

RAMIFICATIONS OF A TRAUMATIC DIVISION: OPPOSITE COUPLES IN THE ISLAND WITHOUT TREES

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Abstract

The story is based on a historical reality, the division of Cyprus after the Turkish intervention in the year 1974 and the events both prior to and after it, interweaving two love stories between two Turkish Cypriots and two Greek Cypriots, one star-crossed, the other happy ending in these turbulent times. Starting with the historical background, the paper dwells on the “couples”, i.e. two people, two abstract concepts, two incidents, in fact any two things Elif Shafak either brings together or compares throughout the story, how they are resolved and Elif Shafak’s stance as regards her holding sides with either of the two communities.

Keywords: Trauma, love, “couples”, homophobia, separation and union.

Ramifications of a Traumatic Division: Opposite Couples in “The Island without Trees”

It is what happened in 1974 in Cyprus that brings about this colorful and brilliant novel full of supernatural elements. After being conquered by Hittites, Egyptians, Phoenicians, Assyrians, Greeks, Persians, Macedonians, Romans, Byzantines, Arabs, Franks, Genoese, Venetians, and finally Ottomans, Sultan Abdülhamit II rented Cyprus to the British for a hundred years in return for protection against Russian aggression. The British annexed the island when the Ottoman Empire lost World War I. On June 15, 1974 with the help of the Greek junta Nikos Sampson carried out a coup d’état against Makarios, the President of Cyprus, and Turkey intervened five days later, on June 20. Following the Turkish intervention the island of Cyprus was divided into two sections, namely the Turkish side and the Greek side which the world recognizes today as the rightful owner (O’Malley & Craig, 2011).

Out of this trauma Shafak (2021) brings together two people, two abstract concepts, two incidents, in fact any two things creating couples that are opposite each other. Most striking is the two forbidden love stories, one between Defne, Turkish Cypriot and Kostas Kazantzakis, Greek Cypriot, the other between Yusuf, Turkish Cypriot and Yiorgos, Greek Cypriot. These two create the first “couple” which is heterosexual love versus homosexual love. The second one is Turkish tribe versus Greek tribe or Islam versus Christianity. Throughout history homosexual love was shunned, even punished for centuries until Queen Beatrix signed a law in 2001 making Netherlands the first country to legalize same-sex marriage.

Defne is eighteen and Kostas seventeen. For the former “human suffering was paramount and justice the ultimate aim, whereas for him, human existence, though no doubt precious beyond words, had no special priority the ecological chain.” (Shafak, 2021, P. 25). Despite their differences in character, Defne and Kostas complete each other becoming a couple and fall in love. They meet secretly at night, knowing neither of their families would approve their relationship for she is Turkish and Muslim and he, Greek and Christian. Although many superstitions, food names and certain traditions of the two communities are highly similar and they have amicable relations, their history, language and religion prevent them from allowing extra-tribal marriages. After some time, Defne and Kostas carry out their amorous relationship in a tavern, The Happy Fig, that takes its name from a fig tree in the garden and that is owned by Defne and Kostas’ counterpart in “couple,” namely Yusuf, Turkish and Muslim and Yiorgos, Greek and Christian until the fateful days when trouble begins in the island and escalates with

the EOKA-B revolting against the British rule. Kostas' mother, Panagiota, intervenes two weeks before the Turkish intervention which Turks call peace operation and Greeks say is invasion, and she arranges to send Kostas to her brother in England under the pretext of one week. The aftermath of the Turkish operation is trauma which divides and separates not only the inhabitants of the island but also Defne and Kostas. Turkish Cypriots (50,000) move to or remain in the north of the island while Greek Cypriots (160,000) move to the south, the distance between them getting further just like the distance between Defne and Kostas. Despite Kostas' explanatory letter Defne asks him not to contact her anymore. Yet, Defne is pregnant. The child, a boy named Yusuf Yiorgos, as ill-fated as his namesakes, is given away to be adopted by a British family. He dies after a mosquito bite when yet a baby. Years pass by and Fortuna, the Goddess of Fortune, changes her mind, deciding to bring together not only Turks and Greeks but also Defne and Kostas.

