

## DELUSION AND DISPLACEMENT: THE IDENTITY STRUGGLE IN 'THE ISLAND OF MISSING TREES'

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### **Abstract**

*This study explores the issue of identity crises in Elif Shafak's *The Island of Missing Trees*, examining how characters manage their sense of self amidst displacement, cultural hybridity, and historical trauma. Drawing on Marcia's (1966, 2002) model of identity formation and Erikson's (1968) theory of psychosocial development, the study looks into how people struggle with rootlessness and belonging. The study uses thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), with a focus on the cultural, social, and psychological components of identity formation. The analysis reveals how the novel's protagonists deal with internal difficulties affected by historical events, migration, and personal connections. The study, which follows an interpretivist paradigm (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011), highlights the flexibility of identity as well as the impact of social settings. The study investigates the characters' psychological and emotional issues using Marcia's identity statuses as well as Erikson's identity vs. role uncertainty and closeness vs. isolation stages. The findings indicate that identity is a dynamic process impacted by memory, displacement, and*

social expectations (Misztal, 2003). This study adds to postcolonial literary debate by demonstrating how literature reflects the intricacies of identity creation in a transnational and historical context, so providing a deeper understanding of identity battles in diasporic and culturally varied environments.

**Keywords:** Displacement, Delusion, Identity, Identity Crises, Isolation.

## **INTRODUCTION:**

*Identity is a multifaceted and evolving construct, shaped by cultural heritage, personal experiences, and environmental contexts. In literature, identity struggles offer profound insights into the complexities of human existence, often reflecting real-world concerns about belonging, self-perception, and societal expectations. One of the foremost writers who explores these issues with nuance is Elif Shafak, a British-Turkish novelist, whose works delve deeply into the multifaceted nature of identity, particularly in the context of displacement, cultural hybridity, and internal conflict. Through her richly layered storytelling, Shafak navigates the theme of identity crises, illustrating how personal and collective histories intersect to influence one's sense of self. *The Island of Missing Trees*, a novel that engages with themes of loss, belonging, and cultural transformation, stands as a powerful example of Shafak's exploration of these issues.*

*Shafak's contribution to Turkish literature, particularly through her English novels and translations, has played a significant role in introducing Turkish narratives to global audiences (Akbatır, 2017). Her work is known for its ability to intertwine folk culture, historical trauma, and the personal identities of her characters. In *The Island of Missing Trees*, Shafak examines the fluidity of identity, illustrating how it is reshaped by personal experiences, societal shifts, and environmental influences. This novel confronts the identity struggles of its characters, who grapple with the complexities of selfhood in a world marked by cultural displacement, shifting value systems, and political turmoil. Identity, as a symbol of self-expression and individual recognition, is central to Shafak's storytelling (Meridians, 2003). When a person faces instability in their sense of self and environment, an identity crisis emerges, emphasizing the pivotal role of self-awareness in navigating the challenges of life.*

*While Shafak's novels have been widely explored in the context of migration, cultural hybridity, and trauma, *The Island of Missing Trees* has received less attention regarding its focus on the themes of delusion and displacement as critical mechanisms shaping identity crises. This research seeks*

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*to address this gap by examining how Shafak’s portrayal of characters reflects the fragility of identity in the face of socio-political and environmental upheavals. By focusing on delusion and displacement, this study will shed light on how these themes contribute to the protagonists’ complex journeys toward self-understanding and identity formation.*

*The subject of identity has long been central to both scholarly debate and artistic exploration, given its pivotal role in human experience. The ongoing discourse surrounding identity emphasizes its profound relevance in understanding the self and its relationship to society. Identity formation is a critical aspect of human existence, as individuals continuously negotiate their sense of self in response to internal desires, external pressures, and societal expectations. In literature, characters often reflect these real-life struggles, as they confront the fluid and evolving nature of their identities. The characters in *The Island of Missing Trees* also face significant challenges in constructing and reconstructing their identities, particularly as they navigate their relationships to their past, their heritage, and the changing world around them. This study aims to explore the identity struggles of Shafak’s characters by focusing on the central themes of delusion and displacement, which serve as key factors influencing their self-perception and sense of belonging.*

*This study seeks to address the following research questions:*

- 1. How do the themes of delusion and displacement shape the identity struggles of the characters in *The Island of Missing Trees*?*
- 2. In what ways do the environmental and socio-political contexts influence the characters’ sense of self and contribute to their identity crises in *The Island of Missing Trees*?*

