

To Be or To Belong: Exploring the Consciousness of Being in Shafak's The Island of Missing Trees through Sartrean Existentialism

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Abstract

This study utilizes a qualitative research methodology, relying on interpretive analysis to explore existential themes in Elif Shafak's *The Island of Missing Trees*. Framed through the lens of Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialist philosophy, particularly his concept of consciousness of being. The research investigates how characters like Ada, Kostas, and Meryem confront their existence, make choices, and navigate the tension between being and belonging. Drawing on Barret and Cain's model of textual analysis, the study incorporates close reading, character development, thematic interpretation, symbolism, and narrative structure to reveal how the novel articulates Sartrean ideas of freedom, responsibility, and self-definition. The analysis highlights how Shafak gives voice to the characters' internal struggle with identity and displacement, portraying consciousness not as a fixed state, but as a continuous process of becoming. Ultimately, the study demonstrates how literature becomes a vessel for existential inquiry, transforming abstract philosophical ideas into lived emotional realities.

Keywords: Authenticity, Belonging, Consciousness of Being, Existentialism, Jean Paul Sartre.

1. Introduction

In a world increasingly marked by displacement, fragmented identities, and the search for belonging, literature offers a profound space to explore the depths of human existence. In contemporary literature, the tension between being and belonging frequently emerges as a response to displacement, cultural hybridity, and postcolonial trauma. Elif Shafak's *The Island of Missing Trees* portrayed themes of memory, trauma, love, and cultural conflict. At the heart of this exploration lies the existential question: What does it mean to be?

Previous studies have explored existentialist dimensions in postcolonial and diasporic literature, emphasizing how characters navigate alienation and freedom amid social and historical constraints. Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialist framework, particularly his concept of consciousness of being that existence precedes essence, and individuals must define themselves through choice and action has been widely applied to literature that interrogates identity and authenticity.

This study seeks to address that gap by interpreting the novel through a Sartrean lens, focusing on the internal struggles of characters who grapple with the meaning of their existence in the face of inherited trauma, migration, and personal agency. Sartre's assertion that human consciousness is not a passive state but a dynamic force that must confront nothingness and freedom underlies this analysis. Through this perspective, the novel becomes



a compelling case for examining how the characters reflect the existential condition torn between the need to belong and the imperative to be.

This research draws upon Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialist philosophy particularly his concept of consciousness of being which asserts that human beings are not defined by any fixed essence but by their ability to choose, reflect, and act in the face of freedom and nothingness. Sartre's notion that consciousness is always directed toward something and must define itself through action becomes a powerful lens for interpreting the psychological and emotional dimensions of Shafak's characters. This study, therefore, aims to examine how the characters in *The Island of Missing Trees* embody the struggle between being and belonging, offering insight into the existential conditions of modern identity and human consciousness.

The Island of Missing Trees portrays the love of Kostas and Defne, a Greek and Turkish respectively (Atayurt-Fenge, 2023; O'Neill, 2024). Their separation due to political conflict leads Kostas to England, while the trauma of their past continues to shape their lives. Central to the narrative is a fig tree, a silent witness to history, love, war, and loss which symbolically carries Defne's soul and reflects the novel's themes of memory and nature's resilience. Shafak gives voice to plants and animals, blending the natural world with human emotion in a unique storytelling style. Years later, their daughter Ada confronts the legacy of silence and buried secrets after the arrival of her aunt Meryem. As Ada unravels her family's hidden past, she confronts her own identity crisis. The novel explores existential themes through characters shaped by war, love, and displacement, revealing that meaning is found not in resolution, but in the endurance of struggle (Zehra & Ali Mohsin, 2023).

Based on Sartre's concept of consciousness of being, this study explores how characters in Elif Shafak's *The Island of Missing Trees* confront identity, freedom, and belonging through their choices in a world shaped by trauma and displacement. By analyzing the novel through Sartre's lens, this research aims to uncover how the characters' awareness of their existence drives them to confront their past and shape their future. The study not only bridges literature and existential philosophy but also contributes to a deeper understanding of how contemporary fiction reflects the universal human struggle for meaning in an ever-fragmented world.