Turks and Greeks start working together in the year 1981 on "Committee on Missing Persons (CMP), a bicomunal body established by Turks and Greeks to recover, identify, and return to their families, the remains of 2002 persons (492 Turkish Cypriots and 1510 Greek Cypriots) who went missing during the inter-communal fighting of 1963 to 1964 and the events of 1974. This is indeed change. Old animosities are buried. *Injuriarum remedium est oblivio. (Oblivion is the remedy for injuries)* The once "couple" Turks and Greeks are now once again a "couple".

Defne, now an archeologist, is now working with the CMP. Kostas decides to come back to Cyprus. Through a colleague now based in Cyprus he meets Defne as she is working with the committee. She takes him out to a picnic in the outskirts of the city. It is there that they first start talking about the past, and about themselves. Thus, they are reunited in St. Hilarion, a castle in Kyrenia where they spend a night in nature and make love. Once again they are a "couple". They move from Cyprus where one pregnancy yielded a son who was adopted by a British family but who died to London where a daughter named Ada (Turkish word for Island) is born and she survives. Their union bears fruit.

As to the other "couple", Yusuf and Yiorgos, their union is doubly forbidden for not only are they followers of different of different faiths, but their homosexual relationship is cursed by Man and religion as well. They are the owners of the tavern, Happy Fig, working together in their joint enterprise. They both help Defne and Kostas meet secretly in the tavern, but there is nobody to help them when they are tied together after they are brutally beaten, killed and thrown into the well in the garden of the Happy Fig contrary, to the tradition of killing Turks and Greeks separately. Ironically, a Geek and a Turk are thus bound together. In contrast to the resurfacing of Defne and Kostas' love and union, the bodies of Yusuf and Yiorgos are found in the bottom of the well when its wall collapses while ants are trying to build subterranean passages for their home. While Defne and Kostas unite alive and happy despite the tragedy and the trauma they have suffered, Yusuf and Yiorgos unite in death. Also, while they choose to stay in one island, (even after a note of hatred containing words like sodomites, homos, sinner is stuck on the door of the tavern) Defne and Kostas choose to leave in order to live in another island. Defne's natural death takes place there.

Cyprus and England also constitute an opposite "couple" in that peace leaves its place to animosity, hatred, and death in Cyprus but peace and normality is restored in England. Ada who is now sixteen, is born there symbolically uniting the two islands with her ticket name. She is instrumental in the unfolding of the plot because she is given a homework related with migration and change. Actually, the plot boils down to change and migration. Even the fig tree is a part of this change and migration. She has thrived in Cyprus, giving her name "Happy Fig" to the tavern, but after the explosion in the tavern, deprived of sunshine and daily care, she gets sick, being infested and about to die. Kostas is able to take a cutting from one of her branches, and he takes the cutting with him when he leaves Cyprus together with Defne to plant it in London. Once again she thrives in England.

Ficus carica, the fig tree, is the partner of two opposite "couples". One is plants and human beings, and the other is when as both a first and a third point of view narrator she forms a couple with the omniscient narrator. For one thing as "...a parthenocarpic variety, she can make fruit on her own, without needing a male tree nearby (Shafak, 2021, P. 40) and for another her memory is infinite. According to her, "Human time is linear ... arboreal time is , cyclical, recurrent, perennial; the past and

the future breathe within this moment” (The sequence of events in *The Island without trees* is arboreal in that the events are revealed out of chronological order.). Another striking difference is “Even trees of different species show solidarity with one another regardless of their differences, which is more than you can say for so many humans (Shafak, 2021, p. 100). When Happy Fig is bombed, one of her branches catches fire from the sparks and she is in flames. Yusuf and Yiorgos manage to put out the fire. Unlike the people who were there she recovers from the fire unscathed.

As a narrator not only does she relate the events she has witnessed herself, thus providing first-hand information but she also provides second-hand information which she obtains from various insects and animals. They keep her apprised of important events which the omniscient narrator verifies. A butterfly named Painted Lady tells the fig tree she has seen the grave of Yusuf Yiorgos Robinson. The mosquito informs the fig tree that she has bitten Yusuf Yiorgos giving him acute respiratory distress. Chio, the parrot, lets the fig tree know about the evacuation of the Varosha district in Famagusta during the Turkish intervention. The queen ant tells how the bodies of Yusuf and Yiorgos were discovered in the well. The honeybee says she has overheard a Greek scientist working with the CMP tell Defne they have a DNA match for Yusuf and Yiorgos. The mouse visits the fig tree and tells her about the glorious days of Ledra Palace, the hotel where inter-communal talks were opened in 1968.

