

Article

Susceptibility and Resilience, a Fig Tree and a Scream

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Abstract: Analyzing two key figures in Elif Shafak’s novel *The Island of Missing Trees*—a schoolgirl’s scream and a narrating fig tree—this essay analyzes the intersection between susceptibility and resilience, particularly as these terms are developed in psychology, trauma studies, and ecology. I argue that the novel’s resonant scream critiques the discourse of psychological resilience on multiple counts: its inadequacy as a response to complex trauma, its focus on autonomous individuals, its assumption that responsibility for resilience rests on victims rather than perpetrators of harm, its construction of a “resistance imperative” and its disavowal of the inequalities in access to resilience-building resources. By contrast, the novel’s fig tree, I contend, exemplifies an ecological model of resilience rooted in a recognition of the interdependence of the multiple and diverse organisms that comprise an ecosystem, and of susceptibility as an advantageous suite of capacities that are crucial to resilience. These contrasting conceptions of resilience lead me to advocate for a politics of susceptibility, an eco-psychosocial politics based on the recognition that individuals cannot become resilient on their own, through their own volition, intention, or “self-efficacy”, and that focuses instead on building systemic and sustainable forms of resilience inclusive of the diverse subjects that comprise a community, society or ecosystem; that, rather than fetishizing independence, liberty and rights, fortifies interdependence and reinforces mutual responsibilities; and that rather than exploiting susceptibility as a weakness, nurtures it as the soul of resilience itself.

Keywords: resilience; psychological resilience; ecological resilience; susceptibility; sustainability; trauma; ecology; ecosystem; Elif Shafak; *The Island of Missing Trees*; scream; fig tree



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Elaborating two central concerns of Elif Shafak’s recent novel, *The Island of Missing Trees* [1]—a resilient and semantically fruitful fig tree and a viral scream of intergenerational trauma—this paper analyzes the intersection between *susceptibility* and *resilience*, ramified in a significant body of work in psychology, engineering, medicine, the social sciences, philosophy, economics and business. While deploying these terms in diverse ways, these disciplinary discourses share a baseline conception of resilience as a protective or reparative form of *strength* in relation to the hazardous *weakness* represented by susceptibility¹. My specific focus in this essay is on how these terms are developed in psychology, trauma studies, and ecology, which I here analyze in dialogue with two weight-bearing structures of Shafak’s novel: a remarkably resilient fig tree, who once flourished in a tavern in Nicosia and has since survived war, a bomb attack, fire, neglect, transplantation into foreign soil, the dreadfulness of English weather and being buried alive—and who narrates about a third of the novel; and the spectacularly resonant scream that erupts out of a 16 year-old schoolgirl named Ada in her history class, its visceral repulsion of an assignment (on migration, generational change and family histories) that dredges up both recent and inherited traumas—a scream that, I argue, repudiates the psychological discourse of resilience and the imperative of “bouncing back” to a normative state which for Ada has never existed².

Ada’s scream of distress and the fig tree’s resilience are narratively interwoven and thematically juxtaposed throughout the novel: both Ada and the fig tree are transported *en cachette* from Nicosia to London—the fig tree in a suitcase and Ada in the womb—where Ada will be born and the fig tree reborn. As Ada’s scream is keening the loss of integral connections—with her parents, a cultural heritage, her teacher and classmates—her father is laboring to protect the fig tree’s vital connections to her ecosystem,

burying the tree to shelter her from the impending storm. As Ada's scream is exhausted, "a sound reverberated inside her head, a heavy steady rhythm—*crack-crack-crack*" as if "someone's bones were breaking", ([1] p. 29) while at the same moment, the fig tree hears her "roots strain and snap, one by one, a strange, muffled *crack-crack-crack*" like "the sound of bones breaking" ([1] p. 36). The threefold argument that I draw from my analysis of these interwoven figures is first, that Ada's resonant scream poses significant critiques of the discourse of psychological resilience and the culturally pervasive "resilience imperative" it has engendered; and second, that the novel's fig tree exemplifies an ecological model of resilience rooted in interdependence in which susceptibility is conceived not as weakness, but as a suite of vital capacities that are constituent of (rather than opposed to) resilience. These contrasting conceptions of resilience lead me to my third argument, which advocates for a *politics of susceptibility*, an eco-psychosocial politics committed to building systemic, inclusive, and sustainable forms of resilience that, rather than fetishizing independence, individual rights, and self-initiative, seeks to fortify interdependence and reinforce mutual responsibilities.

A brief propaedeutic sketch of the etymological nuances of *resilience* and *susceptibility* will serve to both clarify and densify the significance of these terms in the psychological and ecological discourses that this essay draws into dialogue with Shafak's novel. While the Latin root of the word *resilience* (*resilire*), is often translated as "to jump or bounce back", *resilire* was also used in standard Latin, as D. E. Alexander explicates, to signify shrinking or contracting (Ovid), rebounding (Cicero), or avoiding or drawing back (Quintillian) [6]. When, a millennium later, the word passed into Middle French (as *résiler*), it meant to retract or cancel. And when the term was assimilated into English sometime around the 16th century, its nuances came to include, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, "withdraw[ing] or distanc[ing] oneself from an undertaking, declaration, course of action, opinion etc.". Later English usages often carried negative connotations of fickleness, recoiling, or going back on one's word ([6] p. 2709, [7]). A singularly seminal use of the word in English appeared in the work of the 19th century Scottish engineer William Rankin, who used the term *resilience* to describe the combined characteristics of rigidity and elasticity that allowed a material to retain its shape, robustness, and efficacy. This conception of resilience—as the ability of a material to both withstand (through strength) and (through ductility) adapt to, or rebound from, a physical force—became a standard principle of physics which later inflected conceptions of both psychological and ecological resilience.

Irish Historian Robert Bell is credited with first using, in 1839, the term *resilience* to signify "the ability to recover from adversity" and as a synonym for fortitude ([6] p. 2709). This usage occurred sporadically in psychology from the 1950s onward, although it was not until the 1980s and the work of Norman Garmezy that resilience became a significant focus of developmental psychology³. By the 2000s, with the burgeoning field of trauma studies and debates over the diagnostic category of P.T.S.D., resilience gained further salience in psychological scholarship and significant traction in mainstream discourses⁴. Ecological conceptions of resilience, which bear traces of nuance inherited from both physics and history, are rooted in Darwin's demonstration of the interdependence among species, which was fundamental to the work of ecologists in the 1950s who endeavored to understand the capacities of ecosystems to resist, respond or adapt to disturbances or trauma and to maintain, or return to, overall stability⁵. *Resilience* has subsequently become a key concept in sustainability studies and plays a crucial role in the most recent assessment report of the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC-AR6)⁶.

