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CONCEPTUAL MAPPINGS OF LOVE IN ELIF SHAFFAK'S "THE ISLAND OF MISSING TREES"

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Abstract

This scientific endeavour explores the conceptual mappings of human experiences as perceived by a plant character endowed with human features, and it relies on the prominent theme in cognitive semantics. Following the theoretical cognitive-semantic studies of George Lakoff, Mark Johnson and others, the article depicts the conceptual metaphors of love in the discourse of the arboreal character – Fig Tree – in the most recent novel “The Island of the Missing Trees”. This poetic novel is written by the well-known and rewarded British-Turkish writer Elif Shafak – a book of love, war, migration and adventure, a psychological exploration of the human experience on two territories, whose story is told by a Fig Tree, which impersonates the protagonists’ dramatic experiences, dilemmas, anxieties and love relationships. The stylistic analysis tries to trace the directions in which the conceptual metaphors can lead us to explore the possible interpretations of the novel, as well as the various narrative paths connected to plant life, environmental current issues, interconnectivity in the natural environment, and their effects upon our human history. The research observes the conceptualisations of parental love, friendly love and romantic love, love conceptualised as vertical space with reference to the underground life of plants, and also as horizontal space, when we take into account the characters’ migration. It is the story of a mixed Greek-Turkish Cypriot couple, a future biologist and a future archaeologist, who face the challenges of war and take different stances – one is forced to run away, the other decides to stay and face life as it comes. The novel highly explores the paradigm of love in its various forms, and follows a deeply metaphoric narrative string to portray human feeling through the diary of a fig tree. Throughout the novel, the plant kingdom projects conceptualizations of migration, transplantation and rebirth, which are all metaphors for survival.

Keywords: conceptual metaphor; mapping; semantic marker; love; natural environment.

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1. Introduction

The present paper explores the conceptual mappings of human experiences and plant life from a love paradigm as they are outlined in the latest novel *The Island of Missing Trees*, written by Elif Shafak, and it relies on cognitive semantics as the main theoretical background. The analysed novel is a masterful work of storytelling which blends the narrative line with Cypriot history, love, trauma and resilience, as well as cultural issues, such as migration, colonialism and cuisine. What is notable about

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this novel is the arboreal perspective and in-depth biological research, which add authenticity to the story and a spiritual side to the environmental current dangers. *The Island of Missing Trees* is a psychological exploration of the human experience whose story is partly told by a Fig Tree, which renders the protagonists' dramatic experiences, dilemmas, anxieties and love relationships. It is the story of a mixed Greek-Turkish Cypriot couple, a future biologist and a future archaeologist, who face the challenges of war and take different stances – one is sent away by his mother, the other decides to stay and face the crumbling fate of her homeland. They reconnect later in the novel, but disaster strikes once more: Defne dies and leaves her beloved husband and daughter in a state of numbness, immobility and nervous breakdown. The novel highly explores the paradigm of love in its various forms, and follows a deeply metaphoric narrative string to portray human feeling through the diary of a fig tree.

As Ron Charles mentions in a book review for *The Washington Post*, “*The Island of Missing Trees* is not just a cleverly constructed novel; it is explicitly about the way stories are constructed, the way meaning is created, and the way devotion persists. Without snarling readers in a thicket of confusion — don’t worry, each chapter is clearly dated — Shafak involves us in the task of assembling these events. “In real life,” she writes, “stories come to us not in their entirety but in bits and pieces, broken segments and partial echoes, a full sentence here, a fragment there, a clue hidden in between. In life, unlike in books, we have to weave our stories out of threads as fine as the gossamer veins that run through a butterfly’s wings.” (Shafak, 2021, 262)” Therefore, it is imperative to tackle a conceptual metaphor analysis, that decodes the underlying meanings within the story.

The study contributes to the field of literary analysis in general, and to the interpretations of Elif Shafak’s work in particular, from the perspective of Conceptual Metaphor Theory so as to emphasise the need to decipher metaphoric subtleties in the discourse of an inanimate plant-main character – Fig Tree. The intention is to create a more appropriate framework for semantic interpretation and metaphoric mapping decryption by juxtaposing concrete with abstract concepts in order to explain thought projection and meaning creation. Relying on the cognitive-semantic approach, which “represents an approach to the study of mind and its relationship with embodied experience and culture, employing language as a key methodological tool for uncovering conceptual organization and structure” (Evans, Green, 2006, 180), this research focuses on the semantic mapping projection of love, war and environment in the discourse of the Fig Tree. Therefore, the core theoretical background of the article is Lakoff and Johnson’s Conceptual Metaphor Theory – a multidisciplinary approach which combines cognitive linguistics with social sciences. Conceptual Metaphor Theory is an important tool in decoding literary, as well as non-literary texts, so as to better understand the encoded messages and the implied meanings. In conceptual theories, metaphor is defined as understanding one conceptual domain in terms of another conceptual domain. The conceptual domain from which we draw metaphorical expressions corresponds to the source domain; and the conceptual domain that we try to understand corresponds to the target domain. According to cognitive semantics, conceptual structure is embodied, semantic structure is conceptual structure, meaning representation is encyclopaedic, meaning construction is conceptualisation. The first principle marched on one idea that has emerged in order to explain the nature of conceptual organisation on the basis of interaction with the physical world and it is called the embodied cognition thesis. This thesis stipulates that the nature of conceptual organisation comes from bodily experience, which makes conceptual structure become meaningful by the association with that particular bodily experience. Thus, concepts associate and the result is an instance of what cognitive linguists call an image schema.

