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EXPLORING FOOD AS A CULTURAL BRIDGE IN LITERATURE: ANALYZING
ITS ROLE IN *THE ISLAND OF MISSING TREES*

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Abstract:

*Food is a powerful literary device, symbolizing nostalgia, cultural identity, and intergenerational connection. In *The Island of Missing Trees*, Elif Shafak masterfully employs food to bridge the past and present, exploring themes of migration, memory, and belonging. This paper analyzes how food preserves cultural heritage, heals intergenerational wounds, and navigates diasporic identities. The novel follows Kostas and Defne, lovers from opposing sides of the Cyprus conflict, and their daughter, Ada, who grows up disconnected from her heritage. Through traditional Cypriot cuisine—baklava, olives, and figs—Shafak highlights the impact of political turmoil on personal relationships. Food serves as a repository of memory, linking characters to lost homes and fractured identities while also providing space for reconciliation. This study examines food as a cultural signifier, representing both division and unity. The shared culinary traditions of Greek and Turkish Cypriots underscore the novel's broader message: that cultural roots remain intertwined despite historical tensions. Additionally, food symbolizes survival and adaptation in the immigrant experience, as seen through Ada's struggle to connect with her past. By situating the novel within literary and food studies, this research argues that food is more than sustenance—it is a bridge across time, identity, and memory in a world shaped by exile and division.*

Keywords: *Food symbolism, Cultural identity, Nostalgia and Memory, Intergenerational Connection, Migration and Displacement, etc.*

Food has always played a vital role in human culture, serving not only as sustenance but also as a medium of memory, identity, and belonging. Across literary traditions, food is frequently employed as a powerful symbol that encapsulates personal histories, cultural heritage, and the complexities of migration and exile. In diasporic literature, in particular, food functions as a bridge between past and present, homeland and adopted land, allowing characters to reconnect with lost traditions and forge new identities. Elif Shafak's novel *The Island of Missing Trees* exemplifies this concept, weaving food into its narrative as a crucial element in storytelling, nostalgia, and intergenerational bonding.



Set against the backdrop of the divided island of Cyprus, *The Island of Missing Trees* follows the story of Kostas, a Greek Cypriot, and Defne, a Turkish Cypriot, who navigate their forbidden love in a politically and ethnically fractured society. Their relationship, marked by secrecy and loss, is later reflected in their daughter Ada's struggle to understand her roots while growing up in England. Throughout the novel, food acts as a silent witness to history, preserving traditions in the face of displacement and exile. Shafak masterfully uses culinary elements—such as baklava, olives, figs, and regional dishes—to symbolize memory, reconciliation, and the deep cultural connections between communities that are otherwise divided by conflict.

This paper explores the role of food as a cultural bridge in *The Island of Missing Trees*, analyzing how it connects individuals across generations, transcends political and ethnic divisions, and serves as a tool for healing and self-discovery. By examining food as a literary motif, this study argues that culinary traditions in the novel are not merely nostalgic references to the past, but active symbols of resilience, belonging, and transformation. Drawing on literary criticism, food studies, and postcolonial theory, this research situates Shafak's novel within a broader discourse on food as a narrative device in literature. Ultimately, this paper highlights how food in *The Island of Missing Trees* serves as more than a source of sustenance—it becomes a language of identity, love, and reconciliation, providing characters with a means to reclaim their past while forging new futures.

Food has long been associated with nostalgia, particularly in literature that explores themes of migration, exile, and loss. As a tangible link to the past, food carries the memories of home, childhood, and cultural traditions that are otherwise at risk of fading over time. In *The Island of Missing Trees*, Elif Shafak employs food as a vessel for nostalgia, allowing characters to remain connected to their homeland despite their physical and emotional distance from it.

One of the most significant examples of this is the fig tree itself, which serves not only as a narrative voice but also as a representation of home and history. Kostas, who is forced to leave Cyprus due to political violence, smuggles a cutting of the fig tree to England, where it continues to grow in his backyard. This act of preserving a plant from his homeland mirrors the way immigrants and exiles cling to food traditions as a way of maintaining their identity. Scholars such as Krishnendu Ray (2016) in *The Ethnic Restaurateur* have examined how food acts as an anchor for immigrants, providing a sense of continuity in an unfamiliar environment. Shafak's novel reflects this idea, showing how food and nature become powerful carriers of memory, preserving cultural roots even in exile.