The term *susceptibility*, derived from Latin *susceptio* (taking up, assuming, receiving, accepting or undertaking), while often used synonymously with *vulnerability* (from Latin *vulnerabilis*: wounding) denotes, not an incapacity, but rather a suite of capabilities: of taking, receiving, being affected by or experiencing something, including the good, the salutary and the true. My argument thus distinguishes between *susceptibility* (as receptiveness and capacity) and *vulnerability* (as exposure to wounding, attack or harm) in a

manner that conceives vulnerability as a particular species of susceptibility. In recent years, however, a number of philosophers, influenced by Judith Butler's arguments in *Precarious Life* [37], have expanded the term *vulnerability* to mean something close to the conception of susceptibility I elaborate below and consonant with the politics of susceptibility for which I advocate. Danielle Petherbridge, for example, theorizes vulnerability "as a *general openness toward the other*" ([38], p. 591 emphasis in original) and Pamela Sue Anderson "reconceive[s] vulnerability as an openness—an open wound which is neither necessarily negative nor wholly positive", and as "the capability for being affected by, and affecting, change" ([39] p. 12)⁷. While these theorizations of vulnerability are compelling and significant, I diverge from them definitionally and take a broader analytical focus: these philosophies of vulnerability focus primarily on relations to human others, whereas my argument theorizes—and posits as significant—relationships of susceptibility among multiple life forms. Rather than examining power relations within human societies, I propose an ecological perspective that focuses on managing benefits and harms within a larger ecosystem in which human societies are one component among others.

Psychological conceptions of susceptibility have often adopted medical models, conceptualizing the mind's susceptibility to trauma or mental illness as analogous to the body's vulnerability to a pathogen or injury; susceptibility, that is, has been viewed as a weakness or an inability to resist, or recover from, harm. But the dominant psychological discourse of resilience rests on an even more specific principle of *differential* susceptibility, a concept derived from evolutionary biology and codified in "diathesis–stress models" of psychopathology which posit that some individuals are (for multiple physiological, genetic, environmental and temperamental reasons) more susceptible than others to the effects of adverse events and environments⁸. One cogent challenge to the diathesis–stress model, however, argues that differential susceptibility may entail not only disproportionate vulnerability, but greater susceptibility "to the beneficial effects of supportive and enriching experiences" ([46], p. 885). This theory proposes that "vulnerability factors" might be more accurately conceived as "plasticity factors", as, that is, a receptivity to both harms and benefits; it thus conceives susceptibility as encompassing the kinds of capacities for which I argue here⁹. While this argument seems to have had little impact on the discourse of *psychological* resilience analyzed below, it does correlate with *ecological* conceptions of resilience in which susceptibility—conceived as the capacity to receive, take in, or be affected by others—is crucial to thriving and, rather than being opposed to resilience, is constituent of it.

Psychological Resilience: Susceptibility as Weakness

The notion of resilience has gained significant traction in psychology over the last decades as a prophylactic against myriad forms of harm, including the traumatic effects of bullying, racism, domestic abuse, sexual assault, structural violence and war¹⁰. In derivative form, this discourse has seeped into other fields such as Business and Management, where the focus is primarily on workforce maintenance and the resilience of corporations¹¹, whilst a diluted, often contaminated effluence of this discourse has produced a veritable deluge of self-help books, podcasts, employee training programs and an innumerable number of posts, TikToks, and retweets by often ill-informed social media influencers¹². But the fundamental tenets of psychological resilience that I am problematizing here, however they are manifested across this discursive spectrum, are well established in the scholarly literature and in publications of the American Psychological Association (APA). These tenets support a consensus definition of psychological resilience that includes the abilities to "bounce back" from stressful events; manage trauma, resist or recover from illness; successfully adapt to challenging circumstances through "mental, emotional, and behavioral flexibility and adjustment to external and internal demands" (APA [27]); and resume or carry on with normal functioning in spite of adversity¹³. While nuanced and judiciously related to practice in more rigorous strains of psychological scholarship, this conception all too often devolves into a kind of *resilience imperative* in which an ability to "bounce

back” is cast as synonymous with strength, good mental health, sound moral character and normalcy. But Ada’s scream, I am arguing, is a repudiation of this imperative: it is a declaration of her acute susceptibility to the psychological impact of this assignment on migration and family heritage, a searing disclosure of her vulnerability to its potential harms, a verbal sign of her existential difference from her classmates, and a plea to a classroom environment that is failing to protect her. Ada’s scream is, even more profoundly, an indictment of the irreparable injustice of losing her mother to a fatal depression and her father to abject grief and an eruption of outrage at being assailed by an intergenerational trauma to which she has not consented, which she is not given to understand and over which she has little control¹⁴. The scream, which lasts for 52 s in the classroom and stretches across two chapters of the novel, simultaneously expresses the symptoms of a complex trauma, a repudiation of resilience and a susceptibility—an openness, an ability to absorb or receive—that is not only crucial to education but also exposes Ada to emotional harm¹⁵.

Tracing the progression of Ada’s scream, the novel illustrates the etiology of complex trauma and the intersecting susceptibilities that both condition traumatic symptoms and, as I elaborate below, might alternatively metabolize the sustenance provided by a supportive ecosystem. The novel depicts how the teacher’s announcement that her class will study “migration and generational change next term” ([1] p. 12) triggers Ada’s unease and initiates a kind of chain reaction of psychological distress—intensified by the ensuing discussion of interviewing an elderly relative and preparing to talk about a family heirloom which, in turn, elicits Ada’s further anguish over the fact that she lacks an extended family—not only had she “never met her relatives on either side”, but she has also come to suspect that “her parents’ marriage had not been approved by the families” ([1] p. 12), which compounds her anxiety over what that says about *her* (that “she, the product of this marriage, [was not] really *approved*”) ([1] p. 13), and leads ultimately to unbearably traumatic memories of the mother she has lost, who “had understood unruly thoughts, naughty thoughts, *the dark side of the moon*” ([1] p. 15)¹⁶. These passages illustrate the complex nature of Ada’s distress—how her recent tragedy is compounded by inherited trauma—and how a history assignment triggers a cascade of traumatic symptoms: dissociation, linguistic breakdown, alexithymia, an inability to concentrate, loss of self-control, a sense of isolation and the resurgence of an inchoate pain exacerbated by the loss of the one person—her mother—who might have understood it¹⁷. Asked to respond to a fellow student’s proposition that “it is always women who cling to souvenirs from the past”, Ada’s back tenses “as if her body had sensed a danger she was yet to comprehend” ([1] p. 16). Her pulse thuds in her temples; her mind goes blank; she feels “unmoored” by the “collective expectation” of the class; pressure builds in her ears “as if she were sinking underwater” ([1] p. 16); words escape her.