George Lakoff and Mark Johnson’s *Metaphors We Live By* has revolutionized the way we understand language and how we relate to the world around us if we take into account the experiences that we undergo throughout our lives. In this view, metaphors are not simply poetic expressions, but rather the foundation of our brains’ conceptual system, which signifies that metaphoric projection is the core mechanism that helps people understand, perceive and interpret both themselves and their actions and reactions to other people and the world. Thus, Lakoff and Johnson argue that the essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one thing in terms of another. Metaphors are not simply artistic, creative or rhetorical, they contribute to our understanding of structures and communication, as well

as to the way we express experiences. “The concepts that govern our thoughts are not matters of the intellect. They also govern our everyday functioning, down to the most mundane details. Our concepts structure what we perceive, how we get around in the world, how we relate to other people.” (Lakoff, Johnson, 1980, 3) Therefore, our conceptual structure is highly metaphorical. Lakoff and Johnson state that most of our experiences are organized spatially. “Since there are systematic correlates between our emotions (like happiness) and our sensory-motor experiences (like erect posture), these form the basis of orientational metaphorical concepts (such as HAPPY IS UP). Such metaphors allow us to conceptualize our emotions in more sharply defined terms and also to relate them to other concepts having to do with general well-being (e.g., HEALTH, LIFE, CONTROL, etc.). In this sense, we can speak of emergent metaphors and emergent concepts.” (Lakoff, Johnson, 1980, 58) They also look at ontological metaphors – when ideas or concepts are abstract, we sometimes have to imagine them as physical objects in order to give them form. In this process of shaping abstractions into physical understandable concepts, we borrow meaning from the physical world to help us describe them.

2. A conceptual analysis of the metaphoric textual layers in “The Island of Missing Trees”

The novelty of the paper relies on a conceptual metaphorical analysis which creates the ideal means to decode and understand Elif Shafak’s peculiarity of choosing a tree as one of the main characters in the novel. The journey of reading this poetic prose leaves the reader with an engraved perspective on both the people and nature that surrounds us, which, in part, is coming from the tree character itself, which wraps the story in a magic aura of the natural world. This Fig Tree is central to the novel’s exploration of past and present experiences of the protagonists’ love life, and it represents a tool for historical data collection and interpretation from an islander’s point of view. The writer makes use of the rhetorical figure of prosopopoeia – i.e. a dead or inanimate object is given a voice – so as to mitigate the Cypriot ethnic conflict and negotiate its story line between the two opposing sides. “The novel expands upon prior literary representations of trees but also draws from tree science and vegetal studies. [...] but advances manifold ways of understanding and appreciating them as our kinfolk.” (O’Neill, 2023, 2) The entire story turns the silent world of plants into a multi-faceted experience where the tree is transformed into a human-like being, attributing it almost all human senses – sight, hearing, touch and smell.

Sight is perhaps the most primary of our five human senses. Having sight is also referred to as having vision, which indicates an imagined plan for the future. Moreover, being able to see might imply having a view, an opinion on a certain matter. There are several references to the visual abilities of plants throughout the story. However, the most important metaphoric projection that is related to the sense of sight is “trees have vision”. This idea maps semantic markers of sight [+ABILITY TO SEE, +FACULTY OF SIGHT], but also some sort of future planning, prediction and creativity.

“...Boquila trifoliolata can alter its leaves to mimic the shape or colour of those of its supporting plant, prompting scientists to wonder if the vine has some kind of visual capability?” (Shafak, 2021, 45)

“Trees might not have eyes but we have vision. I respond to light. I detect ultraviolet and infrared and electromagnetic waves.” (Shafak, 2021, 46)

“And we trees watched, waited and witnessed.” (Shafak, 2021, 86)

The metaphoric ability to see attributed to the fig tree creates an aura of wisdom and shapes this inanimate character into becoming a guide which provides a sense of purpose along the narrative line. Not only is Fig Tree one of the main characters, but it is also the story teller which applies vision to the future and creates a mental picture of the plant kingdom’s equanimity, autonomy, longer existence and independence to the human world. Fig Tree is a memorial medium through which the novel negotiates the island’s history (O’Neill, 2023, 3). This historic evidence is projected by the use of sight verbs “watched, waited and witnessed” and they reflect the longstanding and long-lasting life of plants on earth which preceded and will probably prevail over human life on this planet.

