

Metaphores of Love in Elif Shafak's *"There are Rivers in the Sky"*

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Abstract

The present article explores the conceptual mappings of human experiences and their love stories thorough the lens of a metaphoric paradigm in the latest novel written by Elif Shafak, *"There are Rivers in The Sky"*. Following the theoretical cognitive-semantic studies of George Lakoff, Mark Johnson, and others, the article depicts the conceptual metaphors of unfulfilled love along the narrative involving two of the three main characters – Arthur and Zaleekhah. Unfulfilled love is a timeless theme in literature, often linked to the archetype of the hero. When unfulfilled love drives the hero's journey, it can profoundly shape their motivations, inner conflicts, and sense of purpose. This motif highlights both the nobility and the tragedy inherent in striving for something unattainable, especially when that something is love. LOVE IS A JOURNEY is explored throughout the article in its various conceptual instances: UNFULFILLED LOVE IS A JOURNEY, LOVE IS WORSHIP, LOVE IS PAIN, LOVE IS RESEARCH and many others. Unfulfilled love is often linked to tragic heroes, whose inability to attain love mirrors their larger struggles with destiny or personal flaws, and in this case, Arthur and Zaleekhah become tragic heroes who undergo the emotional tension of either Zaleekhah's relationship failure, or Arthur's loveless relationship and internal conflicts through their sacrifices in the name of pure love.

Keywords: conceptual metaphor; love; journey and sacrifice mappings.

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Introduction

The present article aims to explore the conceptual mappings of human experiences and their love stories thorough the lens of a metaphoric paradigm in the latest novel written by Elif Shafak,

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"There are Rivers in The Sky". The core theoretical framework of the analysis is Conceptual Metaphor Theory, which was firstly developed by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980), who have applied their theory to the fields of politics and philosophy. Their scientific endeavour was later followed by Zoltán Kövecses (2002, 2005) who concentrated his conceptual metaphor application to cross-cultural variation, emotion metaphors, and language teaching; Raymond Gibbs (1999, 2006) focused on psycholinguistics to support the experimental work with conceptual metaphors; Elena Semino (2002, 2008) worked extensively on metaphor in literature, health communication, and corpus linguistics; Susan Sontag (2001) and Elena Semino also studied conceptual metaphor projection in the medical field; Andreas Musloff (2009) applied Conceptual Metaphor Theory to political rhetoric and the media; and Arran Stibbe (2020, 2024) bended the limits of conceptual metaphor decoding and incorporated Critical Discourse Analysis in order to apply it to the ecologist movement, thus creating a new scientific approach – ecolinguistics. In the Romanian research environment, some prominent names in the field of Conceptual Metaphor analysis are Gabriela Andrioai (food metaphors), Alexnadra Moraru (literary and political metaphors), Cristian Norocel (political metaphors), Anca Pecican, Arina Greavu, (economic metaphors), Alina Țenescu (media and advertising metaphors), Mihaela Cozma and Simina Terian (national identity metaphors), Irina Dincă (conceptual metaphors in teaching Romanian as a second language), and many others.

Following the theoretical cognitive-semantic studies of George Lakoff, Mark Johnson, and others, the article depicts the conceptual metaphors of unfulfilled love along the narrative involving two of the three main characters – Arthur and Zaleekhah. The novel tackles different eras and locations, beginning in Mesopotamian times by the Tigris, transitioning to Victorian London by the Thames, returning to Mesopotamian regions during the Middle Eastern conflicts during the ISIS coming to power and their ethnic cleansing practices, and finally ending in contemporary London. Its main theme emphasizes that water is both a source of life and a force of destruction, and its secondary theme revolves around idealistic pursuits of love and their various forms of expression. This theme of ideal love that turns into unrequited love is reflected in two of the main characters' lives: Arthur and Zaleekhah. The first character we encounter in the novel is Arthur, a brilliant young boy born into extreme poverty in mid-19th-century London. Only later we are introduced to Zaleekhah, a hydrologist who has fled her marriage to live in a houseboat