This research offers a fresh existential reading of Elif Shafak's *The Island of Missing Trees*, using Sartre's concept of consciousness of being to explore themes of identity, belonging, and human freedom. By examining how characters navigate personal and historical trauma, the study sheds light on the existential tension between the desire to be and the need to belong. It contributes to literary scholarship by bridging philosophy and fiction, offering deeper insight into how contemporary literature reflects the human condition through an existentialist lens. This research examines Elif Shafak's *The Island of Missing Trees* through Sartre's existentialist lens, exploring how the characters' search for identity and belonging reflects the deeper human struggle of consciousness and being. It aims to uncover how personal freedom, memory, and choice shape one's existence in a world marked by displacement and silence. This study seeks to answer the research question: what does the term "the consciousness of being" signify, and how is it reflected in Elif Shafak's novel? The objective of the research is to critically analyze the portrayal and thematic significance of the consciousness of being within the novel, examining how this concept shapes the characters, influences the narrative structure, and reflects deeper philosophical or existential themes presented by the author.

2. Literature Review

The theoretical framework of this study offers an explanation of the existential issues in *The Island of Missing Trees*. This study is grounded in Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialist philosophy, particularly his concept of consciousness of being. Sartre (1943) an eminent philosopher and existential thinker was chief figure in 20th century. According to Sartre, consciousness is not a fixed essence but a dynamic process always directed toward something and defined through its relation to the world. In this view, individuals are responsible for creating meaning in their lives through choice and action. This theoretical lens helps to explore how the characters in *The Island of Missing Trees* confront their freedom, identity, and the burden of existence. In *Being and Nothingness*, he elaborates on the idea that existence precedes essence. According to him, existence comes before essence for human beings, while essentialist thinking is more suitable when it comes to physical objects. Sartre oppose the theory of essentialism, which believes that humans are bound by religion and its prescribed laws.

In contrast, he argues that humans possess freedom and the right to shape their own lives, with their decisions not being subservient to constraints imposed by society, religion, or parents. They can only determine themselves through their decisions. Life is meaningful but only if you want to make it meaningful. Sartre notoriously stated that human beings are fated to be free. This implies that freedom is an inherent aspect of humanity. If man chooses not to decide or avoid the burden of responsibility, he is nonetheless making a choice for himself. We each are compelled to create our own morality, to create morality to follow. You might imagine that an authority would guide you, but all the figures of power you can imagine are fake. They are actually people like you, people who are searching for answers. Freedom brings colossal responsibility. The individual has to accept the implication of their actions. Their decisions affect not only them but others as well. Sartre (2008) in his book stresses human responsibility and freedom. Sartre believed man has the super power to make their life meaningful through their actions. Concisely Sartre's philosophy revive existentialism. His arguments illuminate thousands of intellects regarding the existentialist philosophy.

Sartre (1943) discussed the notion of authenticity in his book. It is meant that human is accountable for his own life, he possesses authority over his act. Likewise, he should be accountable towards his acts instead of rejecting freedom he has command over his life. Freedom endows individuals with the authority to act in accordance with their true nature. Sartre elaborate the scenario with a compelling example of a youth who is faced with a choice of two options. He can stay home to take care of his mother who would be serving as a substitute for his son duties alternatively he also has a choice of joining the army and being a small contributor to the cause for his nation. Sartre stated that is free to do either of the options since he himself is responsible for what he is doing. Both the alternatives should be viewed as suitable for him since in order to live authentically he needs to choose for himself. Authentic living demands that he fully own the weight of his choices and decisions. Sartre spoke of being toward death as the acknowledgement that the true self emerges through the awareness of human mortality and the inescapability of death.

This study is confined to exploring the characters' existential quest for being in Elif Shafak's *The Island of Missing Trees*. Only those portions or passages of the novel are researched about by the researcher that are regarding consciousness of being, realization regarding one's own existence. The research is bounded to the chosen passages with existentialism theme.

2.1. Sartre's Concept of Existentialism

Jean-Paul Sartre's existential philosophy is deeply anchored in the concept of consciousness, which he explores most thoroughly in Sartre & Richmond (1943). Central to Sartre's view is the divergence between "being-in-itself" and "being-for-itself". The former refers to the inert, fixed existence of objects, while the latter denotes the active, self-aware consciousness of human beings, which is characterized by negation, freedom, and intentionality. Sartre asserts that consciousness is always consciousness of something, and that it never has any essence of its own, it is a nothingness that defines itself through its relation to the world.