Another human sense that is highly depicted in the discourse of the fig tree is hearing. This inanimate character is particularly sensitive to sounds and the subtleties of ethnic identities which emerge at a

phonetic level of a foreign spoken language. Thus, it points out that Greek sounds in Kostas' English create a home-like atmosphere, bringing in familiar Cypriot elements to warm the English weather surrounding the fig tree. While being buried to survive the harsh winter, which would not correspond to Mediterranean plants' habitat, Fig Tree overcomes a second uprooting, and feels disoriented and lonely once more, hence, familiar sounds from its mother tongue help it bear with the foreign – hostile environment in the English garden that is now its home.

“After all these years in London he still spoke English with a palpable Greek accent. It was reassuringly familiar to me, his raspy *r*, sibilant *h*, blurred *sh*, truncated vowels, the cadence quickening when he felt excited and retreating when thoughtful or unsure of himself.” (Shafak, 2021, 33)

Now, that we have explained a mere-physical ability to hear, it is time to move to the metaphorical sense of hearing, where the fig tree expands its capacity to hearing “in all directions”, hearing all sorts of birds, as well as the fluid “dissolving of memories into liquid” - a metaphor which invites us to decode the sense of hearing by means of water flow. It is a visual as well as an audible metaphor that constructs the abstract meaning of hearing by attributing physical features like flowing, cascading, and making the resulting sound of drops – *drip-drip-drip*.

“A tree has a thousand ears in all directions.” (Shafak, 2021, 80)

“...and if I listen intently I can still hear the songs of meadowlarks and sparrows, the whistling of warblers and widgeons, the birds of Cyprus, calling my name.” (Shafak, 2021, 81)

“I can hear solid memories dissolving into liquid and water dribbling from the eaves, speaking its own truth, *drip-drip-drip*.” (Shafak, 2021, 341)

Besides Fig Tree's ability to hear per se, we can also interpret perceiving vibrations as being a part of the sense of hearing. Elif Shafak gives detailed and knowledgeable explanations of plant's sensitivity to different aspects of life, which are common to humans, but less expected of trees and flowers. In this view, with the help of Fig Tree's voice, the plant kingdom flourishes and acquires new characteristics so as to expand human ways of knowing and understating the natural world. “Plants can pick up vibrations, and many flowers are shaped like bowls so as to better trap sound waves, some of which are too high for the human ear.” (Shafak, 2021, 81)

Vibration perception can also be related to the following human sense, which is that of touch. Although it has been overshadowed by vision, touch is one of the core forms of perceptual experience because it occurs across the entire body, using a large number of receptors in the skin. This sense is inherently multisensory, since it relies on the other human systems and it connects with the senses of taste and hearing. Moreover, touch has unique and philosophically interesting connections to exploratory action and bodily awareness: “But it turned out it was my old friend the hawthorn tree, sending signals through roots and fungi, asking how I was doing.” (Shafak, 2021, 99) Interconnectivity and plant communication through vibrations and environmental spatial closeness is revealed through action of “sending signals through roots and fungi”, which triggers both the sense of hearing and that of touch. The fig tree stands for the touch receptor, or the non-verbal interlocutor to the hawthorn tree. This plant communication occurring at the root level mimics the human touch and its communicative connotations. “Once a touch stimulus is detected by receptor endings in the skin, the neuron responds by initiating electrical impulses (action potentials) that are carried into the spinal cord. Impulses are then relayed to other neurons in the spinal cord and to the thalamus of the brain. From there, the impulses are transmitted to neurons in the somatosensory cortex of the cerebrum.” (Drewes, 2004, 2) And since we talk about impulses and signals, we may also refer to the sense of touch in relation to temperature changes and the perception of coldness or heat. The sense of touch is particularly related to temperature because there are people who can recognize objects without seeing them because of thermal cues that arise from the changes in the skin when an object comes in contact with the hand.

“The thermal properties of the object, such as its conductivity and specific heat capacity, the initial temperatures of the skin and object, the thermal contact resistance between the skin and object, and the object's size and shape all determine the rate at which heat is conducted out of the skin or object during contact. [...] The sensory system involved in perceiving the changes in skin temperature begins with free nerve endings found in the dermal and

epidermal layers of skin that can be functionally classified as cold and warm thermos-receptors. Warm and cold receptors respond similarly to radiant and conducted thermal energy and are involved in the perception of innocuous (harmless) temperatures.” (http://www.scholarpedia.org/article/Thermal_touch)

“I was cold and, though I did not want to admit it to myself, frightened.” (Shafak, 2021, 20)

“He placed heat lamps in the garden to provide warmth throughout the night and, most crucially, before the crack of dawn, the darkest hour of the day and often the coldest.” (Shafak, 2021, 23)

“I can feel the harsh winter beginning to relax its grip.” (Shafak, 2021, 341)