Overwhelmed by raw susceptibility, paralyzed by fear, and flooded with affect, Ada is encouraged by the teacher to respond. Instead, she concentrates on the butterfly she’s been drawing in her notebook: an overdetermined figure that carries a fertile load of significance related to her family history, her father’s fig tree, and her present sense of abject vulnerability. Watching as “alarmed and desperate to flee, the butterfly took to the air, even though its wings, unfinished and blurred at the edges, were hardly strong enough” ([1] p. 16), Ada displaces her own desire to flee, her incomplete thoughts, blurry feelings, and sense of fragility onto this image that carries with it memory fragments of her mother (who bore a tiny tattoo of a Painted Lady on the inside of her arm), knowledge gained from her father (about the generational migration patterns of *Vanessa cardui*), and an inkling of the fig tree’s understanding of the remarkable resilience of butterflies. In its own way, this butterfly is elaborating the class discussion on migration, generational change and family heritages, as much as carrying Ada’s trauma¹⁸.

If these passages illustrate Ada’s attempts to manage traumatic affect and maintain a sense of control—to be resilient—the final series of blows that knock loose her epic scream come when she does manage to respond (she disagrees with the proposition about women being a family’s primary souvenir collectors; her father, for example, collects plants; the fig

tree is his favorite) and when, in response, her classmates twitter, sneer or, at best, avert their eyes. Even her teacher's face twists with incomprehension as she dismisses, however gently, the idea of a tree being an heirloom and presses Ada to "think of an object [her father] cares about", of "something that has emotional value" ([1] p. 17). These dismissive reactions to Ada's contributions to the discussion wrench away her tenuous hold on self-possession, at the same time as they devalue the ecological worldview that she has acquired from her father (the botanist and evolutionary ecologist), reinforce an anthropocentrism that pathologizes care for non-human life forms, and endorse a capitalist instrumentality in which value (including "emotional value") attaches solely to material commodities useful to humans for signifying their identities, affiliations, and status. Already in a state of hyperarousal, flooded with waves of postmemory and grief, and terrified by her inability to "find the right words" ([1] p. 17), Ada experiences this rebuff as an ego-crushing blow, a judgment on the unacceptable abnormality of her family and the absurdity of its values, and a banishment into social and affective isolation¹⁹. It is a blow that paralyzes and destabilizes her: although her teacher keeps asking her to sit down, Ada remains "rooted to the spot" ([1] p. 25) while the ground seems to shift beneath her:

She clutched the edge of her desk, desperate to hold on to something, worried that if she let go, she might lose her balance and fall down. Panic churned and rolled in her lungs, and no sooner did she open her mouth again than it spilled out and gushed forth, an underground stream eager to break loose from its confines. A sound both familiar and too strange to be her own surged from somewhere inside her—loud, hoarse, raw, wrong. She screamed. ([1] p. 26)

As this passage testifies, rather than "bouncing back", Ada is stuck; she is both immobilized and off balance. For Ada, time stops and space shifts: she feels as if she's been consumed by a "fissure in time" ([1] p. 19), and the very ground she stands on has become terrifyingly unstable. Not only does she viscerally repulse the imperative of carrying on with "normal functioning", but the cataclysmic eruption of her scream renders the entire classroom dysfunctional. Measured by resilience indicators on standard psychological instruments—the ability to regain ego-control after stressful events, manage strong feelings, maintain a positive outlook, avoid seeing crises as unbearable, stay focused under pressure, construct meaning out of traumatic experience, bounce back quickly from adversity—Ada would score abysmally low²⁰. She is, by contrast, overcome, shattered, undone. She can no longer bear her pain, cannot make meaning out of what she cannot comprehend. The anguish that gushes out of her is not manageable, but "lifts her up like a flying carpet and carries her against her will; it is uncontrolled, unfettered, untamed" ([1] p. 27). Far from maintaining a sense of self-efficacy, Ada no longer recognizes herself; she has a "sense of falling out of herself, not part of this moment, nor of this world" ([1] p. 27). Her scream spectacularly denounces the idea of "bouncing back"—its suggestion that recovery from trauma is achieved in a single rebound—as far too simplistic a model for responding to complexly multicausal and compound forms of distress²¹.

If Ada's scream repudiates the kind of resilience imperative generated by psychological discourse, it also illustrates its fundamental inequality. While psychological scholarship has shifted away from depicting resilience as simply an innate character trait and turned to developing guidelines for building resilience, those guidelines are often equally problematic (if significantly more fungible). The most recent APA guidelines aver that building resilience is a matter of acquiring skills that "anyone can learn and develop" and that all that is needed is "time and intentionality" (APA, "Resilience", "Building your Resilience"). But Ada's scream would beg to differ; embedded in it is the recognition that not everyone can develop resilience equally, that even the APA's own guidelines are lists of materials and resources that are far less accessible to certain groups than to others and largely inaccessible to many. Ada, for example, cannot simply "maintain good relationships with close family members", as recommended because her family members are dead, have repudiated her parents for marrying each other, live on a distant island with which she has no contact, or simply because she does not know that they exist. She cannot, as the guidelines recommend,

consider a broader context because it has been withheld from her. The reverberations of Ada's scream, I thus argue, carry a number of challenges to the discourse of psychological resilience²², including:

- that it creates a *resilience imperative* that is inadequate to addressing complex forms of trauma;
- that it implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) pathologizes certain individuals or groups as *susceptible* or *vulnerable* in a manner that stigmatizes them as weak, incapable or mentally ill and that such designations function to warrant paternalistic forms of "protection" and control;
- that insofar as psychological discourse conceives of resilience as psychical strength, and of susceptibility as weakness, it carries out a form of genesis amnesia, ignoring the conditions and resources necessary to build resilience, particularly the material and social resources external to the psyche of autonomous individuals;
- that, concomitantly, practices and programs focused on building resilience largely ignore glaring inequalities in access to the material resources, environment, community involvement and social support on which building resilience depends;
- that in purveying resilience as a tool for warding off susceptibility or mitigating the effects of harm, this discourse risks shifting responsibility for harm onto victims, encouraging endurance over agency, forgiveness over justice, and acceptance over confronting and challenging systemic enablers of harm; and
- that the discourse of resilience largely overlooks the fact that susceptibility denotes, not an incapacity, but a suite of capabilities: of taking, receiving, being affected by, or experiencing something, including the good, the salutary, and the true²³.

Ecological Resilience: Susceptibility as Strength

If Ada's scream, as I am arguing, exposes a number of critical problems in the discourse of psychological resilience, and in the kind of *resilience imperative* it has (however inadvertently) spawned, the novel's fig tree exemplifies an ecological understanding of resilience that proffers compelling correctives to that discourse, one consonant with a conception of resilience theorized by ecology and various branches of environmental and sustainability studies²⁴. Rather than focusing on discrete and autonomous individuals, self-efficacy and volitional behaviors as does the discourse of psychological resilience, ecology concerns itself with entire ecosystems and with the resilience and sustainability of the multiple, diverse and mutually dependent organisms that comprise it. From this perspective, resilience is about a symbiotic environment adapting to and recovering from trauma or harm; a recognition that no individual entity within that system can be resilient on its own, and that a trauma to a single entity or species is a threat to all.

This principle of a resilience built on porous subjectivity and interdependence is one that Shafak's fig tree wishes she could teach to humans: "Men think they know with certainty where their being ends and someone else's starts. With their roots tangled and caught up underground, linked to fungi and bacteria, trees harbor no such illusions. For us, everything is interconnected" ([1] p. 30)²⁵. Once Kostas has carefully buried the fig tree to protect her from the polar vortex bearing down on London, she picks up signals from a nearby hawthorn who "through roots and fungi ask[s] how [she] was doing" ([1] p. 99), which prompts the fig tree's further explanation of how ecological systems build mutual resilience:

Under and above the ground, we trees communicate all the time. We share not only water and nutrients, but also essential information. Although we have to compete for resources sometimes, we are good at protecting and supporting each other. . . . Defoliated by the wind, scorched by the sun, attacked by insects, threatened by wildfires, we have to work together. . . . We remain connected across entire swathes of land, sending chemical signals through the air and across our shared mycorrhizal networks. ([1] p. 99)

Sharing resources, competing only when necessary, protecting, supporting and working together: these are the ties that bind the tree to its environment and constitute the resilience of the ecosystem. It is a conception of ecological resilience in which susceptibility—as the capacity to receive, take in, or be affected by others—is crucial to thriving, and rather than being opposed to resilience, is constituent of it.

Yet, insofar as a network of susceptibilities allows for the fig tree, hawthorn, fungi and other life forms to thrive in this ecosystem, it also makes them vulnerable to harm. The fig tree's remarkable resilience—her 96 years in Cyprus and 16 in London—has been built on her ability to receive nutrients, communication, and aid from others—including from human others: the tavern owner, Yusuf, who rescues her from fire; Kostas and Defne, who years after the destruction of the tavern, determine to rescue her; Kostas, whose careful clipping, transportation and transplantation of her branches gives her a new life in London. But the fig tree's susceptibility to human actions is also a susceptibility to harm: it was, after all, humans that threw the bomb that set her on fire; their territorial rapacity that ripped apart her land; their ethnic violence, homophobic rage and homicide that left her abandoned and deprived of resources; and it is human action that has caused the climate change that necessitates her winter burial. The fig tree's experience thus demonstrates that susceptibility, while crucial to survival, is never risk free: it conditions the possibility of symbiotic thriving—having the ability to communicate, share resources and provide mutual support—but it also bears the threat of injury and harm. The resilience of the fig tree, like that of other entities within her ecosystem, depends less on her own ability to ward off or recover from harm than on the efficacy of her ecosystem and on its ability to maximize benefits and minimize harms for all.

My argument that the discourse of psychological resilience might learn valuable lessons from the fig tree and the ecological model of resilience she exemplifies is not to assume that we can conflate humans with trees, nor to disregard differences between natural ecologies and human societies. But it does contend that we should neither underestimate the forms of intelligence and sentience that trees possess nor overlook the myriad ways that they are intertwined with human lives—ecologically, nutritionally, meteorologically, materially, historically and symbolically. Indeed, Shafak's fig tree takes pride in her species' central role in humans' religions, legends, literatures, and histories. And Kostas, the ecologist, notes that the fig tree is more significant than any other species in sustaining the Mediterranean ecosystem, crucial to maintaining its biodiversity, including its humans²⁶. That ecosystem, as the fig tree explains from her underground shelter, is complex, intelligent, hospitable and resilient, albeit largely disregarded by humans:

Life below the surface, contrary to what most people think, is bursting with activity. A handful of soil contains more microorganisms than there are people in the world. Packed with bacteria, fungi, archaea, algae and those wriggly earthworms . . . all working toward converting organic material into nutrients on which we plants gratefully feed and thrive, the earth is complicated, resilient, generous. ([1] p. 80)

That resilience, as the tree emphasizes, is the result of collective actions that work to provide for the needs of all inhabitants of the ecosystem, to supply them with benefits and protect them from harms.