on the Thames in 2018. Born in poverty, Arthur escapes his bleak circumstances thanks to his exceptional memory. He becomes fascinated with Mesopotamian history, particularly the Epic of Gilgamesh, which influences the course of his life, as well as its end. Whereas Zaleekhah, who is contemplating the aftermath of her failed marriage is slightly confused, and while reminiscing on her secret undeclared true love her sadness pushes her to confront with suicidal thoughts. These two characters, who seem to have nothing in common are united by a mirroring journey from east to west, or the other way around, that unites their life purposes and symbolically connects them to unrequited love: Arthur begins his journey from the west to the east in search of his love for research and finds idealistic romantic love and an unavailable partner, while Zaleekhah moves from the east to the west, forced by the tragedy of her parents' death to find a mentor who she secretly falls in love with and whose unacknowledged research she chooses to continue out of love. In her confusion, Zaleekhah also contemplates a change in her sexual orientation, when she meets a lesbian tattoo artist who rekindles the flame of joy into her life.

1. Cognitive Semantics in Elif Shafak's *There are Rivers in the Sky*

As the relationship between language and the human mind represents the key focus for cognitive semantics, there is also a need to understand the relation between conceptual structure and the external world of sensory experience (Evans, Greene, 2006 : 157). Unlike traditional semantics, which often treats meaning as something abstract or independent from the mind, cognitive semantics emphasizes that meaning is deeply connected to human experiences, mental processes, and conceptual structures. "The concepts that govern our thoughts are not matters of the intellect. They also govern our everyday functioning, down to the most mundane details. Our concepts structure what we perceive, how we get around in the world, how we relate to other people" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980 : 3). Thus, the aim of this paper is to investigate how humans interact with and perceive the external world, which has led the analysis towards the unravelling of how language reflects conceptual structure, in general, and how humans contextualize love, in particular. The core theme of this study is the interpretation of the conceptual metaphor LOVE IS JOURNEY in the latest novel *There are Rivers in the Sky*, written by Elif Shafak. Since unfulfilled love is a timeless theme in literature, often linked to the archetype of the hero, as it pushes them to pursue their quest for self-

discovery, this novel revolves around this theme as one of the literary tools to create the characters' personalities and to deepen their relationship with the readers. When unfulfilled love drives the hero's journey, it can profoundly shape their motivations, inner conflicts, and sense of purpose. This motif highlights both the nobility and the tragedy inherent in striving for something unattainable, especially when that something is love. LOVE IS A JOURNEY is explored throughout the article in its various conceptual instances: UNFULFILLED LOVE IS A JOURNEY, LOVE IS WORSHIP, LOVE IS PAIN, LOVE IS RESEARCH and many others. Nevertheless, unrequited love is often linked to tragic heroes, whose inability to attain love mirrors their larger struggles with destiny or personal flaws, and in this case, Arthur and Zaleekhah become tragic heroes who undergo the emotional tension of either Zaleekhah's relationship failure, or Arthur's loveless relationship and experience internal conflicts through their sacrifices in the name of pure love.

1.1 Theoretical background

The theoretical background that supports the analysis is Conceptual Metaphor Theory, which represents a convenient tool for interpreting both literary and non-literary texts. This framework opens the way to a deeper understanding of encoded messages and implied meanings by defining metaphor as the process of understanding one conceptual domain through another. In this context, the domain providing the metaphorical expressions is referred to as the source domain, while the domain being understood is identified as the target domain, thus, conceptual metaphors typically employ a more abstract concept as target and a more concrete or physical concept as their source (Kövecses, 2010 : 7), which leads to a better grasp of how the human mind constructs, implies or deciphers meaning. Moreover, language use reflects inherently metaphorical understanding of human experiences, where metaphor plays an organizing factor in language and cognition (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). In this view, metaphor exceeds being just a figure of speech and it becomes a specific mental mapping which influences the way people think, reason, and imagine in everyday life (Lakoff & Johnson 1980), which means that words do not represent chunks of meaning as it appears in the dictionaries, but serve as "points of access" (Langacker : 1987) to vast repositories of knowledge relating to a particular concept or conceptual domain. By applying the Conceptual Metaphor Theory developed by George Lakoff and Mark

Johnson in 1980, we aim at decoding the metaphors which reside at the linguistic level and depict the various expressions of love mapped to the concepts of journey, change, pain and research throughout the characters' transformation in the book.