2.2. Explaining Anguish as Important Characteristic of Existentialism

Olson (2012), in his book clarifies that human existence is intimately tied to anguish. He defines anguish as a combination of fear, disgust, and excitement, and states that it's vital to know what anguish actually is. For some existentialists, anguish is merely a fundamental aspect of being alive, while for others, it indicates human freedom. Anguish unveils the secret of life and is associated with nothingness in existentialism. Anguish explains the gap between being and not being. Olson examines existentialism in a more profound sense by emphasizing anguish as an integral component of the philosophy.

2.3. Thomas Flynn's Thoughts on Existentialism

Flynn (2009), in his work, traces the most important features of existentialism by different philosophers. He points out that these themes tend to coincide with one another, with 'existence precedes essence' being the central and most fundamental theme. Existentialism, writes Flynn, is a free philosophy with responsibility being attached to it. Being an individualistic philosophy, it speaks of freedom, identity, and seeking meaning of human existence. Flynn continues to delve deeper into the fundamental principles of existentialism and presents key existentialist philosophers, from Nietzsche to Sartre.

3. Methods

3.1. Research Design

The researcher takes an explanatory research design to examine Elif Shafak's novel, *The Island of Missing Trees*. This design enables one to thoroughly examine the characters' existentialist nature. In particular, the researcher specifically tackles two important questions: How are the characters existentialist, and why are they existentially inclined? The characters in Shafak's novel personify existentialism through their representation of ambiguity, inner turmoil, and human existence as absurd. The research design of choice presents a structured approach to revealing and explaining the underlying motivations and mechanisms that propel these existentialist currents in the narrative. This study is grounded in the interpretivist paradigm, which emphasizes the understanding of reality through the subjective experiences and interpretations of individuals.

3.2. Data Collection

Data for this study has been sourced from the chosen novel. Only relevant and significant paragraphs are chosen by the researcher for the interpretation and analysis. The researcher collected the data using the skimming method, which involves reading the text quickly to develop a general understanding of its content.

Here the data is gathered from Shafak's *The Island of Missing Trees*. The data which is employed for the backing of the primary data is termed as secondary data. The secondary data

has been gathered by the researcher from the other sources such as books, articles, various databases and from the official reports etc.

3.3. Research Method

Close reading is a nucleus of the research methodology. French critical practices are in the opinion that close reading has very broad roots as the central feature of interpretation. Barnet and Cain in *A Short Guide to Writing About Literature* map out some of the central tools of literary analysis that guide readers to explore and interpret fiction in depth. Some of the principal tools are:

- 1) Explication is close reading, where the readers break down a piece line by line in order to find its meaning, symbols, and subtleties. It is an approach to seeing how each detail fits into the larger themes and feelings of the story.
- 2) Barnet and Cain stress finding the central themes, that is, the overall ideas or messages the author wishes to communicate. Finding the themes can help to see what is beneath the surface of the text.
- 3) Barnet and Cain suggest analyzing the structure of a narrative's timeline, pacing, and sequence of events to assess how these elements influence the reader's experience and emotional reaction.
- 4) Symbol and imagery identification assist in revealing the underlying layers of meaning of a text. Both literary tools can extend emotional and intellectual richness, serving to heighten thematic resonance.
- 5) Character analysis involves examining a character's motivations, actions, and development to understand their function in moving the plot forward and representing universal themes. By doing so, one can learn the author's views on human nature or societal issues.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. I don't have any of ... What I lack in beauty and popularity, I make up for in mystery and inner strength (Shafak, 2021)

Individualism, inner resilience, authenticity, and the quest for meaning are fundamental aspects of existentialism. The above excerpt, from *The Island of Missing Trees*, exemplifies these features. Craib (1979) mentions Sartre's concept of consciousness as a means of self-knowingness in his book. The fig tree's recognition of herself and her traits is indicative of an existential outlook. While she admits lacking in conventional beauty and allure, she compensates through her other traits mystery and inner strength.

This acknowledgment is deeply existential: she finds value not in external validation but in embracing her uniqueness. Her statement, "I am attractive in my own way," (Shafak, 2021) exemplifies existential individualism. She embraces her inner strength over materialistic ideals. Inner strength, in existential terms, is closely intertwined with authenticity living according to one's true nature. By valuing her inner self, the fig tree exemplifies authenticity.

