant literature, theorists and critics will be considered highly conducive in the exploration and evaluation of concerned themes.

Sutari in her research on *The Island of Missing Trees* (2021) examines anthropocentrism and its impact on the environment in order to determine how vital the strong affinity between people and the nature.¹ Her study focuses on the ecocentrism theory which reveals the negativism of humans on the environment and the organism of the universe as well. Similar to the island of Cyprus in this particular novel, Cyprus went through a phase of colonization and civil war, both of which had a bleak effect on the lives of expatriates having diverse backgrounds and multiple indigenous identities. In the text of the novel, the fog tree symbolizes a spiritual being which illustrates the spiritual the spiritual setting and portrays interaction between humans and nature.

Kararti asserts in her research that identities change as a result of culture, religion and nationality.² She also opines about identities that are constructed by language, religion, culture and history as well as how flexibly Shafak dealt with the idea of identity in her watermark work as the infrastructure of her writing and incites people worldwide to live peacefully despite discrepancies through depiction of multifarious characterization. Going through Shafak's works textually and contextually, the researcher underscores that Shafak behaved national identity in a civic way as earlier she delineated it and a vivid historical connection can be observed to biculturalism.

Houria claimed in her research oriented article on Shafak's 'The Bastard of Istanbul' about assimilated cultural identities referencing Bhabha's theorem of hybridity that characters in the novel change drastically and psychologically to justify their own survival and how much rectified is the theme of hybridity which Elif has chosen to illustrate her characters portrayal in the novel. ³It presents extremely pertinent ideas to Shafak's most recent novel 'The Island of Missing Trees' which deals with the effects of partition and division on the development of characters' diasporic third space identities

and their determination to live in betweenness in order to maintain their inner stability. It demonstrates a lot of highly relevant ideological concepts.

Hussein states in his journal by contrasting unholiness and hybridity in Shafak's novel (2011) *Honour* that are generation of immigrants' plight affects subsequent generations through various circumstances, rules and experiences within new hybrid culture and traditions.⁴ He made it crystal clear that in patriarchal cultures daughters in particular, those without brothers are seen as wretched beings. Even though they migrated for the better, they nevertheless feel marginalized and alienated and treated differently than other people and their offspring would likely experience the burning issues.

Stotesbury in his most recent study argues assertively that present-day readers are holistically abreast of ecological change through trees, anticipated thanks to current writers, particularly through trees in Shafak's (2021) *The Island of Missing Trees*.⁵ Elif tree appears metaphorically, presumably allowing the readers to consider the possibility of an arboreal other whereas Shafak discusses the use of conservative postcolonial narratives in her anthropomorphism method and the strife between Cypriots on the island. Shafak shifts her point of inclination by including the voice of fig tree. *The Island of Missing Tree* a novel by Shafak due out in 2021 was under discussion in an interview with the Penguin UK (2021), which revealed that the plot is inextricably entwined with ever being around, whether they are human or non-human being. They endured unfathomable suffering as a result of division and partition history and belonging, culture and hybridity and vice versa. Shafak demonstrates that it is possible to be ordinary and remarkable at the same time. She believes that identity is fluid and flexible. Key aspects are vividly portrayed in the work includes symbols of love and danger, a memory keeper fig tree, a guy couples' secrets and the protagonists' strategy for dealing with self-resolution.

Mocan states in his research article oriented work on self othering and redemptive narratives that the idea of othering in Shafak's *The Island of Missing Trees* is the most prominent feature of her self-portrait sculpture and that new forms of intolerance are hanging over their heads as faded labels in our ostensibly civilized world, but Shafak proved to be as strong as an ox in front of her accusations of "insulting Turkishness" in her other novel stood

despite growing global interconnectedness the paradoxical legacy of colonial sovereignty is something that humanity is ironically struggling with.⁶ He also asserts that owing to her ethnicity, multiculturalism and refused to succumb to nationalism, Shafak was able to produce such a seminal work.

The research work conducted by Abbas, Sehar and Sundus Gohar on the masterpiece literary work, "Another Gulmohar Tree—A Tale of Identity and Hybridity" is a pictorial manifestation of the theory of hybridity and Bhabha's concept of Third Space.⁷ It depicts how cultural change brings hybrid ambiance with change of societal values. This piece of research also brings forth the challenges which take place owing to this societal paradigm shift. Furthermore, it illustrates the amalgam of Eastern and Western cultures. When expatriates shift from one colloquial boundary to another for their survival, they have to become assimilationists. The immigrants have to mitigate all the celestial and terrestrial cultural and societal boundaries.