Similarly, the novel frequently references Cypriot dishes such as baklava, olives, and traditional meze, all of which evoke deep emotional responses in the characters. Defne, who has struggled with the trauma of the Cyprus conflict, finds comfort in preparing and sharing these foods, reinforcing the idea that food serves as a source of healing. Literary critic Doris Witt (1999), in *Black Hunger: Food and the Politics of U.S. Identity*, argues that food in literature often operates as a marker of both loss and resilience, allowing characters to reclaim their histories through culinary practices. In *The Island of Missing Trees*, this is evident in the way food provides not just nourishment but also a connection to the past, enabling characters to maintain ties to a homeland that is both physically and emotionally distant.

Furthermore, the act of sharing food in the novel becomes a means of storytelling, allowing memories to be passed down across generations. Ada, who has grown up disconnected from her Cypriot roots, initially struggles with her mixed heritage. However, as she learns about her parents' past and the significance of the dishes they once shared, she begins to understand the



cultural weight of food. Scholars such as Lisa Heldke (2003) in *Exotic Appetites: Ruminations of a Food Adventurer* have discussed how food is not just a physical entity but also a narrative tool, used to transmit history and cultural memory. Shafak's novel aligns with this perspective, demonstrating how food serves as a bridge between generations, allowing the past to be relived and reinterpreted.

In conclusion, food in *The Island of Missing Trees* functions as a powerful symbol of nostalgia, preserving memories and cultural identity in the face of displacement. Shafak illustrates how the sensory experience of food—its taste, smell, and preparation—keeps alive the history of a divided homeland. Through literary analysis and theoretical insights, it is evident that food in the novel is more than sustenance; it is an emotional archive, a means of healing, and a reminder that the past continues to live on through tradition.

Food is deeply intertwined with cultural identity, serving as a marker of heritage and belonging. In *The Island of Missing Trees*, Elif Shafak highlights how culinary traditions reflect the hybrid identities of individuals navigating multiple cultures. Through the novel's characters, particularly Kostas, Defne, and Ada, Shafak explores how food both reinforces and complicates notions of identity, especially in the context of migration and political conflict.

One of the novel's central themes is the divided identity of Cyprus, where Greek and Turkish Cypriots have historically been at odds. Despite these divisions, food emerges as a shared cultural thread that transcends political barriers. The novel presents dishes such as baklava, olives, and meze, which belong to both Greek and Turkish culinary traditions. These foods symbolize a cultural commonality that remains strong despite the island's partition. Literary scholar Carole Counihan (1999) in *The Anthropology of Food and Body* argues that food plays a crucial role in shaping cultural identity by reinforcing community ties and transmitting heritage across generations. This perspective is evident in the novel, where food serves as a reminder that Greek and Turkish Cypriots share more similarities than their histories might suggest.

Kostas, who is forced to flee Cyprus, experiences a complex relationship with his identity. Although he settles in England, his connection to his homeland remains intact through food. The fig tree he smuggles serves as a powerful metaphor for his uprooted identity—physically displaced yet deeply rooted in his origins. The tree's survival in a foreign land reflects how immigrants maintain their cultural heritage despite geographical separation. Kostas's attachment to the fig tree parallels the experiences of many immigrants who, as theorist Krishnendu Ray (2016) explains in *The Ethnic Restaurateur*, use food as a way to sustain their cultural identity in unfamiliar environments.

Defne, in contrast, embodies a more conflicted relationship with her heritage. Unlike Kostas, she struggles with the trauma of Cyprus's history and distances herself from certain cultural symbols. However, food remains an integral part of her identity, even when she tries to suppress it. When she prepares traditional dishes, it becomes clear that food is not just a personal act but a cultural performance—one that ties her to her past, even when she wishes to escape it. This reflects what Lisa Heldke (2003) explores in *Exotic Appetites: Ruminations of a Food Adventurer*, where she argues that food is an active agent in shaping one's sense of self, reinforcing traditions even in moments of personal denial.