This is a clear use of first-person narration, offering intimate access to the speaker's thoughts and feelings. There's no direct symbolism or elaborate imagery here, but the phrase "attractive in my own disarming way" (Shafak, 2021) hints at emotional charm something that doesn't grab attention but slowly unfolds.

4.2. I miss Cyprus too. Maybe because of the frigid climate, I can't help harking back to my days in the sun. (Shafak, 2021)

This section engages directly with the central research question: What does it mean to possess a consciousness of being? The narrative is delivered through the voice of the fig tree, which, by the novel's end, is revealed to embody the soul of Defne. Sartre's concept of consciousness of being (Sartre, 1956) speaks to an individual's awareness of their existence, the passage of time, and the dissonance between past and present. In this context, the character's yearning for the warmth and familiarity of the past while fully inhabiting the present demonstrates this existential awareness. She is not merely living in the moment; rather, she is deeply conscious of the time that has passed, and this consciousness generates an emotional tension that threads through her narrative.

Symbolism is central to this passage. The stark contrast between the cold, present climate and the sunlit memories of Cyprus serves as more than just a setting; it reflects emotional distance, inner discomfort, and the ache of disconnection. The cold symbolizes more than weather; it metaphorically conveys the protagonist's internal state. Narrated in the first person, the passage adopts a confessional, intimate tone, drawing the reader into a deeply personal reflection. It likely forms part of a larger meditation on identity, displacement, and the search for belonging.

4.3. Women, at least where I come ... Whereas Daphne was transformed into a tree in order to avoid love, I transmuted into a tree in order to hold on to love. (Shafak, 2021)

The passage serves as a reflection of Defne's soul, symbolically embodied in the fig tree which is a resilient, memory-bearing organism. Elif Shafak draws upon the Greek myth of Apollo and Daphne, invoking themes of transformation, desire, and love. In this retelling, Defne's metamorphosis into a fig tree is not merely mythical; it is deeply existential. Her transformation signifies a conscious act of self-definition, in line with existentialist thought. By choosing a path aligned with her inner truth guided by love and personal conviction, Defne asserts her freedom and autonomy. This act of agency exemplifies Sartre's notion of the consciousness of being: she is fully aware of her existence and assumes responsibility for shaping its meaning.

Defne's choices reflect an understanding that existence precedes essence; she is not born with a predefined purpose but instead creates one through deliberate, authentic action. Her decision to become the fig tree anchored in love and memory is a metaphor for existential commitment, illustrating how meaning is forged through personal freedom and emotional truth. Through this lens, her transformation becomes a profound act of self-realization, demonstrating how identity, purpose, and love converge in the existential journey toward authenticity.

This passage continues the non-linear narrative structure of the novel, blending present narration with mythological pasts and internal reflections. Transformation into flora symbolizes protection, endurance, and identity. The narrator here is the fig tree, which is personified and acts as a round character.

5. Conclusion

Through the lens of Sartre's concept of consciousness of being, *The Island of Missing Trees* reveals the characters' existential struggles with identity, memory, and freedom. Sartre's idea that consciousness is a "being-for-itself" always directed toward something beyond itself helps unpack the inner conflicts of characters like Ada and Kostas, who grapple with the meaning of their existence in a divided world. Their awareness of choice, loss, and responsibility reflects the Sartrean notion that existence precedes essence, making the novel a rich site for existential exploration.

This study contributes to the growing body of literary research that applies existentialist philosophy to contemporary fiction, particularly within the context of postcolonial and diasporic narratives. By highlighting the conflict between being and belonging, the analysis reveals how characters navigate inherited trauma and cultural hybridity through conscious acts of self-definition. It offers a framework for interpreting similar literary texts that deal with displacement, identity, and memory, and can serve as a reference point for scholars working at the intersection of philosophy, literature, and trauma studies.

Moreover, this research encourages a deeper engagement with Elif Shafak's work beyond political or historical readings, suggesting that her fiction also probes universal human dilemmas grounded in existential thought. It opens pathways for future interdisciplinary studies that explore how literature can give voice to psychological and philosophical concerns, especially in an era marked by global migration and identity fragmentation.

A comparative analysis of *The Island of Missing Trees* and other existential novels would offer meaningful insights into how different writers explore themes of identity, freedom, and the search for meaning. Examining similarities and differences can enrich our understanding of existentialism in literature across diverse contexts.

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