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

*Post-colonial literature often explores themes of identity crises and hybridity, especially when it comes to people who have been displaced—like immigrants from countries that were once colonies. Zubair (2012) sheds light on the identity struggles in Pakistani English fiction, where the conflicts around race, nationality, and class often take center stage. These struggles, especially prominent after the colonial era and in the wake of global conflict, bring identity to the forefront. In a similar vein, Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* explores how colonization causes deep identity crises in African societies, where people are forced to reckon with their heritage and personal identity (Kara, 2023). Achebe’s work aims to help Africans reconnect with their roots and transform*

their identities. Roces (2012) also tackles the identity struggles of Filipinos, shaped by both colonial history and the postwar challenges that followed. Together, these works underline just how crucial understanding identity crises is, especially in postcolonial contexts.

Identity is at the core of human experience. It's about who we are, how we define ourselves, and what makes us unique. According to Gioia, Patvardhan, and Hamilton (2016), identity is a mix of traits that make an individual stand out from others. It's something that literature, particularly in African, Pakistani, and Turkish societies, has explored deeply. As Smith (2012) points out, identity is always changing in today's world, influenced by race, class, gender, nationality, and sexuality.

Scholars from different fields like anthropology, sociology, psychology, and cultural studies have helped shape our understanding of identity. For instance, Brubaker and Cooper (2000) argue that identity can either be strong and complex or weak and undefined, depending on the individual's life experiences. Fearon (1999) also emphasizes that identity is socially constructed, meaning it's often shaped by societal expectations. Grotevant focuses on the role of family in forming identity, while Jackson and Goossens (2008) highlight how a failure to meet familial or societal expectations can lead to a crisis of identity.

In a country like Turkey, where multiculturalism runs deep, the complexities of identity are even more apparent. Istanbul, sitting at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, embodies the country's diverse and often conflicting identities. The transition from the Ottoman Empire to the modern Turkish Republic has left many individuals with a fragmented sense of self, grappling with political and ethnic struggles. This sense of dislocation is reflected in Elif Shafak's works, particularly *The Island of Missing Trees*, where characters navigate their identities in a rapidly changing world.

The history of Turkish literature is rich with explorations of identity. Starting in the Tanzimat period (1839-1876), Turkish authors began to examine how identity evolves in the face of modernization (Günay-Erkol, 2013). Writers like Orhan Pamuk and Elif Shafak have become internationally renowned for their portrayals of identity in contemporary Turkey. For instance, Pamuk's *Snow* (2004) and *The White Castle* (1990) delve into the East-West divide, while Shafak's *The Bastard of Istanbul* (2006) and *The Island of Missing Trees* (2021) explore how historical and political forces can fragment one's sense of identity.

Pamuk, often viewed as a key figure in bridging Turkish society with the

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*West, uses his novels to explore the elusive nature of selfhood. His characters are caught in a struggle to reconcile their personal identities with national identity, a theme echoed in Shafak’s *The Island of Missing Trees* (Barstad, Knutsen, & Vestli, 2019). Shafak’s work touches on the same concerns, but with a focus on how individuals navigate complex, often contradictory aspects of their personal and cultural identities.*

*Turkey’s identity is shaped by its history, geography, and its fraught relationship with the West. The country’s transition from a multi-ethnic Ottoman Empire to a nation-state has led to a sense of fragmentation, which Turkish literature frequently explores (Akçam, 2004). Shafak’s novel continues this tradition, reflecting on the struggles faced by individuals trying to find their place in a changing world.*

*The *Island of Missing Trees* is a story that unfolds in London, following Ada Kazantzakis, whose identity is deeply intertwined with an unknown island, a family history full of turmoil, and her connection to a fig tree. The tree serves as a link to her past, standing as a symbol of love, loss, and a deeper sense of belonging. This novel explores profound themes like love, division, history, and environmental awareness, making it one of Shafak’s most powerful works.*

*At the heart of the story are Kostas and Defne, two Greek Cypriot teenagers who fall in love against the backdrop of war and political division. Their love, both tender and tragic, is symbolized by a fig tree that silently witnesses their secret meetings. As the years pass, the tree endures through war, upheaval, and their eventual disappearance. Decades later, Kostas returns as a botanist, searching not just for native species but also for a love that has been lost to time. The novel highlights the power of forbidden love and how it can endure even in the face of immense hardship.*