1.2 Love is a journey in its various forms

Thus, the first conceptual metaphor that is projected along the entire story is LOVE IS A JOURNEY, which becomes a physical journey from London to Nineveh, in Arthur's case, and a personal identity journey from heterosexuality to lesbianism, in Zaleekhah's case. Throughout his life, Arthur has constructed his life journey of becoming in the city of London through his avid quest for knowledge, first as an apprentice at the printing press, and then as a scientist, an interpreter for the Mesopotamian clay tablets. When he reaches maturity, Arthur finally has the chance to start his physical journey to Nineveh so as to look for more tablets and eventually find the Epic of Gilgamesh. His love for research and becomes a journey of self-awareness and finally a journey of love – "...ever since he was a boy, he has been pulled by a ghost river, a flow so strong it doesn't let him rest or take root. **The current that carries him along** is stronger than **matters of the heart** – or so he believes." (Shafak, 2024 : 321)

With the use of the verb "carry along" the reader is presented with an image of movement which maps the source domain of the journey, while the noun phrase "matters of the heart" clearly projects the target domain of love. If we perceive love as a process, then we construct its meaning with spatial elements – it must have a beginning, proceed in a linear fashion and make progress in stages toward a goal (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980 : 90). Therefore, LOVE IS A JOURNEY comes into form with the subtle intervention of the omniscient writer, who contradicts the character's opinion by adding "or so he believes", thus turning the journey of becoming a well-known researcher into a love journey. Another reference to the destination of his research journey is compared to the feeling of finding his loved one again – "*Ni-ne-veh*. The joy of being **here at last!** Arthur feels like a suitor **reunited with a long-lost love**." (Shafak, 2024 : 324) This first encounter with the Mesopotamian city awakens Arthur's feelings in anticipation of his future love for Leila and the reference to "a long-lost love" forecasts the unfulfilled love mapping. By the use of the adverbial phrase "here at last" the reader may decipher the encoded meaning of a long lapse of time that had to pass in order for him to reach a

destination, which reinforces the journey metaphor and together they project the conceptual metaphor LOVE IS A JOURNEY.

The following hint to the journey metaphor within Arthur's story is when he is forced to leave Nineveh, but promises Leila that he "will come back", and Leila replies with the verb "return", thus projecting the semantic markers of movement back and forth which presuppose a beginning and a starting point: "'This mark (the ancient sign of water) is my pledge – **I promise I will come back.**' 'You will, I know, but **you will return** changed, and you will find things changed'" (Shafak, 2024 : 386). The journey metaphor is therefore triggered by the semantic sphere of the synonymic sequence "come back" and "return" which presupposes a starting point, some kind of movement, an end point and the movement in the opposite direction, so as to reach the starting point.