The last human sense that is present at the metaphoric level of discourse in the lexical choices of Fig Tree is that of smell. This is a special sense through which odors are perceived, an effort that contributes to the functional detecting of food, to the perception of danger, hazard and phenomena, as well as to the fulfilment of taste. “However, olfaction is vital not just to identify and discriminate odorants, it adds an emotional attribute to the objects or events, influences our mood and thoughts, acts as a catalyst in social interactions (modulates behavior and interpersonal relationships) and has played a significant role in the evolution of human habitats.” (Sharma, Kumar, Aier, Semwal, Tyagi, Varadwaj, 2019, 1) In this view, the fig tree states its ability to smell while remembering olfactory images from its past life – “I don’t ever get bored but there is so much I miss already - ... the aroma of coffee spilling from the house every morning...” (Shafak, 2021, 81) As it has been pointed out by researchers in the field of olfactory studies, “the smell does not seem to be satisfactorily ‘real’ as it does not exist without a perceiving material” (Sharma, Kumar, Aier, Semwal, Tyagi, Varadwaj, 2019, 2) and in our example, “the aroma of coffee” represents the object of the olfactory process, thus projecting the idea that Fig Tree is endowed with the sense of smell. It is the olfactory capacity that projects Fig Tree’s ruminations of better times in its motherland Cyprus.

The sense of taste, however, is the only human senses that is absent in the emotional expression of the plant character. Nevertheless, as the pairing of smell and taste occurs naturally, we shall interpret them as one single sense and conclude that all human senses contribute to the personification of the fig tree, thus rendering it as the central character, the storyteller and the interpreter of human interactions and emotions throughout the novel. The fig tree is a vibrantly animate being, a living organism that encompasses human emotions of fear and love, as well as several gradual shades and subtleties of sensorial nature: “Figs are sensual, soft, mysterious, emotional, lyrical, spiritual, self-contained and introverted.” (Shafak, 2021, 119) The expression of fear is revealed in the episode of the burial, where the tree becomes emotional and afraid of the unknown – “I was nervous, filled with apprehension. I had never been buried before. (Shafak, 2021, 20). These expressions of various human feelings endow this inanimate character with human features, since emotions help people decode information, understand how to react in different situations, know how to behave and respond accordingly, and communicate and connect with other people – in this case, communicate and connect with the natural environment. This transgression forces the reader to perceive Fig Tree as a human character, and gives the author the freedom to interpret, or often comment on the political turmoil and the social implications in Cyprus.

2.1 Metaphors of love and discursive positivity

The most important aspects related to conceptual metaphors, which permeate the present study, concern the relations between the action, narration, emotional reaction and cultural interpretations of the fig tree, as well as its constant expression of human feelings with their various nuances and subtleties. Our analysis tries to trace the directions in which the conceptual metaphors can lead us in exploring the possibilities of understanding the feeling of love, and its numerous shapes as parental love, sibling love, friendly love and romantic love, as they are revealed in the lexical choices assigned to the fig tree.

The most neutral conceptualisation of love, which we have decided to include in the positive section, is Fig Tree’s expression of sibling love – its love for Kostas and Defne’s daughter, whom it considers to be its sister. Now, from a spatial point of view, siblings are the people who populate one’s personal

environment. They are always around and if we look on the positive side, we can choose to accept them and be grateful for them, since they will be present at every occasion, every milestone and every embarrassing moment in our lives. This is precisely the image painted by Fig Tree when speaking about Ada. Its strong connection to her permeates the beginning of the novel and projects the conceptual metaphors LOVE IS HABIT in: “For I felt connected to her, even if she might not think much of me. We had grown together in this house, a baby and a sapling.” (Shafak, 2021, 100). The target domain of habit is triggered by the phrase “had grown together”, which deletes any kind of choice for a life spent in each other’s company. This implied “togetherness” infuses the text with the semantic markers [+JOINT VENTURE, +COLLABORATION, +COOPERATION] and, as all siblings end up doing, the feeling of love is co-built with time, with habitual activities and shared moments of both happiness and sadness, as well as with an awkward construction of intimacy and irrational loyalty, despite numerous quarrels and inadequacies.

Nevertheless, Fig Tree’s strongest relationship along the storyline is built around Kostas and ever since the beginning of the novel, Fig Tree expresses its dependence on the expression of Kostas’ parental love because of its need to be taken care of during the winter season, as well as being watered, trimmed and pampered, as any other tree. However, this particular operation of transplantation, burial and replantation, which is necessary for a Mediterranean tree living in London, projects the conceptual metaphor LOVE IS SURVIVAL. In the fragments – “He cared about me, always had. In the past, whenever the weather turned frigid he took precautions to keep me alive.” (Shafak, 2021, 22) and ““Some branches will break, but don’t worry’, Kostas said. ‘The ones remaining will be more than enough to keep you alive.’” (Shafak, 2021, 35) – the use of the collocation “keep me/you alive” triggers the semantic markers [+ANIMATE, +VIBRANT / -DEAD]. Fig Tree’s clinging to life through the harsh winter and Kostas’ continuous help in the pursuit of its wellbeing convey their co-dependence and their assigned roles as caretaker and offspring. This expression of parental love which usually takes the form of affection, care, comfort and nurture completes the conceptual metaphor LOVE IS SURVIVAL by constructing another – LOVE IS WARMTH. This constant care for the health and safety of the tree, his positive responses towards its happiness and his little acts of kindness to provide it with warmth during the night, not only show Kostas’ fatherhood, but also disclose his kind nature, his vivid awareness of the surrounding environment and his true connection to the plant kingdom.