Ada, as the daughter of Kostas and Defne, represents the struggles of second-generation immigrants who feel disconnected from their ancestral roots. Raised in England, she does not initially identify with her Cypriot heritage, yet food offers her an entry point into her family's history. In one of the novel's key moments, Ada begins to learn about her parents' past through



their stories of Cypriot cuisine. This transformation aligns with sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) argument in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, which suggests that food is not merely a matter of sustenance but a social and cultural practice that shapes identity. Ada's gradual acceptance of her cultural background through food reinforces this idea, showing how cuisine functions as an educational and emotional bridge across generations.

Ultimately, food in *The Island of Missing Trees* is more than a reflection of cultural heritage—it is an active force that connects individuals to their histories, their communities, and themselves. Shafak illustrates that while national identities may be fractured, food remains a unifying element that carries the weight of shared traditions. By presenting characters with different relationships to their heritage, the novel highlights the ways in which food can simultaneously be a symbol of continuity and a means of rediscovering lost identities.

Food serves as a crucial link between generations, preserving traditions and memories that might otherwise fade with time. In *The Island of Missing Trees*, Elif Shafak uses food as a medium through which familial connections are maintained, even in the face of migration, trauma, and cultural displacement. The novel demonstrates how the act of preparing and sharing food fosters continuity, allowing younger generations to inherit and reinterpret their heritage.

The relationship between Ada and her late mother, Defne, is one of emotional distance and cultural disconnection. Raised in England, Ada feels estranged from her Cypriot roots, struggling to understand the significance of her family's past. Throughout the novel, she remains largely unaware of the traditions that shaped her parents' lives. However, food emerges as a means through which she gradually reconnects with her heritage. Scholars such as Sidney Mintz (1985), in *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History*, argue that food is an essential carrier of memory and history, providing a tangible link between generations. In Shafak's novel, this idea manifests in the way Ada begins to uncover her family's history through stories of Cypriot cuisine, which serve as a gateway to understanding her parents' experiences.

Kostas, unlike Defne, embraces food as a living link to his past. His deep attachment to the fig tree symbolizes the transmission of cultural memory across generations. The tree, which he smuggled from Cyprus and nurtured in England, serves as both a literal and metaphorical representation of rootedness. The fig tree, which narrates parts of the novel, reflects on its own journey from one land to another, mirroring the experiences of immigrant families who attempt to sustain their traditions in new environments. Literary critic Marianne Hirsch (1997) in *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* discusses the concept of "postmemory," where second-generation individuals inherit the memories and traumas of their ancestors. In *The Island of Missing Trees*, food acts as a conduit for this transmission, ensuring that cultural traditions persist despite physical and generational distance.

A poignant moment in the novel occurs when Ada, despite her initial detachment from her Cypriot identity, begins to engage with the foods of her ancestors. While she may not have grown up immersed in Cypriot customs, the smells, tastes, and rituals surrounding food serve as a subconscious connection to her lineage. Anthropologist Carole Counihan (2004), in *Around the Tuscan Table: Food, Family, and Gender in Twentieth-Century Florence*, argues that food is not just a source of nourishment but a language through which family history is communicated. This is particularly evident in the novel when Ada's understanding of her cultural identity begins to shift, illustrating how food serves as an entry point for reclaiming lost narratives.

Moreover, Shafak presents food as a universal experience that binds people across different backgrounds. Despite the historical conflict between Greek and Turkish Cypriots, their cuisines

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remain strikingly similar. Traditional dishes such as halloumi/hellim cheese, stuffed vine leaves, and meze platters are cherished by both communities, demonstrating how food transcends national and ethnic divisions. This theme is reinforced through Ada's gradual realization that her heritage is not singular but a fusion of multiple identities. As Paul Freedman (2007) discusses in *Food: The History of Taste*, cuisine often develops through cultural blending, carrying traces of different influences while maintaining its own distinct narrative. Shafak's novel echoes this idea, showing how food acts as a bridge not only between generations but also between divided communities.

In conclusion, food in *The Island of Missing Trees* functions as a bridge across generations, ensuring that cultural traditions persist despite displacement and historical upheavals. Through the relationships between Kostas, Defne, and Ada, Shafak illustrates how food serves as both a memory keeper and a means of reconciliation. Whether through the fig tree's symbolic endurance, the shared culinary traditions of Cypriots, or Ada's eventual embrace of her cultural roots, food emerges as a powerful force that connects the past, present, and future.

