

A blind writer recalls giving birth: 'I worried that the nurse wouldn't let me take my baby home'

scroll.in/article/1005155/elif-shafaks-new-novel-shows-us-how-its-not-just-humans-who-remember-the-trauma-of-war-and-loss

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Book review

Elif Shafak's new novel shows us how it's not just humans who remember the trauma of war and loss

In 'The Island of Missing Trees', the pain passes down the generations.



Elif Shafak.

A few days ago, a translated version of Rabindranath Tagore's poem was doing the rounds on social media.

Day by day I float my paper boats one by one down the running stream.
In big black letters I write my name on them and the name of
the village where I live.
I hope that someone in some strange land will find them and
know who I am.

This emotional need to return home, a place where you no longer belong but which you carry within you, and the intergenerational trauma that precedes and trails the displacement, form the crux of Elif Shafak's new novel, *The Island of Missing Trees*. Shafak expands on this sense of belonging and interweaves it with different narrative strands of uprootedness and conflict, when families are forced to flee their homes and countries because of conflict and civil war.

The story begins with the teenaged Ada in London, who has an incident in class one day, and whose days are interspersed with memories of her dead Turkish mother. Her personal history goes back to Cyprus – which gained independence from the United Kingdom in 1960 – and erupting fault lines of love, family and belonging.

Caught in this civil war are Kostas, a Greek Cypriot who is a lover of nature – including trees, bees and bats – and his love for Defne, a Turkish Cypriot. Kostas, madly in love with Defne, a love that their families and islanders will never approve of, leaves the island.

The story is unpacked from these two parallel perspectives and timelines, where Ada's desperate search for her family's past in the absence of her mother continues to elude her until one day her aunt, Meryem, arrives at their London home and reinstates the Turkish vestiges of Ada's upbringing through food, gossip and mystical stories of djinns.

War and the tree

Recently, contributors at literary hub put together a [list](#) of eighteen trees featured in classic and recent literary works, including the chestnut tree in Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and Valeria Luiselli's orange tree in *Faces in the Crowd*. However, what stands out narratively in Shafak's book is the interesting plot device of a tree narrating the story of its island and its people.

The 96-year-old fig tree on the island has witnessed not only the ravages of people's hatred but also a story of blossoming, ever-sacrificing, love. When the fig tree decayed, a part of it was uprooted and transported to London by Kostas and Defne.

Shafak delicately laces the tree's perspective with an objectivity and tenderness that goes beyond the bloodshed, violence and hatred. The chapters in which the tree narrates the story are indeed magical, wise and vivid with imagination.

Just like Kostas, Ada and Defne, the fig tree moves its memories from its previous life to London and we slowly discover the past from its perspective. Despite the obvious disadvantage of being rooted in one position, the fig tree recounts the story of the island and its people through the birds, bees, ants and other non-humans that visit it over the years. The chapters on how to bury a tree and then unbury it are deeply symbolic.

These chapters are a metaphor for the buried and discarded bodies of missing persons during the war. Defne, who continues to live on the island during and after the war, is employed with the Committee of Missing Persons, partnering with the United Nations to locate victims. The connections and contrasts are stark.

Displacement and memory

Shafak's writing lays bare the brutal nature of war and its manifestation in people's lives and its impact on arboreal beings. There is hatred along the lines of religion – Muslims versus Christians – of nationalities – Turkish versus Greeks – so much so that even language, food and culture are separated along these lines. According to Meryem, Ada's aunt who visits them in London, baklava, a sweet dish that both Turks and Greeks claim to be their own, is also made differently – the Turks add pistachios and make their baklavas crispy, while Greeks, who use raw walnuts, apparently ruin the taste.

Kostas and Defne's love story is foreshadowed by the equally dangerous fate of Yusuf and Yiorgos, a gay couple on the island who ran the tavern where the fig tree once lived. The beauty of their love story and resilience is further enhanced by the frailty and pain suffered by those left behind.