“He placed heat lamps in the garden to provide warmth throughout the night and, most crucially, before the crack of dawn, the darkest hour of the day and often the coldest.” (Shafak, 2021, 23)

“You’ll be warm under the ground, Ficus. It’s going to be ok, said Kostas.” (Shafak, 2021, 32)

Thus, LOVE IS WARMTH is triggered by the placement of “heat lamps” for obvious reasons “to provide warmth”, as well as by the burial of the tree, which is supposed to prolong its life and preserve the needed higher temperature for Mediterranean trees. We have interpreted warmth as being associated to parental love, because it represents the first attribute given by psychologists to its definition. “Researchers instead use a variety of related constructs such as warmth, acceptance, sensitivity, care, affection, and support to capture parental love, although the relationship between parental love and these associated concepts remains unexplored to date. These various constructs may be unique components of an overarching concept of parental love or synonyms describing how parental love is conceptualized.” (Sabey, Rauer, Haselschwerdt, Volling, 2018, 738)

Nevertheless, in addition to his parental love and concern for his fig tree, Kostas also reveals his feelings of friendship and comradeship, by projecting the conceptual metaphor LOVE IS CARE. This relationship of co-dependence, meaningful communication, deep connection and a constant need to be close to one another is emphasised at a linguistic level by the use of the verbs talk and sit, which reinforce the confessional atmosphere in the characters’ garden.

“‘When you are buried, I’ll come and talk to you every day.’ Kostas said.” (Shafak, 2021, 30)

“For months after Defne was gone, and still every now and then, usually before midnight, Kostas would come to the garden and sit by my side, wrapped in a thin blanket, his eyes red and raw [...] On such nights I felt so much love and affection for him that it hurt.” (Shafak, 2021, 35)

Therefore, LOVE IS CARE is seconded by LOVE IS CONFESSION, a conceptual metaphor that is suggested by the fig tree’s migration story, where lonely and homesick immigrants talk to their trees as substitutes for psychoanalysts. The act of confessing, even though it is symbolically done to a tree, presupposes the acknowledgement of wrong doing, or conflicting feelings due to morally questionable behaviour, which opposes the psychological desire to identify with being good and moral. Moreover, since the confession occurs because of migration, the need for comfort and psychological clutter release becomes a coping mechanism with too much novelty. Thus, “individuals experience unpleasant feelings of cognitive dissonance when being exposed to information or behaviour which clashes with their core values or beliefs” (Berlinschi, Fidrmuc, 2018, 2). In this case, Elif Shafak projects the conceptual metaphor LOVE IS CONFESSION, thought her character’s voice, by infusing the text with the semantic markers [+DISCUSSION, +TRUST, +CONFESSION, +LOYALTY], as well as, [+CONTINUUM, +RECURRENCE].

“First-generation immigrants talk to their trees all the time – when there are no other people nearby, that is. They confide in us, describing their dreams and aspirations, including those that they have left behind, like wisps of wool caught on barbed wire during fence crossings.” (Shafak, 2021, 24)

“Humans have always sensed there was something uncanny about me and my kind. That is why they come to us when in need or trouble [...] And sometimes we help them without even noticing.” (Shafak, 2021, 64-65)

Displacement is a very disturbing experience which usually affects its subjects at psychological, social and emotional levels, as the process of people’s dislocation from their homeland creates a crucial amount of novelty which is translated into stress, until the adapting period has come to an end. Turing plants into therapists is a convenient method to cope with estrangement. Thus, the collocations to talk to somebody all the time in “first-generation immigrants talk to their trees all the time”, the verb to confide in “they confide in us” activate the conceptual metaphor LOVE IS CONFESSION and complete the semantic sphere projected by the conceptual metaphors LOVE IS CARE and LOVE IS WARMTH – [+AFFECTION, +PROTECTION, +NURTURE] – with markers of trustworthiness, [+RELIANCE, +CONFIDANCE, +GUARDIANSHIP].

The human need for comfort equals a necessity for a higher quality of life which has constantly improved with our evolution. However, the need for comfort and shelter during times of trouble is a psychological requirement, since humans perceive uncertainty as hostility. When wading into the unknown, as immigrants do, they often tend to grasp for the familiar certain, and because their environment is completely new, sometimes they carry pieces of natural familiarity, i.e. their local trees, to be able to endure the foreign new setting. The previous conceptual metaphor focused on the target domain of confession, but the act of disclosing one’s secrets presupposes a private space, which is provided in the following conceptual metaphor – LOVE IS SHELTER – that is triggered by the markers of the noun refuge [+RETREAT, +HIDEAWAY, +SAFETY] in: “Anyone who seeks refuge under a fig tree, for whatever reason, has my deepest sympathy...” (Shafak, 2021, 65)

Along the same lines of protective sheltering needs, the following conceptual metaphor is very well connected to the previous ones, since it conceptualises love as comfort. Hence, Fig Tree’s love for Kostas is expressed by its desire to hold him, so as to offer him the affection he needs during his grieving time after his wife’s death. Fig Tree’s impossibility to provide Kostas with his warm embrace forces it to grieve and suffer together with him. This episode can be decoded as LOVE IS COMFORT in the sense that making comfort available could represent a declaration of love, if only Fig Tree were human.