Food is not only a personal and cultural symbol but also a political one. Throughout history, food has been used as a tool of power, resistance, and identity formation, particularly in contexts of war, migration, and colonialism. In *The Island of Missing Trees*, Elif Shafak highlights the political and social dimensions of food, demonstrating how it can both divide and unite communities. The novel presents food as a site of memory, conflict, and ultimately, reconciliation, reflecting the broader political tensions between Greek and Turkish Cypriots.

One of the central political themes in the novel is the division of Cyprus and how it manifests in everyday life, including food culture. The island's partition not only separates communities geographically but also disrupts shared culinary traditions. In the novel, the partition creates an artificial division between people who, despite political and religious differences, have long shared similar cuisines. Historian Fabio Parasecoli (2019), in *Food*, argues that food traditions often outlast political conflicts, serving as silent reminders of a shared past. This is evident in the novel, where Greek and Turkish Cypriots continue to eat baklava, olives, halloumi/hellim, and meze, despite nationalist narratives that attempt to claim these dishes as belonging to only one side.

At the heart of the novel's political commentary is The Happy Fig Tavern, a restaurant run by Yusuf and Yiorgos, a gay couple—one Turkish Cypriot and one Greek Cypriot. Their tavern becomes a symbol of defiance against the rigid boundaries imposed by war. The restaurant serves traditional Cypriot dishes, welcoming people from both communities and embracing a shared culinary heritage. However, their love and their establishment are ultimately targeted by nationalist violence, illustrating how food spaces can become battlegrounds for larger ideological conflicts. Sociologist Michaela DeSoucey (2016), in *Contested Tastes: Foie Gras and the Politics of Food*, explores how food can be deeply politicized, reflecting tensions over national identity, tradition, and modernity. The destruction of The Happy Fig Tavern in *The Island of Missing Trees* echoes this idea, showing how food spaces can both challenge and reinforce social divides.

Food in the novel also highlights the power dynamics of colonialism and migration. When Kostas leaves Cyprus for England, he experiences culinary alienation, as the familiar flavors of his homeland are absent from his new environment. This reflects the broader struggles of immigrants who must navigate food insecurity, cultural displacement, and adaptation in foreign lands. Culinary historian Rachel Laudan (2015), in *Cuisine and Empire: Cooking in World History*, argues that food in diasporic literature often reflects the economic and social hierarchies imposed by colonial histories. Kostas's longing for Cypriot food mirrors the broader experience of



postcolonial displacement, where food becomes one of the few remaining connections to a lost homeland.

Moreover, food in the novel serves as a form of resistance and survival. The act of cooking and preserving traditional dishes becomes a way for characters to reclaim their cultural identity in the face of political oppression. Defne, for example, struggles with the trauma of war but continues to engage with food as a means of reconnecting with her past. This aligns with the arguments of food scholar Psyche Williams-Forsyth (2006) in *Building Houses out of Chicken Legs: Black Women, Food, and Power*, where she discusses how food preparation can serve as an act of agency and empowerment for marginalized communities. In *The Island of Missing Trees*, food similarly becomes a tool for resilience, offering characters a way to assert their cultural identity even when history tries to erase it.

Despite the divisions presented in the novel, food also emerges as a symbol of unity and reconciliation. The shared love for Cypriot cuisine—regardless of whether one is Greek or Turkish Cypriot—suggests that cultural memory persists beyond political borders. The fig tree, a central figure in the novel, metaphorically represents this continuity. It bears witness to the island's history and survival, just as food traditions endure despite the traumas of war and displacement. As Elif Shafak shows, the politics of food extend beyond the plate—they reveal histories of migration, conflict, and the potential for healing.

To conclude, food is more than a mere necessity; it is a powerful narrative device that embodies nostalgia, cultural identity, generational memory, and political resistance. Shafak masterfully uses food to highlight the complex relationships between exile and belonging, memory and forgetting, division and unity. The novel reveals how food serves as a bridge across generations, preserving traditions even in the face of migration and cultural displacement. It also underscores the political significance of cuisine, illustrating how food can be both a source of conflict and a means of reconciliation. Through the lens of food, *The Island of Missing Trees* offers a profound commentary on identity and history. The novel suggests that while war and politics may divide people, food has the power to reconnect them, keeping alive the shared heritage that transcends imposed borders. Ultimately, Shafak's novel reaffirms the idea that food is not just about sustenance—it is a language of memory, love, and resilience, ensuring that even in exile, cultural identity can endure.

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