Under the title *Diaspora and Displacement* Sabbah investigates in her research the ecological relation between world of nature and the identical issues of belonging.⁸ The research asserts the causes which create a lot of identity issues for immigrants and these issues are heart burning topic of discussion in bicultural literature. From Eco critical perspective our perceptions play pivotal role in the existence and sustenance of a meaningful life.

Theoretical Framework

To develop a qualitative research, the novel 'The Island of Missing Trees' will be analyzed empirically under the theoretical framework of postcolonial theory. Postcolonial theory underscores core themes such as belonging, culture, displacement, hybridity etc. The present paper seeks to concentrate on biculturalism leading to third space identity in the prescribed text in the backdrop of Cyprus in 1974.

Data Analysis and Discussion

The *Island of Missing Trees* is a fictional novel which navigates the themes of biculturalism, identity i.e. native identity, received identity, third space, colonial impact by the implication of postcolonial lens and incorporates the intricate history of Cyprus. Postcolonial analysis delves deep to dig out the idea of third space identity which seeds into the characters navigating double

identities, leads to the formation of third space identity. The textual and contextual analysis of the novel manifests how biculturalism commutes to the flourishing of third space in the backdrop of Postcolonialism.

To digest the biculturalism, it is imperative to unearth the historical and cultural background of Cyprus. This island remained a land of conflict between Greeks and Turks. In 1974, this dispute resulted in dislocation of communities and it incited them for identity and sense of belonging. In the novel, the protagonist, Kostas represents Greek community while his beloved, Defne portrays Turkish background. Their relation is a likelihood of bridging the cultural gap. They opt for challenging identities and incorporating dual identity accept third space identity that transcends national, international and international borders in view of globalization. Third space tolls the bell for destruction of fixed identities and broaches the third space in wider canvas. The novel underscores the narrative of fostering biculturalism which brings forth the resolution of these cultural bruised wounds on expatriates in host lands.

The *Island of Missing Trees* (2021) is a story of two teenagers Kostas and Dene in the background of 1970s in the time of civil war. It chronicles the forbidden relation of Greek Cypriot and Turkish Defne which gets mature after their migration to London. It also depicts the singular personality of Ada, their daughter who is befuddled. Only the Fig tree is her relation to Cyprus. The novel covers the timeframe of 1974, 2000 and then revives 2010. In 1974, civil war takes place between Turkey and Greek and the couple goes through a phase of separation. They are chained in the cuffs of immigration, colonial ethnic divide, racial and identity issues. Their daughter, Ada is Greek to the past of her parents. Being a British by birth, she is treated with discrimination. She is torn between two cultural boundaries.

In 2000, after twenty five years Kostas visits Cyprus and tries to reconcile with Defne. She accepts him after his apologetic remarks. After getting away they plan to shift in England. Before their departure they visit the Happy Fig Tree and revive their reveries in a nostalgic mood. In 2010, in the absence of Kostas, Defne passed away owing to overdoses. On the other hand, the circumstances take a turn and they have to face a bleak situation in the foreign land. Their identities are changed and challenged. This cultural

gap between prevailed cultures widens and in result of this collision a novel identity emerges with the nomenclature of 'Third Space Identity' which is the leading measure of the paper in hand.

Biculturalism refers to blending of two cultures in a particular community. It becomes the need of the hour to imbibe foreign culture for immigrants' survival. They adopt the language of the host country with diverse culture and traditional norms, rites etc. South Asian literature is brimmed with such themes of hybridization, biculturalism and third space identity. (Homi K. Bhabha, 2012) coined the term 'Third Space Identity' and dealt with it in his world famous book 'The Location of Culture, 1994'. It is the key theme of the present novel by Elif Shafak. This third space bridges the cultural gap among different segments in a society. Shafak recognized this interconnectedness and penned down this postcolonial aspect. It is beyond doubt to say that Bhabha engraved iron stamp on third space and cultural identity in his seminal work, *The Location of Culture*.

Postcolonialism is a conceptual framework which underscores cultures, politics and societal values of the colonized lands including language, literature, history, anthropology etc. It critiques power structures, injustices and other imperial forms of patriarchal subjugation prevailed in these remote controlled areas. Edward Said minutely details the pre and post aftermaths of colonialism in his seminal work 'Orientalism' (1978). Said categorically asserts that the West misrepresents the East. The pre-historic culture and civilization of the East is marred and sabotaged in the name of Whiteman's Burden. Through meticulous analysis, Said expresses the implicit assumption of orientalist explicitly and sheds light on the theme of Otherness as well.⁹

Postcolonial theory interprets power dynamics exclusively British power rule. Shafak through her narrative pens down British colonial rule over Cyprus; different characters navigating multiple cultural, linguistic and religious influences. Shafak gives voice to different silent characters that are made suppressed by colonial powers. Shafak allows them to claim their identity or being. *The Island of Missing Trees* via postcolonial perspective throws light on the power dynamics, hybridization, love and trauma, memory and diaspora. The novel intricately highlights the residual effects of

colonialism, the difficulties in identity construction and the strife for recolonization in postcolonial setting.