“How I lamented that I could not turn my branches into arms to embrace him, my twigs into fingers to caress him, my leaves into a thousand tongues to whisper back his words, and my trunk into a heart to take him in.” (Shafak, 2021, 35)

All these decoded conceptual metaphors have painted a positive picture of the expression of love in the discourse of the fig tree. Since Conceptual Metaphor Theory tries to decode abstract language so as to better understand the implied meaning, we shall exemplify the structural analysis. LOVE is a concept. It is partly abstract, a product of the human mind to express an emotion that is felt. But when we try to understand it, we need to describe it in order to translate its abstract nature to more physical, palpable elements which help our brains cope with and decode this reality. Therefore, the author structures the lexical strings, at least in these cases, with the help of concepts that are close to our home-like environment, such as WARMTH, COMFORT, CONFESSION and SHELTER. How we describe the feeling of love is basically related to how our need of safety and protection emerges in the discourses that outline the conceptualisation of love. We borrow from something pre-existing to describe something conceptual.

On a similar note, the following conceptual metaphor continues the idea of the need for shelter, or the desire to be surrounded by a familiar environment, thus, LOVE IS MELANCHOLY/LONGING projects the fig tree's melancholic ruminations of its better life in its motherland Cyprus:

“I have never been to Cyprus since. I still carry the island with me, though. The places where we were born are the shape of our lives, even when we are away from them. Especially then. [...] Of the past we left behind I remember everything.” (Shafak, 2021, 33)

“So I guess it's in my genes, this melancholy I can never quite shake off. Carved with an invisible knife into my arborescent skin.” (Shafak, 2021, 34)

Here we are witnesses of a pensive expression of homesickness and the longing for familiarity arising from the memories of a better existence, a proper habitat and the physical need for roots, which are crucial to our tree character. This migration and transplantation, together with the burial and replantation cause a lot of stress to the fig tree. Alongside remembering and starting again often sit nostalgia and trauma, on the one hand, the romanticisation of the time “before” — when people lived peacefully as neighbours, celebrated, mourned, and ate together — and, on the other, the deep and disturbing presence of experiences and losses that are too painful to name, and yet are always present and live on in future generations.

2.2. Negative sides of love in Fig Tree's discourse

Love is an intangible feeling that makes us vulnerable to danger, pain and suffering. Love is seen in numerous aspects of our lives, and it often describes a beautiful feeling that expresses affection. However, love might also hurt, when expressed or not expressed accordingly, when it is not mutual, or when fear overcomes love. Therefore, the unbelievable feeling of a tree's romantic love towards a human being projects the conceptual metaphor LOVE IS DANGER due to the awkwardness of the situation. The leap into the unknown is always a trigger for vulnerability in the face of possible danger, and Fig Tree expresses its anxiety for its falling in love, as well as its lack of time – “it was too late to guard myself”.

“This year, love, not unlike the unusual winter, had crept up on me so gradual and subtle in its intensity that by the time I realized what was happening it was already too late to guard myself. I was stupidly, pointlessly besotted with a man who would never think of me in an intimate way.” (Shafak, 2021, 30)

The conceptual metaphor LOVE IS DANGER is also implied by the certainty of an obvious happening expressed with the help of the passive past construction “I was besotted”, as well as the uncertainty of a future response conveyed by the use of the conditional “would never think of me...”. Fig Tree's tormented analysis of being insecure and vulnerable in Kostas' presence delves into the threatening nature of falling in love, but what emerges is the fear of feeling trapped and the danger of idealising and romanticising an impossible relationship. It emphasises the vulnerability of opening oneself up to love, knowing that the outcome may not be favourable, which provides an intriguing perspective – love can be both a certainty and a risk. The paradox is that despite its progressive nature – “had crept up on me so gradual and subtle in its intensity” – there is no turning back, the one who has already fallen is unable to stop feeling. Hence the danger and the trap, which both come with

semantic markers of [+IMPRISONMENT, +CAPTIVITY, +THREAT, +RISK]. This risky business of falling in love is highlighted by the sense of being captivated by someone, or being blinded by love, and neglecting self-protection. To make matters worse, the following conceptual metaphor goes even further and expresses love in terms of grief. The same poor Fig Tree, in love with his caretaker, transforms its feelings into physical perceptions – “On such nights I felt so much love and affection for him that it hurt.” (Shafak, 2021, 35) LOVE IS GRIEF is propelled by the use of the verb “hurt”, which carries the semantic markers [+HARM, +DAMAGE, +PAIN].