Yet humans, prone to thinking highly of their own intelligence, are, from the fig tree's perspective, creatures of remarkable disavowal and willful ignorance, not only about the resources and connections they need to nurture the resilience for which they advocate, but about the kinds of intelligence and sentience they share with trees: "My guess", she says:

is that humans deliberately avoid learning more about us, maybe because they sense, at some primordial level, that what they find out might be unsettling. Would they wish to know, for instance, that trees can adapt and change their behavior with purpose, and if this is true, perhaps one does not necessarily depend on a brain for intelligence? Would they be pleased to discover that

by sending signals through a network of latticed fungi buried in the soil, trees can warn their neighbors about dangers ahead? . . . Or that many plants, when threatened, attacked or cut, can produce ethylene, which works like a type of anesthetic, and this chemical release has been described by researchers as akin to hearing stressed plants screaming? ([1] pp. 44–45)

If Ada's classmates fail to hear the significance of her scream, humanity fails to hear the screams of trees altogether, disavowing forms of intelligence, communicative abilities and sentient experience that differ from their own but that have a significant impact on their own ability to thrive. I would argue, moreover, that the kind of "resilience imperative" generated by psychological discourse, in which resilience is associated with strength, ability and good mental health, exemplifies the kind of disavowal critiqued by the fig tree insofar as it disregards the kinds of resources, support systems, community organization and societal infrastructure on which resilience depends. Indeed, the fig tree's critiques signal the degree to which resilience itself can function as a form of denial, its tenets used to construct the kind of "cover story" that Bessel Van der Kolk describes that traumatizes humans confecting to render their traumatic experience more socially acceptable ([61] p. 43), or for use as a coping strategy that allows them to survive while eroding their ability to thrive. As he puts it, "Every trauma survivor is resilient in his or her own way; they have developed methods for coping and survival, but the price they often pay is absence of a loving relationship with their own bodies, minds, and souls" ([61] pp. 280–281).

As the storm hits London and the buried fig tree is communicating with the hawthorn through that mutually beneficial network on which their resilience depends, Ada, isolated in her bedroom, obsessively replays the shame of her cataclysmic scream, and opens another communication network—social media—that, rather than carrying supportive greetings or life-giving sustenance, functions as a conduit of psychological harm and social exclusion, and that snatches from her grasp any tenuous hold she might have gained on resilience. On her phone she finds a message from an unknown number with a link to "an awful, awful video" ([1] p. 97)—a video of her screaming—that a classmate has filmed with neither her consent nor her knowledge and that is already posted on a platform where it is being disseminated with alarming rapidity, gathering responses filled with "words of contempt, ridicule, reams of sexual jokes and dirty remarks", comments that "slice into her self-esteem" ([1] p. 97). The digital environment through which Ada's scream reverberates arguably functions less like an ecosystem than as an invasive species: aggressively degrading the environments it occupies, destroying vulnerable species, and eroding symbiotic relationships that sustain the entities within those environments. These narratively juxtaposed communication networks—the fig tree's ecological one and Ada's technological one—both entail increased susceptibility to benefits and harms. However, the ecological system is organized in a way that facilitates mutual benefits, resource-sharing and harm mitigation, all of which function to strengthen resilience throughout the ecosystem, while the social media environment orchestrates competition for benefits, disaggregates "unplatformed" social environments, and corrodes essential forms of relation and interaction in a manner that attenuates resilience²⁷. Even when the video of Ada's scream elicits creatively supportive messages, beginning with an Icelandic woman who has filmed herself "screaming at the top of her voice as a geyser went off in the background" and launched the hashtag #doyouhearmenow ([1] p. 123), and even when that hashtag prompts similar reenactments of Ada's scream from around the world, this disconnected solidarity only serves to intensify her "sense of panic and confusion" ([1] pp. 153–154). "She couldn't believe she had started this global craze, and she had no idea how anyone could possibly stop it" ([1] p. 154), which, in turn, causes her to further withdraw: into her room, into the blackout afforded by the storm, and into an infantile position: "drawing her legs in, [and] wrap[ping] her arms around them as she used to do when, as a little girl, she would ask her parents to tell her a story" ([1] p. 154).

Yet it is from this position of susceptibility that Ada begins to reconnect to a more beneficent communication network, if only, at first, through memory. The memories to

which her mind turns feature, significantly, both her parents and butterflies: she thinks first of the books her father used to read to her—on butterflies, insects, animals, and trees—and then of a particularly memorable story her mother recounted: of a WWII infantry battalion stationed on the English coast that was struck with sudden terror one evening at the sight of colored smoke billowing across the Channel. But, as her mother relayed, what the troops assumed to be an inescapable cloud of poisoned gas, turned out to be a magnificent swarm of migrating butterflies ([1] p. 155). It is a story that suggests that things are not always what they seem, and that perceived dangers—perhaps even the consequences of a scream—may turn out to be wonders. And it is the image of those remarkably resilient migrating butterflies that arguably salvages the subsequent conversation that Kostas, having brought a candle to Ada's room, attempts to initiate about "what happened at school" ([1] p. 156).

Recoiling from the topic, Ada redirects her father's attention from the symptomatic scream to the distal roots of her distress, to the compound anguish of her mother's recent death and the inherited and only dimly understood trauma with which she has been raised, and she does so through a question about butterflies. "Why do butterflies cross the Channel and come here?" ([1] p. 157), she asks, deftly evoking an ecological knowledge about which, she knows, her father cares deeply, as well as the assignment on migration that has triggered her scream, the distressing obscurity of her own family history, and that overdetermined butterfly drawn in her school notebook who accompanied her throughout her classroom ordeal. When Kostas explains how butterflies migrate "not within one generation but across many", Ada immediately makes the connection to her own family history: "I like that. It also kind of explains what happened with us. You and Mum moved to this country, but we're still migrating" ([1] p. 157). Weighed down by his own grief, and having committed himself to the belief that his and Defne's migration from Cyprus would be an antidote to their traumatic past, would spare Ada its burden, Kostas resists this analogy. But Ada is intent on disabusing her father of the idea that she's been rendered invulnerable to these postmemories and inherited traumas: "You don't mind believing your butterflies inherit migrations from their ancestors", she retorts, "but when it comes to your own family, you think that's not possible" ([1] p. 158). This dialogue, however barbed and halting, nonetheless opens up susceptibilities in both Ada and her father and begins to rebuild a crucial synapse in a vital communication network. It initiates a dialogue on aspects of Ada's family history that have been withheld from her, gives Kostas a revelatory glimpse into how that history has affected his daughter, gives Ada a jump start on her history assignment, and provides her with some of the primary resources she needs to fortify her resilience²⁸.