*Through *The Island of Missing Trees*, Shafak addresses how identity is influenced by historical, cultural, and political forces. While the novel focuses on the Turkish experience, its themes resonate with anyone who has struggled to define themselves in the face of a changing world. Shafak’s work challenges readers to think about the complexities of identity, belonging, and self-definition, making it a powerful contribution to contemporary literature.*

### **METHODOLOGY**

*The current study, which is based on the interpretivist paradigm, seeks to understand how characters establish identities in their social environments. Denzin and Lincoln (2011) underline that reality is socially created, and*

knowing these people's perspectives is critical for comprehending their actions. The study focuses on the specifics of each circumstance, investigating how characters' identities were created and changed during wartime. The study uses life narratives and theme analysis to present a full picture of the characters' lives, as well as their identity formation and crisis. This method contributes to a better understanding of the complex dynamics of identity development in society.

### **THEMATIC ANALYSIS**

*Thematic analysis, as defined by Braun and Clarke (2006), is a method used for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns in qualitative data. The process begins with becoming familiar with the data, which was done in this study through reading both the theory and the text. The next step is coding, where data is broken down into manageable units and labeled with codes based on the theoretical framework. These codes are then examined to generate themes, which are broader categories that represent recurring patterns within the data. Afterward, the themes are reviewed for coherence and any ambiguity is addressed. The final step involves defining and naming the themes, ensuring they accurately reflect the data and contribute to the study's overall objective. This analysis method provides a detailed understanding of the identity construction within the text.*

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

*The present study used Kroger and Marcia's (2011) model of identity formation (Marcia, 1966; 2002) and Erickson's (1968) theory of identity stages 5, 6, and 7. Marcia's concept sheds light on identity states, whereas Erickson's theory addresses personal crises. Therefore, the two notions will be used to the text to look into the status of identity and the current problem.*

### **JAMES MARCIA'S MODEL OF IDENTITY**

*Marcia's model for identity formation (1966) emphasizes the importance of exploration and commitment in shaping one's sense of self. He posits that identity is primarily defined by decisions and commitments towards certain individual and social characteristics. Crisis situations, such as internal conflict and emotional upheaval, trigger adolescents to examine their values, beliefs, and goals. During this exploration, they may adopt new beliefs, values, and make different decisions. Through this process, adolescents develop a progressively stronger commitment to a certain identity. Marcia's theory of identity achievement consists of two elements: crisis, a time of upheaval, and commitment. A crisis is a time of upheaval, requiring a reevaluation of old values or choices, leading to a commitment to a certain role or value. Identity*

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*development begins with the recognition of an ideal, which is divided into statuses. This textual analysis will provide insight into the identities of different characters in the novel.*

### **ERICK ERICKSON'S THEORY**

*Erik Erikson's theory of psychological development is key to understanding identity formation. In the fifth stage, identity vs. role confusion, adolescents undergo a process of self-exploration as they transition from childhood to adulthood. This stage involves figuring out one's personal values, beliefs, and goals, and failure to establish a strong sense of identity can lead to role confusion. The next stage, intimacy vs. isolation, occurs in young adulthood, where individuals seek to form intimate relationships. Successfully navigating this stage results in fulfilling, committed relationships, while failure to do so can lead to loneliness and isolation. These stages of Erikson's theory are essential for analyzing the identity struggles depicted in the study.*

### **ANALYSIS**

*Shafak's novel *The Island of the Missing Trees* (2021) depicts the theme of rootless identity from a postcolonial perspective, highlighting the complexities of displacement, diaspora, and the search for belonging. The novel takes readers to Cyprus, a country riddled with conflicts and societal disputes, where Kostas, a Greek boy, and Defne, a Turkish girl, navigate a forbidden romance. The story interweaves historical details about violent events that impacted Cyprus in the second half of the twentieth century, revealing how these tragedies reshaped everyday lives. The story shifts across time periods, revealing riddles and raising new ones. The novel includes a unique narrator, a chatty fig tree, who witnesses the events that unfold throughout the plot. The fig tree provides melancholic wisdom by listening to confessions, remembering past joys and traumas, and reflecting on the symbolic role trees play in people's lives. Despite the whimsy of the fig tree's point of view, the tale digs into profound subjects, inviting readers to consider the intricacies of love, loss, and the importance of rooted identities.*