Nevertheless, LOVE IS GRIEF is also projected in the episode where the fig tree listens to an ant’s story about how they discovered Yiorgos and Yusuf’s bodies in a well. Fig Tree is thrown down the memory lane, back in Cyprus, where Kostas and Defne used to be childhood sweethearts. He was the son of a Greek widow who grew carob trees, and she the daughter of a Turkish family. The refuge for their budding romance was the Happy Fig – where our character represented the attraction point – a tavern run by Yusuf and Yiorgos, who were partners in business as well as in life. They would offer the best of local food and wine to whoever crossed their threshold, but at the same time would be at an even greater risk than the young couple. Sadly, they were eventually executed by a gang of radicals for not having been of the convenient sexual orientation, during the civil war. Be it as it may, the tragedy is revealed in the novel at the moment when the ant meets the fig tree, and its tremendous pain for the loss of its beloved friends and the injustice committed is translated into a physical reaction of losing grip, crashing to the ground – “I let my branches drop as the terrible truth behind her words slowly sank in. Seeing my distress, she [the ant] assured me that they had not touched Yusuf and Yiorgos.” (Shafak, 2021, 289) Thereby, grief is suggested by physical abandonment of falling arms, or complete capitulation, in the phrase “I let my branches drop”, as well as by the total isolation from the surrounding environment in “and slowly sank in”. Moreover, the feeling of distress restates Fig Tree’s pain by projecting semantic markers such as [+ANXIETY, +SUFFRANCE, +AGONY].

And, to deepen the misery and trouble, our conceptualisation of love takes the form of its opposite – hatred, to express the dissonance and fury when meeting the killer of a beloved friend’s baby. When the feeling of love is very intense, there is a counter part of hatred which manifests its loathing, resentment and hostility as strongly as the sweetness of love. Therefore, we may interpret Fig Tree’s love for Defne in terms of its intense hate towards the mosquito which had killed her new-born baby. Thus, the conceptual metaphor LOVE IS HATRED is a reversed psychological interpretation where the tree respects all forms of life but the mosquito, thus leading us to understand the emotional turmoil as hatred in the excerpt “I tried not to hate the mosquito” [but couldn’t]. LOVE IS HATRED is triggered by the exception that Fig Tree makes in respecting all forms of life.

“...I tried to understand and respect every form of life. Except for once, that is. Except her [the mosquito which bit Defne’s baby to death].” (Shafak, 2021, 270)

“A wave of sadness washed over me when I found this out. I tried not to hate the mosquito.” (Shafak, 2021, 273)

2.3. Romantic innuendos in love conceptualisations

Progressively more preoccupied with individual sensibility and an almost unhealthy attachment to Kostas, Fig Tree’s personality as a main character in the novel identifies with a hyper-sensitive autonomous consciousness that alters the personal and social construction of the self at the end of the novel. Consequently, our analysis looks more closely into romantic ruminations and matters of the heart. In this view, LOVE IS A PARADOX is our first conceptualisation and represents a reiteration of the conceptual metaphor LOVE IS DANGER. This risky business of falling in love is highlighted by the sense of being captivated by someone, or being blinded by love, and neglecting self-protection. “It embarrassed me, this sudden neediness that had come over me, this deep yearning for what I could not have.” (Shafak, 2021, 30) The paradox comes from the impossibility of a mutual love, due to the incompatibility of species, and because there is no turning back, the one who has already fallen is unable to stop being in love. Anyhow, LOVE IS A PARADOX is triggered by the use of collocations

“sudden neediness” and “deep yearning” which project the semantic markers [+UNEXPECTED INSECURITY, +INSTANT DEPENDECE] and [+STRONG DESIRE]

Then, taking a different stance from danger and paradoxical ruminations, we come across the conceptual metaphor LOVE IS BEAUTY, which is triggered by Fig Tree’s constant questioning of its own beauty and its appropriateness of its expectations to be loved back by his caretaker. Moreover, Fig Tree goes even further and hopes to attract Kostas with different, subtler qualities such as popularity and strength. “I get it, I’m no beauty. Never been more plain-looking. [...] But I’d like to believe I’m attractive in my own disarming way. What I lack in beauty and popularity I make up for in mystery and inner strength.” (Shafak, 2021, 31)

This feeling of hope is supported by Fig Tree’s past accomplishments in the art of seduction. Therefore, we find the next conceptual metaphor LOVE IS SEDUCTION. “Throughout my life I have seduced into my canopy droves of birds, bats, bees, butterflies, ants, mice, monkeys, dinosaurs... and also a certain confused couple, wandering around aimlessly in the Garden of Eden. [...] Adam and Eve yielded to the allure of a fig, the fruit of temptation, desire and passion, not some crunchy apple.” (Shafak, 2021, 31)