The process of restoring Ada's sense of self and her ability to function will be a slow and incremental one—there is no "bouncing back" involved; and it is less a matter of "decisive action", "intention", positive thinking, or self-care, than of the supportive acts and nurturing gestures of those around her²⁹. A key reinforcement in Ada's ecosystem will prove to be the maternal aunt, Meryem, who arrives in her life, though Ada initially views her with a truculent suspicion. But with persistence—and cooking—Meryem encourages Ada to socialize and reengage in everyday activities; she grants her an understanding of the traumatic past she has inherited and of the significance of the fig tree to that past; she drains the poison of shame from Ada's scream by withholding blame, offering Ada an alternative perspective and shifting responsibility to an external force³⁰. She gives Ada counsel, but perhaps even more importantly, asks Ada for her opinions and assistance, reminding Ada of her competencies and reinforcing her confidence. Both Kostas and Aunt Meryem, throughout the rest of the novel, nourish Ada's susceptibilities and reinforce her resilience by shoring up the ecosystem that supports her; an ecosystem that has been damaged but still has the capacity to provide her with care, companionship, security and the myriad other resources she needs to begin working through the complexities of her trauma, to re-engage with the world, repair broken bonds with her classmates and herself and envision a future.

Towards a Politics of Susceptibility

Both the critiques Ada's scream launches at the psychological discourse of resilience and the alternative model of resilience represented by the fig tree lead me to advocate for a model of resilience that might, in human societies, be called a *politics of susceptibility*: an eco-psychosocial politics based on the principle that individuals cannot become resilient on their own, through their own volition or "intentionality"; that, rather than focusing on autonomous individuals, discrete groups or sovereign nations, builds systemic forms of resilience that are inclusive of the multiple and diverse subjects that comprise a community, society, national unit or ecosystem; and that rather than fetishizing independence, liberty and rights, fortifies interdependence and mutual responsibilities. Such politics, I would argue, represent a viable way of building sustainable forms of resilience, including psychological resilience, by committing themselves to reconstructing institutions, societal systems, social practices, political structures and environmental policies in a manner that, rather than exploiting susceptibility as a weakness, values it as a significant capacity through which resilience is constructed and humans can thrive.

To be sure, the kind of politics of susceptibility I am advocating for here is grievously offensive to deeply held capitalist values of competition, individual initiative, unbridled accumulation and overconsumption; to the binary gender hierarchies fetishized by patriarchy which devalue cooperation, mutual support and nurturance as signs of effeminacy or weakness; and to the racisms, xenophobias, political and religious extremisms that seek to exploit susceptibilities for the benefit of a particular group, party or class. But such offenses do not, I would insist, make a politics of susceptibility a utopian fantasy. Rather, such politics propose a theoretical framework comprised of conceptually global and pragmatically granular components, a model that acknowledges the complex interrelations among individuals, societies, non-human animals and ecosystems, respects the network of susceptibilities they comprise, and recognizes those susceptibilities as potential sites for capacity-building. And while these politics may travel under different names, they are, I would argue, already under construction in cross-disciplinary dialogues and research, in collaborations between theorists, artists and activists and in collective actions undertaken in schools, workplaces and communities. In my view, two promising examples of a politics of susceptibility—both of which are concordant with the fig tree's ecological conception of resilience and attentive to the critiques embedded in Ada's scream—are first, the model of "just sustainabilities" proposed by Agyeman et. al. [65,66] and second, Garcia, Nedegaard and Legerski's arguments for incorporating intersectionality, resilience and cultural competence into the DSM [84].

While Agyeman's argument for "just sustainabilities" does not directly address psychological resilience, it proposes a broad theory of, and practical framework for, sustainability that is consonant with the kind of ecological resilience described by the novel's fig tree. This is modeled on an open system that is conducive to accommodating psychological resilience. Proposing an equity-focused model that integrates environmental sustainability with human development, the "just sustainabilities" model sees environmental and social justice as inextricably intertwined. Speaking of sustainabilities in the plural in order to acknowledge the differences among varying ecosystems and cultural contexts, Agyeman and colleagues argue that "a truly sustainable society is one where wider questions of social needs and welfare, and economic opportunity are integrally related to environmental limits imposed by supporting ecosystems" ([66] p. 78). On this view, social justice, human rights and environmental protection are conceived as complementing, rather than competing with, each other. They are viewed as intersecting systems that are capable of strengthening each other by sharing resources, benefits and information as parts of a symbiotic structure in which "all facets of sustainability function as an integrated whole, the conditions of which are deeply interconnected" ([66] p. 8)³¹.

While Agyeman's work on "just sustainabilities" affords an expansive view of how a politics of susceptibility might be put into practice, Garcia, Nedegaard and Legerski's argument demonstrates how a disciplinary discourse might contribute to such politics, in

this case, by incorporating revised conceptions of intersectionality, resilience and cultural competence into the DSM. Their argument lays out how understandings of psychological resilience might be reconceived and incorporated into clinical practice in a way that accounts for both the complexity of distress exemplified by Ada's scream and the fig tree's understanding of ecological resilience. Advocating for an "Intersectionality/Resiliency formulation" that "addresses contextual and individual factors related to diversity, equity, and resiliency", Garcia, Nedegaard and Legerski view "an individual's psychological, interpersonal, community, cultural, and spiritual sources of strength and resiliency" as crucial to competent diagnosis and "effective clinical practice with the whole person" ([84] pp. 18–19)³². Rather than focusing on a discrete psyche, the intersectional conception of resilience they develop takes into account an entire ecosystem and argues for a strength-based theoretical perspective that recognizes the capabilities afforded by susceptibility. Providing methodological nuance to Agyeman's recognition of diverse ecosystems, Garcia, Nedegaard and Legerski conceive "cultural competence" as an ongoing learning process (rather than a status or a knowledge base to be mastered) and view that process as transformative not only of individuals, but of interpersonal relationships, communities and institutions.

The politics of susceptibility for which I am advocating—and which under diverse names is already under construction—also takes inspiration from Amartya Sen's argument for reducing injustice, eliminating "clearly remediable injustices" ([89] p. vii) and "preventing manifestly severe injustice" ([89] p. 21) rather than holding out for (or despairing at not achieving) a perfectly just society. It wagers on the kind of work, both theoretical and in multiple forms of practice, that strives to reduce or mitigate aggression, abuse, social exclusion, economic inequality, political disfranchisement and social, racial and environmental injustices. It also commits to building institutional forms of support, collaboration and cooperation, strengthening social networks and communities, constructing systems of inclusion and economic equality and providing protections against aggression and harm. The politics of susceptibility for which I am advocating recognizes that sustainable revolutions are constructed collaboratively and incrementally, comprised of localized actions, diverse forms of knowledge and heterogeneous perspectives. It understands that complex problems are very rarely solved by individuals, discrete acts or a single theory, but rather through collaborative work, alliances and solidarities. It views this fact not as a form of weakness but as the foundation of resilience.

