



Tracing Animal Voices: Reconfiguring Human-Animal Boundaries In Elif Shafak's *The Architect's Apprentice*

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Abstract:

Elif Shafak's *The Architect's Apprentice* offers a nuanced portrayal of the Ottoman world, where human and nonhuman lives coexist and interact in complex, often ethically charged ways. The paper examines the representation of animals in the novel, emphasizing how Shafak destabilizes anthropocentric perspectives and reconfigures conventional boundaries between humans and nonhumans. Animals in the narrative from elephants to domestic creatures are portrayed not merely as passive or decorative presences but as agents with their own forms of communication, memory, and influence on human affairs. By tracing these 'animal voices', the paper highlights the ethical, social, and narrative significance of nonhuman lives and interrogates human assumptions of dominance and control. Drawing on contemporary theories in posthumanism and critical animal studies, the paper argues that Shafak's work exemplifies the literary potential to reconceptualize interspecies relationships, foregrounding empathy, co-existence, and shared subjectivity. The novel challenges hierarchical human-centered frameworks, suggesting that ethical responsibility extends beyond human concerns. Through close textual analysis, the paper demonstrates that *The Architect's Apprentice* invites readers to reconsider their ethical and imaginative engagement with the nonhuman world, positioning animals as active participants in history, culture, and narrative.

Keywords: Posthumanism, Animal Studies, Nonhuman Agency, Ethics, Elif Shafak

Elif Shafak was born in 1971 an award winning Turkish-British novelist and public speaker. She holds a PhD in political science. Her work extraordinarily features themes like identity, human rights and the intersection of Eastern and Western cultures, with Istanbul being a recurring setting in her novels. She is celebrated for blending diverse storytelling traditions and minority rights. Her works have been translated into fifty eight languages. Shafak is regarded as one of the significant writers in

the world because of her novel capacity to bridge cultural and historical divides, passionate advocacy, and rich storytelling.

Shafak originates a unique narrative approach in Ottoman Istanbul, where animal and human relationships are foregrounded to challenge traditional boundaries and hierarchies. The story centers on Jahan, an elephant tamer who arrives with Chota, a white Asian elephant gifted to Sultan Suleiman. The bond between Jahan, an elephant tamer and Chota becomes a powerful metaphor for the interconnectedness of all living beings, undermining the rigid distinctions between humans and animals.

A 2024 book review on *The Torogi Chronicles* highlights how Shafak uses this relationship to explore animal agency in the context of political and social hierarchies of the Ottoman Empire. The novel foregrounds the elephant's role not just as a passive creature but as an active participant in the narrative, symbolizing mutual cooperation between species and challenging strict human dominion (*The Torogi Chronicles*)

In Turkish literature and culture, animals have a symbolic role, reflecting the nation's evolving relationship with nature, power, and spirituality. Historically, Ottoman culture maintained a close and multifaceted relationship with animals. Horses, camels, falcons, and dogs were integral to imperial life, warfare, and social hierarchy. The elephant, though not native to Anatolia, carried a distinctive cultural symbolism. They appeared in royal processions, diplomatic exchanges, and courtly spectacles, embodying the empire's wealth and reach.

Elif Shafak has broadened this view to show a more ethical and compassionate image of animals as sentient beings with their own emotions and choices. Writers like Latife Tekin in *Sevgili Arsız Ölüm* and Orhan Pamuk in *The White Castle and Snow* also challenge the line between human and nonhuman worlds, highlighting ecological awareness and moral connections.

In the Turkish literary imagination both past and present the elephant embodies a dynamic symbol: once a tool of empire and dominance, it is now re-envisioned as a creature of moral intelligence, emotional kinship, and ethical significance. Elif Shafak's portrayal of Chota in *The Architect's Apprentice* reflects this evolution, transforming the elephant from a figure of spectacle into a voice of compassion and posthuman consciousness, marking a turning point in the representation of animals in Turkish literature.

Research questions such as How does Elif Shafak represent animal consciousness and agency in *The Architect's Apprentice*? In what ways does the relationship between Jahan and Chota challenge anthropocentric hierarchies? How does Shafak use the architectural and imperial context of the Ottoman Empire to explore interdependence between human and nonhuman life? What theoretical insights from posthumanism and animal studies help in understanding Shafak's reconfiguration of human-animal boundaries? Can animals in Shafak's novel be read as subaltern figures, and if so, how

do they speak through silence, action, and empathy? aim to explore how Shafak's narrative reimagines the relationship between humans and animals from a posthumanist and ecoethical perspective.

Animals, especially the elephant Chota, are portrayed in Shafak's book as active participants in the moral and emotional life of the narrative rather than as silent supporting characters. While 'animal voices' subvert anthropocentrism by giving animals emotion, perception, and communication, the term 'tracing' suggests an ethical and interpretive act of revealing these hidden voices that humanist readings frequently overlook.

Shafak's story blurs the lines between man and beast, reason and instinct, culture and nature through Jahan's compassionate relationship with Chota, symbolizing coexistence beyond hierarchy. This is reflected in the phrase 'reconfiguring human-animal boundaries'. By listening to the animal kingdom that has been silenced, Shafak's fiction reinterprets the ethical and creative distinctions between species.