The conceptual metaphor LOVE IS SEDUCTION is projected by the mere use of the verb to seduce and by the semantic markers of the nouns “allure”, “temptation”, “desire” and “passion”, which lead the reader into a semantic sphere of carnal pleasure, only to continue with another sensual conceptualisation of love – LOVE IS SEX. The scene where Adam and Eve supposedly taste the fig and not the apple, which would be the end of their lives in paradise, symbolises love making rather than knowledge tasting, as the biblical couple share a sort of fruit which is described as “tender, ripe, deliciously alluring...”, thus implying semantic markers such as [+SOFT, +PLEASANT, +LUSCIOUS, +ATTRACTIVE, +CHARMING, +TEMPTING]. The level of intensity with erotic love is high, it is based on chemistry, pheromones and instinct. The action of actual falling in the expression “falling in love” pairs with danger and undisclosed implications of diving into the unknown. Additionally, having the urge, the desire, the temptation to share physical intimacy with a partner is meant to strengthen the bond and to come into togetherness, which are all intensified by the feelings of lust and love. The passage implying the conceptual metaphor LOVE IS SEX relies on the physical simulation hinted by the presence of a fig, which represents the female sexual organs:

“Adam and Eve shared a tender, ripe, deliciously alluring aromatic fig, splitting it open right down in the middle, and as the fleshly opulent sweetness dissolved on their tongues they began to see the universe around them in a completely new light...” (Shafak, 2021, 32)

The final conceptualisations of love are mapped on the concepts of rebirth and transformation, and, more importantly, Fig Tree itself. At the end of the novel, we find out that the Defne’s spirit has chosen to inhabit the fig tree, so as to be able to spend more time with the love of her life. The deeply metaphorical end of the novel reveals Defne’s metamorphosis into the Fig Tree and enforces the idea that the tree’s voice is Defne’s spirit, thus explaining the tree’s personification along the narrative line. The two characters intermingle, as the female voice is both Defne herself, or an impersonation of the mythical Ovidian Daphne; she is the fig tree as well as a combination of the two, thus creating “an affecting moment of interspecies co-existence” (O’Neill, 2023, 12). Hence, LOVE IS REBIRTH is depicted in the Defne’s finding a new recipient for her soul – “where I could possibly reside”.

“But where I (Defne) could possibly reside now that I was no longer alive and lacked a body, a shell, a form? And then I knew. The old fig tree! [...] I seeped into her vascular tissues, absorbed water from her leaves and breathed life again through her pores.” (Shafak, 2021, 343)

At the end of the novel, we find out that, after her physical death, Defne’s spirit has transmuted into the fig tree in order to extend the duration of her existence on earth and be close to the love of her life for as long as possible. Her need to extend her time is an expression of love, since the tree has proven to be Kostas’ shelter, comfort and confessional space. Thus, the last conceptualisation of love we have

interpreted is LOVE IS TRANSFORMATION. Here, “Shafak comingles the figures of metaphor and metamorphosis as a “rhetorics of becoming”, with the narrating tree referring to a literal fig tree – it stories that green matter and provides a resemblance to one – and *becoming* one through the narrative’s actualising of arboreal sentience.” (O’Neill, 2023, 6)

“Women, at least where I come from, and for personal reasons of their own, have, time and again, turned themselves into native flora.” (Shafak, 2021, 343)

“I transmuted into a tree in order to hold on to love.” (Shafak, 2021, 343)

And, we shall end our analysis with a closed circle to find that LOVE IS THE FIG TREE, a conceptual metaphor that is propelled by the assumption that no matter what one looks for where matters of love are involved, then one should reach for the proximity of a fig tree. “Then again, if it’s love you’re after, or love you have lost, come to the fig, always the fig.” (Shafak, 2021, 330)

3. Conclusions

This research study has explored the conceptual mappings of human experiences as perceived by the plant character – the fig tree – from a love paradigm by relying on the theoretical background provided by the prominent theme in cognitive semantics. Following the theoretical cognitive-semantic studies of George Lakoff, Mark Johnson and others, the article has presented the conceptual metaphors of love in the discourse of Fig Tree in the most recent novel “The Island of the Missing Trees”. Alongside the main narrative, the tree speaks, reflects, and offers wisdom about the realities of which humankind cannot bear too much.

The study has contributed to the field of literary analysis in general, and to the interpretations of Elif Shafak’s work in particular, from the perspective of Conceptual Metaphor Theory so as to emphasise the need to decipher metaphoric subtleties in the discourse of an inanimate plant-main character – Fig Tree. The intention was to create a more appropriate framework for semantic interpretation and metaphoric mapping decryption by juxtaposing concrete with abstract concepts in order to explain thought projection and meaning creation. Thus, we have come across conceptual metaphors of love mapped onto positive life semantic spheres, such as survival, warmth, care, confession, but also darker stances of life – danger grief and hatred. However, the essential semantic field, and the most desired in the interpretation is romantic love. The novel closes the circle of love birth – betrayal – reconnection – consummation and rebirth, by transmuting the woman’s spirit into a living tree.

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