Conclusions

Shafak's novel, then, through a teenager's scream, a fig tree and the occasional butterfly, both exposes the inadequacy of discourses of psychological resilience that oppose susceptibility to resilience and illuminates the promise of an ecological model of resilience in which susceptibility is the foundation of resilience. As I have argued, Ada's scream, its roots and its sequae indict the discourse of psychological resilience on multiple grounds: its inadequacy as a response to complex trauma; its propensity for stigmatizing as weak or pathologically susceptible those who do not promptly "bounce back" from stressful situations; its focus on discrete and autonomous individuals; its assumption that responsibility for resilience rests on victims rather than on (individual, social, political and institutional) perpetrators of harm; the degree to which it ignores gross inequalities in access to the kinds of social, institutional and material resources necessary to build resilience; and the way in which it lends itself to a "resilience imperative" that may encourage the denial of trauma or disavowal of traumatic symptoms. By contrast, the novel's fig tree, I have argued, exemplifies an alternative model of resilience, rooted in an ecological system of interdependence that, rather than focusing on autonomous individuals, understands that resilience depends on an entire ecosystem, and that it is built and supported by the multiple, diverse and mutually dependent organisms that comprise it. The fig tree's conception of resilience recognizes susceptibility as both an advantageous suite of capacities (abilities to receive, take in, be affected) and as crucial to resilience; acknowledges that susceptibility entails both benefits and harms and, understanding that no entity can be resilient on its

own, builds resilience through an ecosystem designed to maximize benefits and minimize harms for all organisms within its purview.

The fig tree's conception of resilience, as well as the dire plea in Ada's scream, have led to my proposal of a politics of susceptibility: eco-psychosocial politics based on the recognition that individuals cannot become resilient on their own, through their own volition, intention or "self-efficacy", and are focused instead on building systemic and sustainable forms of resilience that are inclusive of the multiple and diverse subjects that comprise a community, society, national unit or ecosystem; that rather than fetishizing independence and autonomous rights, fortify interdependence and reinforce mutual responsibilities; and that rather than exploiting susceptibility as a weakness, nurture it as the soul of resilience itself.

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Notes

- ¹ For an instructive etymological study of *resilience* and its uses in various disciplines, see [1]. On the centrality of the concept to policy frameworks in multiple fields, see the short-lived journal *Resilience: International Policies, Practices and Discourses* [2].
- ² The island evoked in Shafak's title is Cyprus, a land "slashed through the heart" ([1] p. 11) as the fig tree puts it, by its partition into Greek and Turkish territories (η Κύπρος/Kibris). Shifting both geographically and temporally, the narrative moves between a present in which Ada, her father Kostas and the fig tree have lived in London in a home "engulfed in a miasma of grief" ([1] p. 11) since the death of Ada's mother Defne and a Cypriot past that remains devastatingly present for Kostas and deeply engraved in the body of the fig tree but about which Ada knows little except the sense that she has inherited "an intangible and immeasurable sorrow" ([1] p. 18). On the history of divided Cyprus, see Papadakis [3], Ker-Lindsay [4], and Stevenson and Stevenson [5].
- ³ See Garmezy [8], Garmezy et. al. [9], Garmezy et. al. [10]; and Masten and Cichetti [11].
- ⁴ For recent work, see Vassallo, Edwards et al. [12], Harms [13], Harris, Brett et. al. [14], Renda, Vassallo et. al. [15], Moore and Woodcock [16], Mucci [17], Yang, Zhou et al. [18], Cohen, Eshel et al. [19], Bain and Lunde [20], Fang, Lu et al. [21], Geçdi and Tanriverdi [22], Richardson [23], Pashak, Tunstull et al. [24], APA [25–27], and Center on the Developing Child [28].
- ⁵ See May [29], MacArthur and Wilson [30], Gunderson and Holling [31], Walker, et al. [32], Holling [33], and Walker and Salt [34].
- ⁶ See Lee, Calvin et al. [35] and [36].
- ⁷ See Butler [37], Gilson [40], Diprose [41], Petherbridge [38], Anderson [39], and Mao [42].
- ⁸ See Beck [43], Abramson, Seligman and Teasdale [44], Miller and Seligman [45], and Belsky and Pluess [46].
- ⁹ See Belsky and Pluess [46].
- ¹⁰ See Vassallo, Edwards et al. [13], Harms [14], Harris, Brett et al. [15], Renda, Vassallo et al. [16], Moore and Woodcock [17], Mucci [18], Yang, Zhou et al. [19], Cohen, Eshel et al. [20] Bain and Lunde [21], Fang, Lu et al. [22], Geçdi and Tanriverdi [23], Richardson [24] Pashak, Tunstull et al. [25], APA [26–28], and Center on the Developing Child [29].
- ¹¹ See Goleman [47].
- ¹² While psychologists with legitimate expertise should not be held accountable for the ways in which their thought is misrepresented, neither can a cultural critique dismiss the extraordinary impact of the popularized, truncated and corrupted versions of these ideas that are widely disseminated in digital and social media environments where complex thought is algorithmically discouraged and claims to expertise are unregulated, and that immeasurably augment the force of the "resilience imperative" that, I am arguing, Ada's scream resists. For a sampling of mainstreamed versions of resilience, see Schiraldi [48], Patterson [49], Fostering Resilience [50], Spotify [51], TikTok [52], and X (Formerly Twitter) [53].
- ¹³ For descriptions of psychological resilience, see for example, Smith, Dalen et.al. [54], Mucci [18], and APA [26–28].
- ¹⁴ The complex trauma expressed in Ada's scream is comprised of directly experienced events and an ongoing home life that is permeated by her parents' traumatic symptoms: living with her mother's depression and alcoholism, finding her mother unconscious, attempting to rescue her and dealing with her subsequent death and losing the close relationship she's previously had with her father. Ada has also inherited a suite of traumas, the symptoms of which she has lived with since birth, without an understanding of their precipitating events: her parents' traumatic experiences in the ethnic violence of 1970s Cyprus, their loss of family members, close friends and a child, the illicit nature of their relationship between a Turkish woman and a Greek man, their subsequent 25-year separation and the ongoing pain of Defne's work as a forensic archaeologist for the Cypriot Commission for Missing People (CMP), locating bodies of the missing and reckoning with the bereaved. On the arguments for recognizing complex PTSD in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM)*, see Mucci [18].