The omniscient narrator gives us another opposite “couple”, that which the Kazantzakis brothers form. One of them is Kostas and his two brothers.. As one partner of the “couple”, Kostas is apolitical and scientifically minded as opposed to his brothers Andreas and Michalis who are involved in political activities. His brothers also form another “couple” between them. Andreas is a EOKA_B fan and an admirer of Grivas, the EOKA-B leader. He has a minimal intersection with the world of his brother, Michalis who does not approve of EOKA, and who openly criticises it. Michalis is killed, a victim of unsolved murder while Andreas leaves home to join the EOKA_B’s ranks. Thus, the two brothers disappear while Kostas continues to live and prosper.

The two Turkish sisters Defne and Meryem form the next couple. Defne is a free and unconventional spirit that takes risks. She is so brave that she refuses to comply with the norms of the Turkish society. She even slips out of the house to meet Kostas. She won’t take advice from anybody. Meryem, on the other hand,, is conventional, traditional and superstitious. She always tries to do the right thing, to please her parents as a child even. But *Fortuna caeca est* and *Fortuna favet adiuvat*. Fortune is blind and she favors the bold. Defne finds happiness in her marriage and has a daughter while Meryem is divorced and childless. With her boisterousness and superstitions Meryem forms another “couple” with scientifically inclined reticent Ada. She is also instrumental in bringing about the “couple” of two psychics, one female one male.

Meryem convinces Defne and Kostas that their missing friends, Kostas and Yiorgos, can be found with the help of a psychic. So, they go to see a Madame Margosha who says she can see the fire in Defne’s soul. Of the elements that help her in her deepest quests, she chooses water. She is able to describe the tavern and even see Yusuf and Yiorgos kissing, and she sees their disappearance as well. Then, she sees a little boy named Yusuf Yiorgos whom she calls poor little thing and asks if they want her to continue. It is Defne who does not want to know the rest. (Shafak, 2021, p. 237). This happens in Cyprus. Meryem also takes Ada to a holy man, an exorcist in London because Ada screamed for no reason in her history class. Meryem thinks this is because Ada has stepped on a djinni. In contrast to Madame Margosha, the exorcist is a man. He wants Ada to look into the water in a bowl and to concentrate till she can see the face of the djinni, but Ada is done there. With a father who is a scientist and a mother who is a scholar Ada refuses to continue with a totally different reason, thus forming an opposite “couple with Meryem.

Apart from the murder of Yusuf and Yiorgos, murders before 1974 also take place in couples. In each “couple” there is one Turkish Cypriot and one Greek Cypriot. To balance the murder of Kostas’ maternal grandfather Kostas Eliopoulos, there is the murder of Ali Zorba who had a caravan of camels. For one young Greek who had just become a father is the murder of Defne’s twenty-six year old uncle who was newly betrothed. Meticulous attention is paid by Shafak (2021) not to hold sides with any community and to remain objective and constructive in her stance. Last but not least is the “couple” Defne and Ada form. When Kostas asks Defne if the missing CMP has found there were Greeks or

Turks, her answer is “They were islanders, like us. (Shafak, 2021, p. 206). Similarly, when Meryem asks Ada if she will visit the North or the South side first when her father takes her to Cyprus, her answer is “I’ll come to the island...I just want to meet islanders like myself” (Shafak, 2021, p. 339).

Union should take the place of division. CMP shows that Turks and Greeks CAN and DO work and live together. The Defne and Kostas “couple”, along with their daughter Ada, is the proof for this. Despite the tragedy and the devastation gone through, Shafak (2021) believes that healing and union are possible for love is eternal and immortal. It is the panacea for all suffering the islanders have gone through. The love of the first couple, that of Defne and Kostas is the proof for this. The Daphne in mythology refuses the love of Apollo. So, she is punished by being turned into a Laurel, a symbol of honesty and innocence. Our heroine, Defne, on the other hand,, transforms, after her death, into the fig tree with a will of her own in order to hold on to love as opposed to her namesake. She goes to London where she is transplanted with the loving care of her Kostas. Just as the Defne who dies in London is buried but seeping into the vascular tissues of the fig tree, breathes again, the Defne in disguise as the fig tree, breathes again after Kostas buries her temporarily from winter to spring when they came to London. *AMOR VINCIT OMNIA*.

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