In Zaleekhah's case LOVE IS A JOURNEY is mapped onto the timid transference from heterosexuality to lesbianism. Even if there is only one innocent kiss, the reader is left with the possibility of a lesbian relationship in the near future; a future that is not outlined in the story, but it is rather lingering in the readers' imagination. After having left her husband, Zaleekhah is contemplating suicide, but eventually she meets Nen, a nonconformist tattoo artist, whose house boat she rents, and they start a friendly relationship. First of all, Zaleekhah invites Nen to a family dinner – "Umm... There's a dinner at my uncle's house this evening for my birthday ..." (Shafak, 2024 : 278) – but soon they get closer and she prepares a get together in the houseboat: "The next evening Zaleekhah **invites Nen for dinner**" (Shafak, 2024 : 399). The journey of love is only symbolic, as it stands for Zaleekhah's sexual exploration, but it may also be interpreted as a slow movement towards intimacy: "Zaleekhah fills a glass of water and sits next to Nen, **their shoulders touching**. She takes a sip. There is a beat of silence as **she puts her hand on Nen's** [...] Zaleekhah **has never kissed a woman before**, and when **she does**, Nen tastes of oranges" (Shafak, 2024 : 402). This timid episode reveals Zaleekhah's beginning to feel attracted to an individual of the same sex, which can initially be confusing, especially because she previously identified as heterosexual. However, later in the story the women form a couple who is willing to adopt a young Yazidi girl (the third main character in the novel), and this may lead Zaleekhah to question her identity and accept her evolving sexual orientation. Nevertheless, LOVE IS A JOURNEY becomes a transitory state from identifying as heterosexual to identifying as lesbian, which pushes Zaleekhah to embrace her new identity and celebrate life itself, as she no

longer mentions suicidal thoughts. Her empowering experience helps Zaleekhah come to terms with herself and take the responsibility of another life within her new relationship.

1.3 Love in its religious connotations

The second conceptualisation of love is mapped onto the concept of worship, which carries the semantic markers of admiration, adoration and superiority. Consequently, LOVE IS WORSHIP is built around the ideal love for a potential partner that reaches perfection in the eyes of the worshiper. In Zaleekhah's story, her love was oriented towards her mentor, an esteemed scientist in the field of hydrology who found himself mocked by his peers for tackling a sensitive subject – water memory. "Berenberg was **her mentor** at first, and a close colleague and a good friend, but, somewhere in between these stages, for a passing time, she **had also been in love with him.**" (Shafak, 2024 : 204) Not only does Zaleekhah keep admiring his mentor despite his being rejected by his fellow scientists, but she also continues his research. Her purity of to honour her mentor's scientific endeavour reflects Zaleekhah's belief that she was serving something greater than herself, but also the act of dedicating herself to his teacher and mentor, whom eventually she falls in love with, portrays him as a higher-ranking person who deserves to be worshiped. "**She was drawn to** Berenberg's dedication and perseverance, **a devotion so selfless** as to seek only the good of its object, an unreasonable commitment perhaps more commonly observed in **ancient mystics and ascetics** than in the modern workplace." (Shafak, 2024 : 208) With the use of the passive form "was drawn to" and the noun phrases "selfless devotion" and "ancient mystics and ascetics" the author constructs a metaphoric image of a world beyond humanity that is similar to religions or mysticism. These concepts build the mapping of unconditional love for the object of devotion, be it a cause or a person.

If Zaleekhah secretly falls in love with her mentor and never declares it, Arthur covertly admires Leila from a distance, as she belongs to a closed community which does not allow strangers to get involved with their women: "Always in those moments, Arthur is overcome by **a sense of bliss**, as if her presence were some kind of **benediction**" (Shafak, 2024 : 343). This episode reveals Arthur's unfulfilled love as a crucial element that constructs his tragic hero characteristics – his inability to attain love mirrors his struggles with his miserable destiny, as well as his imagined personal

flaws, as he repeatedly described himself as unlikeable, or capricious. Nevertheless, Arthur turns his romantic love into a state of worship by referring to his feelings towards Leila as experiencing “a sense of bliss”, or being “mesmerised” by her musical skills: “Arthur listens to her gently strumming the strings, **mesmerized** by her ability to open up herself to music.” [...] “**Arthur cannot help but turn his head towards Leila** whenever she is around. He **admires** her quiet resolve, smiles when he sees her smile” (Shafak, 2024 : 342). Thus, in Arthur’s case, LOVE IS WORSHIP is projected by the ecstasy of seeing Leila, by the feelings of elevation and enchantment carried by the semantic markers of the verb “mesmerise”, as well as by the special quality of time spent around her: “But much though Arthur enjoys these activities (deciphering the tablets), **nothing compares with spending time with the faqra**” (Shafak, 2024 : 342). This kind of idealised love creates emotional tension, while the hero’s internal conflicts parallel the external challenges he faces because his chosen one is an unavailable young woman who belongs to an old-fashioned closed Yazidi community. Therefore, the tension between his deep desire to love Leila and the reality of his denied relationship, but also self-imposed restraint out of respect adds layers to his character, transforming him into a tragic hero. In this respect, he sacrifices his desires for the greater good when he willingly forgoes personal happiness for the sake of her honour, thus elevating his moral standing. Arthur’s sacrifice leaves him lonely and emotionally unfulfilled, but it defines his struggle as noble.