- 15 Ada's sensitivity and openness enable her intelligence and creativity and facilitate her ability to learn, but they also, as with all forms of susceptibility, entail risk. See discussion below; Belsky and Pluess [46], Petheridge [41], and Anderson [38]. The pedagogical questions raised by this scene—in which a classroom fails to sustain one of its members through misunderstanding rather than malice—merit further consideration.
- 16 These passages are narrated in a *style indirect libre* that depicts Ada's point-of-view not merely by relaying her immediate thoughts but also through a narrative voice that translates her inchoate thoughts and feelings and the unconscious matrix that subtends them.
- 17 The terms I am using here represent well-established (if regularly contested and refined) symptoms of trauma that appear throughout the theoretical literature. See Janet [55], Ferenczi [56], Kardiner [57] Van der Hart and Horst [58], Herman [59], Leys [60], and Van der Kolk [61].
- 18 On the continued trajectory of the butterfly in Ada's notebook, see [1] pp. 15–16, 25 and 137. On butterflies and Ada's family history, see [1] pp. 127, 188, the chapter entitled "Butterflies and Bones" (pp. 212–224) and p. 261. For the story of the heirloom inlaid with butterflies, a gift from Kostas to Defne, and then from Aunt Meryem to Ada, see [1] pp. 77, 122 and 127. On the fig tree's relationships with, and memories of, butterflies, see [1] pp. 3, 31, 33–34, 34, 150, 154, 155–157, 190 and 259–262. On Kostas and the ecological butterfly, see [1] pp. 122, 154, 158 and 217–220.
- 19 On postmemory, see Hirsch [62].
- 20 Relevant measurement scales include the 1993 Wagnild and Young Resilience scale; the 1996 Ego Resilience Scale; the 2003 Connor Davidson Resilience Scale and the 2008 Brief Resilience Scale. See also Smith, Dalen et al. (2008); Campbell-Sills et al. [63] and APA [26].
- 21 This position is in part consonant with Mucci's advocacy for DSM recognition of "complex PTSD" that encompasses genetic, epigenetic and environmental sources of trauma and recognizes "the intersection[s] between developed or inherited psychological factors and external resilience" ([18] p. 12).
- 22 The critiques I am posing here, I wish to make clear, are theoretical and not therapeutic ones; I do not presume to make judgements about the clinical efficacy of any therapeutic tools or methods or of the value of resilience therein.
- 23 See Belsky and Pluess [46] for a significant exception to this contention.
- 24 See Adamson [64], Agyeman [65], Agyeman et al. [66], Ammar et al. [67], Coolsaet [68], Murphy-Greene [69], Nardi [70], Schlosberg [71] and Wohlleben et al. [72].
- 25 See also and Shanahan [73], Wohlleben et al. [72], Ammar et al. [67], and Nardi [70].
- 26 See Shafak [1] p. 64 on the former and 217 on the latter.
- 27 My analysis of Ada's experience is intended neither as a screed against social media nor as a denial that it may facilitate supportive and sometimes life-sustaining social contacts, that it can create and sustain communities and that it has played a crucial role in organizing collective action and social justice advocacy. However, it does recognize that social network platforms by design privilege the quantity of contacts over the quality of relationships (tallying likes, hits or retweets); discourage sustained dialogues and complex thought and disaggregate social environments by decreasing the time spent in direct human interaction, isolating individuals physically and often emotionally, expunging from social experiences a shared sensorial environment and through algorithmic content selection and recommendations, reducing the diversity of interpersonal encounters. On the epistemological and sociopolitical effects of social media, see Kitchens et al. [74], Hari [75], Donovan et al. [76], Reyman et al. [77], and Sparby [78]. For an overview of research on social media's impact on youth mental health, see the U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory [79]. On the cognitive and mental health impacts, see also Reyman et al. [77], Hari [75], Tibber et al. [80], Ugwu et al. [81], Ionescu et al. [82] and Winstone et al. [83].
- 28 The butterflies flitting through Shafak's novel reference Ada's memories, parts of her family history that remain unknown to her, and signs of her future—including the trip to Cyprus (the migratory return) that she and her father are planning at the end of the novel. From the point of view of the fig tree, who understands "what resilient migrants [butterflies] are" ([1] p. 259), they suggest that Ada may be stronger and more resilient than she recognizes.
- 29 These are all among the APA recommendations for building resilience. See [26,28]. While APA guidelines include prioritizing relationships as key to building resistance, they place responsibility on individuals (including anxious, depressed and traumatized individuals) to build these relations.
- 30 If that external force in Meryem's mind is a djinn, and if Ada deems such an explanation ludicrous, Aunt Meryem's conviction nonetheless leads to dialogue and experiences from which both parties learn and from which they both gain new perspectives and resilience.
- 31 Drawing on Wilkinson and Pickett's arguments [85] for the many ways that greater equality strengthens societies, and on Schlosberg's expanded vision of environmental justice [71], Agyeman et al. advocate for numerous forms of sustainability that would contribute to psychological resilience: investment in capabilities and co-production; more equitable sharing of resources, costs and responsibilities; changes in market structures and property rights; equal access to resources, technologies, information, representation, participation and justice; prosecutable corporate responsibility for environmental and social harms or for injuries to persons or geographies affected by their supply and production chains and implementation of assessments based on "a dashboard" of environmental, economic, social and psychological indicators.

- ³² The 3rd edition of this book [84] focuses on the exclusion of these factors from the diagnostic classification system in the DSM-5 which dispensed with the “multi-axial system” of previous versions of the DSM [86,87], on the grounds that it had an insufficient scientific basis, that healthcare professionals found it unnecessary and that it muddled the clarity of diagnostic categories. On the history of the multi-axial system see Verywell Mind [88].

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