Third space identity is the conglomeration of cultural collision; it is a liminal space, a new area of cultural negotiation. It originates when immigrants adopt foreign culture for their survival in the host country. By and large, this borrowed culture and identity becomes second nature and one is forced by oneself to abide by these adopted norms. This state of inbetweenness becomes the choice identity of immigrants. In *The Island of Missing Trees* we come across the above mentioned identity traits in pictorial form. This term, third space identity is literally taken from postcolonial theorist, Homi K. Bhabha's seminal work *The Location of Culture*.¹⁰Biculturalism is an offshoot of cultural identity. As mentioned above, biculturalism is the admixture of multiple existing cultures in result of this merging identical place, this space emerges.

The Island of Missing Trees investigates how biculturalism fosters third space identity in the Greek and Turkish characters despite political and historical divides. Shafak's representation of biculturalism and third space engraves the milestones of acknowledging diversity and searching mutual points in a society stained by historical disputes. Her characters seek for cultural mutuality despite having bleak divisions. The island itself symbolizes third space and Fig tree stamps the spirituality of the island with its holistic characterization.

Conclusion

To sum up, it can be inferred that *The Island of Missing Trees* is an intricate interplay of the dominant and the dominated, the indigenous and the host culture, and hybridization is the optimum outcome of this cultural interaction. It is obvious that the dominant culture prevails and survives in the light of Darwin's quote, 'survival of the fittest' and submissive culture is eroded. In the novel, it is crystal clear that the existing culture cannot be subsided easily or sabotaged at the end; rather third space is created which keeps the multi-cultural identities alive for decades. Third space is a state of in-betweenness which bridges the cultural gap and forges and constructs new identity. *The Island of Missing Trees* represents true picture of this cultural fusion where essentials of both cultures mingle together and a cultural

reconciliation comes into existence with liminal space named third space. In short, *The Island of Missing Trees* illustrates a forceful narrative which explores the backstairs influence of biculturalism in the creation of third space identity through postcolonial framework, it can be visualized in the text of the novel that there is resistance and resilience in colonial combat between the colonized and the colonizers' culture i.e. the immigrants' culture and the host culture - but the characters imbibe the foreign culture and the become assimilationists. To round off the discussion, *The Island of Missing Trees* is an open gallery of diverse cultures where the Greek and Turkish cultures can be witnessed par postcolonial perspective. Through the characters of Kostas, Defne and their daughter Ada, these cultural disparities can be observed and how their identities and bridged and commuted through fostering and healthy negotiation.

References

- ¹ Sutari, Bellavita Hadiatul Laila. "Anthropocentrism and its impact on the environment in Elif Shafak" *The Island of Missing Trees*". PhD diss., Universitas Islam Negeri Maulana Malik Ibrahim, 2022.
- ² Kararti, Pinar. "The notion of identity in the works of Shafak." Master's thesis, Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü.
- ³ Houria AMEUR, Nadjiba KESSAL. "Hybrid Cultural Identities in Elif Shafak's *The Bastard of Istanbul*." PhD diss., 2019.
- ⁴ Hussein, Qusay Khalaf. "Unhomeliness Vs. Hybridity: Women's Suffering and Crisis of Identity in Elif Shafak's *Honor*." *Journal of Al-Anbar University for Language and Literature* 36 (2022).
- ⁵ Stotesbury, John A. "The Otherness of Trees: Factness and Fiction in Recent Narratives of Arboreal Survival." *Armenian Folia Anglistika* 18, no. 2 (26) (2022): 146-162.
- ⁶ Mocan, Gabriela Ioana. "Self-Othering and Redemptive Narratives in Literature and the Arts."
- ⁷ Abbas, Sehar, and Sundus Gohar. "Another Gulmohar Tree—A Tale of Identity and Hybridity." *Journal of English Language, Literature and Education* 5, no. 1 (2023): 117-140.
- ⁸ Sabbah, Sherien, and Paramita Ayuningtyas. "The issues of diaspora and displacement in Elif Shafak's *The Island of Missing Trees*." *Rainbow: Journal of Literature, Linguistics and Culture Studies* 11, no. 2 (2022): 62-69.
- ⁹ Quinn, Riley. *An Analysis of Samuel P. Huntington's The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. CRC Press, 2017.
- ¹⁰ Bhabha, Homi K. *The location of culture*. Routledge, 2012.