*The data analysis process involves collecting sentences, phrases, or words to exclude non-relevant sections of the story and specifying identity construction. The data is classified into primary types of identity construction, such as legitimizing, resistance, and project identity, and the reasons for their expansion and disputed nature. Misztal's (2003) identity formation hypothesis of social memory is used to evaluate the data. The final stage of data analysis is*

*to form conclusions based on the theories outlined.*

## **IDENTITY AND IDENTITY CRISES**

*In the novel, identity crises is explored through Ada's reflections and the generational conflicts that arise from displacement and the inheritance of trauma. Ada's question, "Was it also possible to inherit something as intangible and immeasurable as sorrow?" (p. 112) speaks to the intergenerational transmission of emotional and psychological burdens. Shafak (2021) uses Ada's sense of inherited sorrow to emphasize how the struggles of the previous generation shape the identities of the next, even without direct experience of the trauma. Ada's sense of being weighed down by an unidentifiable sadness mirrors the complex relationship individuals have with their heritage—feeling connected to it yet unable to fully understand or embrace it. This theme is also mirrored in her reflection: "I like that. It also kind of explains what happened to us. You and Mum moved to this country, but we're still migrating" (p. 121). The experience of migration, even after physically relocating, continues to shape their identity, reinforcing the idea that identity is a fluid and evolving process, shaped by both past and present experiences.*

*Kostas's comment, "You were born and raised here. This is where you belong. You're British – with a mixed heritage, which is a great richness" (p. 122), underscores the complexity of identity in a multicultural context. Ada is urged to embrace her British identity, yet her mixed heritage creates a constant tension between multiple identities and conflicting senses of belonging. This tension highlights the theme of identity as fragmented and malleable, shaped by the intersections of personal history, culture, and external expectations.*

## **DELUSION**

*Delusion is presented in the novel as both a coping mechanism and a form of liberation. Ada's reference to her mental health and her mother's struggles—"Maybe I'm just not well. My mum had mental health issues. So, yeah, I could have whatever my mum had. Genetic, I guess" (p. 129)—is a poignant example of how trauma can be inherited and internalized, leading to the blurring of boundaries between physical and mental health. The idea of delusion as a means of coping with trauma is also echoed by Meryem, who suggests that "People have fits, speak gibberish, or scream for no reason... It's the djinn" (p. 125). This connection between delusion and cultural or spiritual beliefs emphasizes the role of cultural frameworks in interpreting and managing psychological distress.*

*The notion that delusion can also represent a form of freedom is reflected*

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*in the phrase, “Madness was the only true freedom” (p. 127). This highlights how, in some contexts, the societal norms and pressures to conform may feel oppressive, and delusion or madness offers an escape or a form of rebellion against these external expectations.*

### **DISPLACEMENT**

*Displacement is a key theme in the novel, illustrated by the experiences of Ada and her family as they grapple with both geographical and emotional displacement. The description of Nicosia as “the only divided capital in the world” (p. 113) symbolizes the fractured state of the characters’ homeland and their own sense of displacement. The division of the city mirrors the emotional division that the characters feel within themselves—caught between different cultures, histories, and identities, making it difficult to find a sense of wholeness.*

*Ada’s reflection on first-generation immigrants, “Both eternally grateful for the chances life has given them and scarred by what it has snatched away, always out of place, separated from others by some unspoken experience, like survivors of a car accident” (p. 115), captures the tension between the gratitude for new opportunities and the trauma of loss. This passage highlights how displacement is not just a physical relocation but also a psychological experience, wherein immigrants struggle to reconcile their past and present, often feeling alienated from both their homeland and their new country.*

### **ISOLATION**

*Isolation in the novel is depicted as both an emotional and physical state that exacerbates the characters’ sense of loneliness and alienation. Ada’s emotional isolation is reflected in her cry, “She was no part of this chain. She was no part of anything. In her unbroken loneliness, she was complete. Never had she felt so exposed, yet so powerful” (p. 130). This passage speaks to the paradoxical nature of isolation—while it is a painful and alienating experience, it also provides a sense of self-sufficiency and power. Ada’s emotional isolation is not just a symptom of her personal struggles but a broader reflection of the disconnection felt by individuals navigating the complexities of multiple identities and histories.*

*Additionally, Kostas’s withdrawal into his research, “Her father had retreated into his research like a burrowing animal hiding in its tunnel for safety and warmth” (p. 132), portrays another form of isolation. For Kostas, the emotional isolation is a defense mechanism, a way to protect himself from the pain and trauma of his past. This illustrates how isolation can serve as a coping*

strategy, shielding individuals from further emotional harm, even if it leads to emotional detachment.