The novel *The Architect's Apprentice* weaves the relationship between humans, animals, and the built environment. Through the journey of Jahan and Chota, Shafak explores questions of belonging, compassion, and coexistence. What distinguishes this novel from historical fiction is its ethical attention to the nonhuman. According to Serpell and Paul, It is thought that animals have thoughts, emotions, and social structures that are similar, if not the same, as those of humans (130). The animal is not merely symbolic; it is sentient, communicative, and emotionally resonant.

As Donna Haraway observes, "To be one is always to become with many" (4). This posthumanist understanding of interconnectedness disrupts the anthropocentric hierarchy that privileges humans as superior beings. Shafak's narrative engages with this relational ontology, allowing animals to speak, act, and feel in ways that destabilize human-centered assumptions. Through Jahan's bond with Chota, *The Architect's Apprentice* becomes a meditation on empathy that transcends species boundaries. "Human nature is an interspecies relationship" (Tsing 144). Jahan's moral growth in the novel depends on his willingness to become with Chota to see the world not from the imperial tower but from the shared ground of existence.

Chota's character embodies the moral conscience and represents dignity and endurance. When humans plot for power, Chota represents dignity and endurance. "For Jahan, he was like no other - his best friend, his milk brother" (Shafak 64). His loyalty to Jahan is not that of a trained animal but that of a companion who understands pain and love. "Loving our abstractions seems to me really important; understanding that they break down even as we lovingly craft them is a part of response-ability" (Haraway 93).

Master Sinan seeks perfection in domes and bridges, symbols of human ingenuity and imperial power. Jahan gradually realizes architecture is not a purely human endeavor; it is dependent on the cooperation of nonhuman forces such as gravity, stone, water, and even the strength of animals like Chota. "Chota carried wooden frames and planks; he moved rocks into place so as to protect the

structure from the force of the current. That he could plod in the river easily proved to be opportune” (Shafak 94). The creation of monuments thus becomes an act of interspecies collaboration, revealing that art and nature are intertwined rather than opposed.

According to Chakrabarty, “destroying the artificial but time-honoured distinction between natural and human histories” (206). This dissolution appears in Shafak's story. It suggests that the history of human civilization connects closely with the histories of the nonhuman world that supports and observes it. The elephant Chota plays a key role in construction, highlighting the power and presence of animals. This inclusion shapes both the material and ethical framework of the empire. Shafak's fiction brings to life Chakrabarty's concept of a shared planetary history. In this view, human and natural forces together tell the world's story by combining animal labor and natural elements with human artistic expression.

Elif Shafak's *The Architect's Apprentice* dissolves the boundary between human and animal, portraying life as a shared continuum of vulnerability and coexistence. Domination over animals mirrors domination among humans, as seen in Chota's captivity and Jahan's servitude both trapped within hierarchical systems that reduce living beings to property. The novel becomes an allegory of liberation, exposing the ethical link between human and nonhuman suffering.

The novel's title *The Architect's Apprentice* itself gains depth: while Sinan represents human mastery, Jahan learns humility and empathy through his bond with the elephant, turning apprenticeship into moral education. As Rosi Braidotti notes, “A nomadic zoe-centred approach connects human to non-human life so as to develop a comprehensive eco-philosophy of becoming” (104). Shafak's narrative thus embodies this zoe-centric vision, promoting coexistence over conquest and empathy over domination.

The deep emotional bond in Kartiki Gonsalves's *The Elephant Whisperers* works well with the ethical vision in Elif Shafak's *The Architect's Apprentice*. When Bomman and Bellie tenderly state, “I took great care of him, as if he were my own child. I needed to make sure he would survive. We love them deeply. We have raised them as our own children” (00:32:28 - 00:32:50), they articulate a worldview that dismantles the hierarchical boundary between human and animal life. This sentiment aligns directly with the central idea of the paper where the relationship between Jahan and Chota transcends ownership and becomes one of empathy, interdependence, and moral responsibility.

Elif Shafak goes beyond the usual boundaries of historical fiction and offers a deep look at the connection between humans and animals. Through the bond between Jahan and Chota, the novel breaks down human-centered hierarchies and suggests a new way of living together. Shafak portrays animals not as silent beings but as active participants in our emotional and cultural experiences. By focusing on animal voices, she encourages readers to pay attention to the unseen lives that influence history, architecture, and ethics. In the end, *The Architect's Apprentice* redefines what it means to be human by highlighting the importance of all living beings that share our planet.

Both Elif Shafak's *The Architect's Apprentice* and Kartiki Gonsalves's *The Elephant Whisperers* Oscar winning for best documentary articulate an intimate, compassionate, and ethical relationship between humans and elephants, transcending species boundaries. While Shafak uses fiction to reconstruct historical empathy, Gonsalves's documentary captures real-life coexistence between humans and animals in the contemporary world. The title *Tracing Animal Voices* becomes even more significant in this intertextual comparison, as both works amplify the voices of elephant beings that communicate through silence, presence, and emotion rather than words.

Further research can comparatively analyze how other Shafak novels extend her ecological and empathetic vision toward nonhuman entities like trees, nature, and urban spaces. It incorporates digital humanities tools to trace animal imagery, ecological symbolism, and interspecies communication across multiple texts, offering quantitative and qualitative insights into Shafak's evolving eco-literary imagination. The research can also contribute to cross-cultural and interdisciplinary dialogues between literary studies, environmental ethics, and animal philosophy, ultimately fostering a more inclusive understanding of coexistence that integrates literature, ecology, and moral philosophy in the age of the Anthropocene.

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