In addition to the mental mapping of worship, love is also projected as humbleness, or respect. Arthur’s love for Leila is so idealised, that he tries to become almost invisible, so as not to disturb her divinations: “Arthur can tell she (Leila) is sleepwalking. It is such a curious sight that he can only watch, spellbound. But **worried that he is intruding**, he pulls his head back” (Shafak, 2024 : 323). In his form of divine love, Arthur projects the conceptual metaphor LOVE IS HUMBLENESS, by raising the status of the person he loves to some kind of goddess. His subtle presence around her demonstrates his supreme respect and humbleness, by trying not to offend her in any way possible: “He wants to reach for her hand, find a way to show her that he cares for her well-being. Yet **the Yazidi codes of honour are strict. So, he pushes away even the thought of touching her**” (Shafak, 2024 : 369). Thus, by denying his physical love and concentrating on his spiritual love towards Leila, Arthur reinforces the conceptual metaphor LOVE IS HUMBLENESS: “**I have no expectation** and I shall never even dream of troubling or distressing you in any way.” (Shafak,

2024 : 375). The level of respect and the mystical approach to love pushes Arthur to avoid openly declaring his love to Leila and drives him into a trance where he only whispers his feelings to himself: “...**it is not with any hope, and it is certainly not with any expectation** that I tell you these things (that he loves her). No one ever need to know how I feel about you. **Not even you – especially not you, Leila**” (Shafak, 2024 : 375). In this respect we may interpret the conceptual metaphor LOVE IS HUMBLENESS as LOVE IS SACRIFICE – he whispers all these things to her while she is in a divination trance. However, in the end, she kisses him on the cheek, as if acknowledging his feelings for her.

1.4 Love as a passion for research

In both cases, Zaleekhah and Arthur’s unfulfilled love is idealized and becomes a symbol of perfection because it remains untouched by the imperfections of reality. Hence, they see in this unreachable love a representation of purity, beauty, or a sense of divine purpose, which propels them toward seeking lofty, sometimes unreachable goals that add tragedy to their characters. Due to this, both Arthur and Zaleekhah experience emotional growth, as the realisation that their love cannot be accomplished shifts their focus towards greater wisdom, self-awareness and the acceptance of their fate. Thus, Arthur continues his research to translate the clay tablets and to continue excavating the ancient Mesopotamian territories in search of the Epic of Gilgamesh, and Zaleekhah moves forward with her research into water memory. This internal transformation in the characters’ psychological framework is a key element in their journeys, moving them beyond the realm of personal desire into one of universal insight.

This unrequited romantic love transgresses into an obsessive love for research in Arthur’s case, and an expression of loyalty to her mentor for Zaleekhah. Therefore, the third conceptual metaphor that comes to light form the semantic interpretation of the novel is LOVE IS RESEARCH. In this view, Shafak allows Arthur to express his mixed emotions when he thinks about his work: “It is in that moment that **Arthur’s gaze**, scanning the room inquisitively, **alights** on the cover of the book. He recognizes **the words that have haunted him** ever since his eyes first fell upon them – Nineveh and Its Remains” (Shafak, 2024 : 91). Thus, he is both impressed and overcome by nightmarish feelings when he first comes closer to what is to become his calling, his life research. “Arthur is captivated [by Nineveh