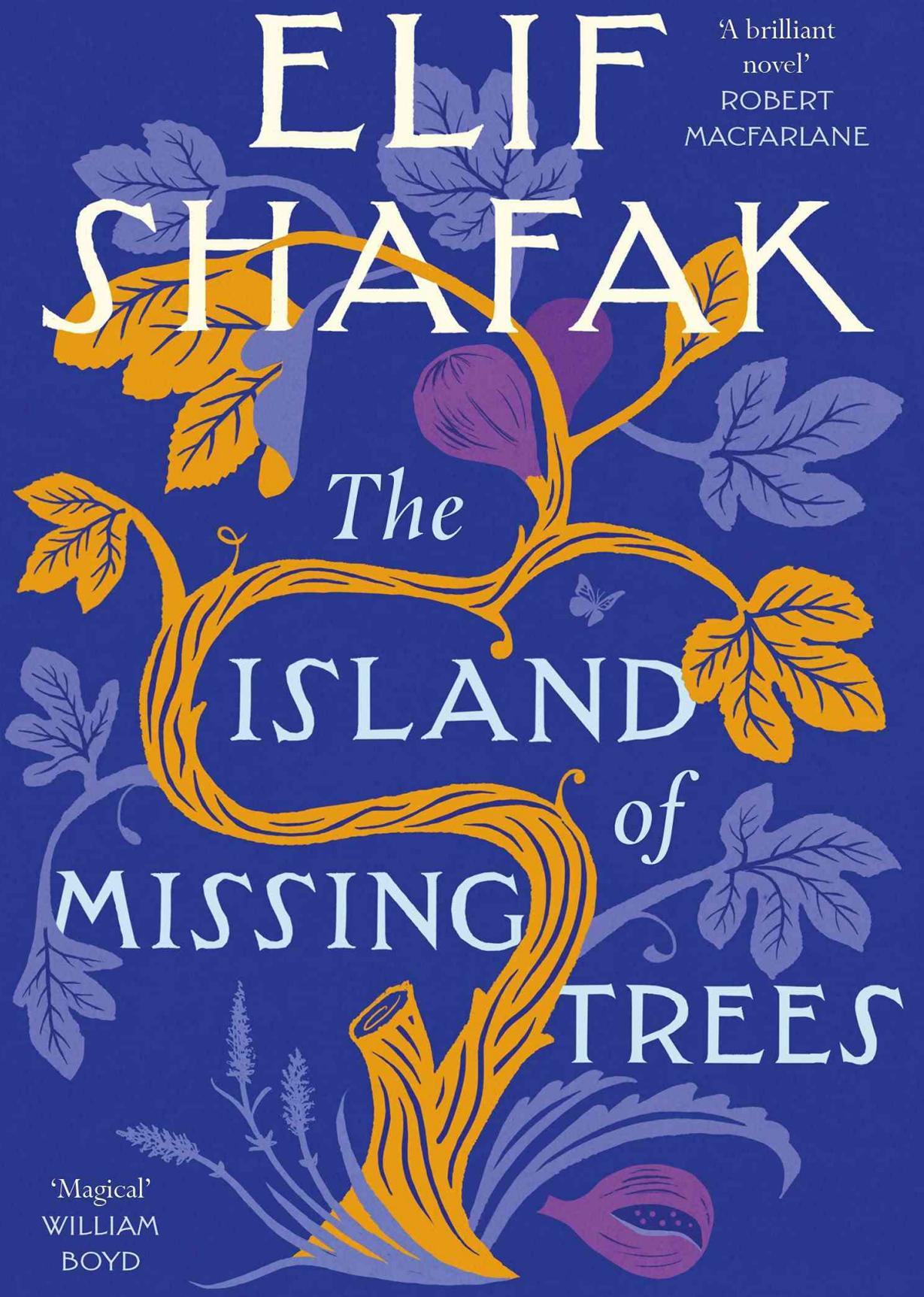
The self-possession that Shafak's women characters come to embody slowly unravels under the burden of trauma. Defne's defiance and motivation to love Kostas despite opposition and to continue living and working in the island in the aftermath of the civil war is neither unconventional nor unarticulated. However, the tragic wounds of the war and her subsequent choices leave an indelible mark both on her life and Ada's psyche, as well as on her sister Meryem's life.

There is a Turkish saying, mentioned in the book, which says that if you weep for all the sorrows in the world, in the end you will have no eyes. *The Island of Missing Trees* is the story of an island whose people are missing, erased by the horrors of war. To honour their lives and stories, we may want to read this novel even if it means having no eyes in the end.

FROM THE BOOKER-SHORTLISTED AUTHOR OF
10 MINUTES 38 SECONDS IN THIS STRANGE WORLD

ELIF SHAFAK

'A brilliant
novel'
ROBERT
MACFARLANE



The
ISLAND
of
MISSING
TREES

'Magical'
WILLIAM
BOYD

The Island of Missing Trees, *Elif Shafak*, Viking.

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BOOK EXCERPT

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Kristen Witucki is a blind author, editor, teacher, and mentor who lives in the north-eastern United States. She is the author of a fiction book for emerging adolescent readers, *The Transcriber*, a novel, *Outside Myself*, and several non-fiction articles. She lives with her husband, James Simmons, who is also blind, and her three sighted children: Langston (9), Noor (4), and Karuna (1).

“I didn’t know she was coming,” the nurse told my sighted friend as she helped me into the soon-to-be-blood-soaked hospital gown. “No one told me about this.” Was “this” my blindness or the baby or both? She was right; the nurse hadn’t been expecting me and I had not met her before. On my hospital tour, it was nurse Evelyn I had met. She had told me about a competent blind mother she knew and who, she assured me, would help me get a handle on mothering. Unfortunately for me, Langston had chosen to be born on Evelyn’s day off.

“We took the tour and talked to several people here,” my friend, Suzanne, answered calmly....

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