### **ROLE CONFUSION**

Role confusion is evident in Ada's struggle with her sense of self and her family's expectations. The quote, "What could she tell them about her father that would make them understand what he was like when she herself had a hard time recognizing him any more?" (p. 134), highlights Ada's internal conflict and confusion about her father's identity. Her difficulty in recognizing him as a person reflects her broader struggle to understand her own identity and role within the family dynamic. This confusion is exacerbated by her parents' expectations and the cultural pressures that come with her immigrant status, forcing Ada to navigate multiple roles and identities that don't always align.

Meryem's comment, "The young are impatient. They can't wait for school to be over and life to begin. But let me tell you a secret: it already has! This is what life is" (p. 137), speaks to the disconnection between generations and the different expectations placed on young people. It also reflects the difficulty that younger generations face in understanding their place within a family or cultural context, where traditional roles and expectations may conflict with the desire for independence and self-expression.

### **DISCUSSION**

The novel deals with the difficult themes of identity crisis, illusion, displacement, solitude, and role uncertainty. The characters, particularly Ada, struggle with the intergenerational transmission of trauma, which is profoundly ingrained in their histories and continues to define their identities even when they have not directly encountered the initial origins of grief. The work also emphasizes the conflict between accepting one's heritage and being pressured to conform to a single, socially accepted identity.

Delusion serves as both a coping technique and a form of resistance, since Ada recognizes her probable mental health issues and the link between mental disease and cultural ideas. This cultural perspective of psychological suffering stresses how belief systems influence how trauma and mental illness are seen and treated. In other respects, delusion provides a type of emancipation, as Ada views lunacy as the only true freedom amid restrictive cultural constraints.

Displacement is another major theme in the narrative, as Ada and her family deal with both geographical and emotional separation. The city's divides reflect their own internal divisions, which are trapped between distinct cultural

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*identities and histories. Ada's description of first-generation immigrants as "eternally grateful for the chances life has given them and scarred by what it has snatched away" captures the paradox of displacement, in which immigrants frequently face a dual reality of gratitude for new opportunities and grief for the losses associated with leaving their homeland. Displacement is more than simply a physical migration; it is also an emotional and psychological journey that leaves people feeling disconnected from their past and present. Isolation, both mental and physical, exacerbates the characters' conflicts over identity and belonging. Ada experiences a peculiar sense of strength and fullness in her seclusion, but Kostas' emotional isolation serves as a defensive mechanism, insulating him from more anguish. This sense of self-sufficiency contrasts with Kostas' retreat into his research, demonstrating that isolation can be both a coping mechanism and a type of alienation from the world around them.*

*Role uncertainty is also an important part of the characters' development, especially Ada's effort to understand her place in the family dynamic. The sentence, "What could she tell them about her father that would make them understand what he was like when she herself had a hard time recognizing him anymore?" expresses Ada's internal turmoil and bewilderment regarding her father's identity, and thus her own. This sense of uncertainty about one's status in a family or community is exacerbated by cultural and familial expectations imposed on her.*

*Shafak's stories probes into questions of identity and displacement through the development of characters such as Kotsas, Defne, and Ada. These characters represent the postcolonial and post-war individuals seeking an identity that is fluid, complex, and shaped by tradition, history, language, and geography. The characters' actions highlight the power of the state, tradition, and marketing. Shafak's work is a manifesto of her personal beliefs on people, cultures, and nations, occasionally advocating nationalism while sympathizing with victims of geographical disputes. Despite her negative views on nationalism, racism, and prejudice, Shafak's fiction and nonfiction represent her personal convictions as well as the impact of folk culture, state, and marketing on individuals. Thus, "social identity" is both given and received, shaped by history, language, and location. Moreover, Shafak's story asks readers to consider the fluid nature of identity and the impact of trauma, revealing the complex ways in which people cope with the emotional and psychological*

consequences of their past while attempting to define themselves in an ever-changing world.



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