and Its Remains]. Never before has he heard of anyone who has left England to venture into such remote lands. **It excites him** to think that in that vast region called Mesopotamia there are people so diverse in their customs and manners yet united in the secrets of the land" (Shafak, 2024 : 111). His excitement with Ancient Mesopotamia reveals his future love and dedication to the excavation of the clay tablets and their translation. "Such is **the boy's fascination with Nineveh** that, inspired by his readings, he starts sketching fantastical figures..." (Shafak, 111). The conceptual metaphor LOVE IS RESEARCH, or rather LOVE IS A QUEST is constructed by describing work with the sematic sphere of courtship, or the incipient moments of a love relationship. By using the verbs "to alight" and "to excite", as well as the noun "fascination", research becomes endowed with semantic markers of passion, captivation and enchantment, thus becoming a substitute for the inexistent lover.

Following the idea of the conceptual metaphor LOVE IS RESEARCH, we also encounter in Arthur's discourse the metaphoric mapping RESEARCH IS DUTY and READING IS EATING. We would like to interpret the latter conceptual metaphor – READING IS EATING – within the same sematic field of love, due to the fact that Arthur becomes over sensitive with words while reading, to the point of understanding words in terms of flavour and taste: "As he reads, **he can taste the words**, the tip of his tongue **tingling with flavours** – buttery, oaky, zingy, spicy, herbaceous..." (Shafak, 2024 : 108). Besides the various nuances he can find in describing words in terms of food, Shafak also refers to Arthur's reading as if it were an urge, or an addiction to gulp large quantities of information: "**Reading is a feast** he can never have enough of, and he tucks into each page with relish." [...] "**He devours novels**" (Shafak, 2024 : 109). The use of the noun "feast" attributes positive qualities to the reading process as it implies semantic markers of celebration, while the choice for the verb "to devour" casts a darker image and adds semantic markers of unstoppable appetite or desire, an impossibility to satisfy oneself with what is present. Nevertheless, they both reinforce the conceptual metaphor READING IS EATING.

On the other hand, RESEARCH IS DUTY falls into the same category of love metaphors because Arthurs performs his calling driven by an inner love for Ancient Mesopotamian culture and a supernatural understanding of words: "I have finally found my calling: **it is my duty to piece together** has been broken, to help people to remember what has been consigned to oblivion throughout the centuries..." (Shafak, 2024 : 217). As we find out

form the novel, Arthur was the only person who could decipher the clay tablets in the British Museum, but, despite his obsession with the ancient writing and his calling to outlandish territories, he also considered the decryption of the tablets as his duty. In this view, we may interpret research as standing for the loving wife he has never had, since he speaks of his research in terms of love and duty. Not only does love arise from deep emotional connections, mutual respect, and care for someone, but paired with duty, it also implies commitment, loyalty and taking responsibilities. Arthur's fulfilling a responsibility out of love is one of the most selfless things he can do in order to save himself from the misery of unrequited romantic love.

As for Zaleekhah, LOVE IS RESEARCH her profound undeclared love gives her a higher vibration aura as she expresses it in the form of loyalty: "...but you and I both **love the work we do** and that love is beyond all personal success or failure. You'll pick up where I left off, and, if you falter, someone else will take on your research" (Shafak, 2024 : 205). Zaleekhah's loyalty is projected by the studies she continues to approach regardless of the despising contempt among her peers, as she performs acts of thoughtful service to his mentor, and gives his teacher consistent support in hard times by addressing that unusual field of study despite all odds. Therefore, unfulfilled love emotionally isolates both heroes from their peers, leaving them alone in their suffering, which heighten the tragedy of their life journey. While they may achieve external victories in their significant research work, their internal void augments and emphasises the bittersweet nature of their triumphs.

1.5 The tragedy of living life without love

Throughout the novel, both Arthur and Zaleekhah have to deal with two types of unrequited love, one that is not fulfilled with the desired lover and another that persists inside their marriages. Therefore, the tragedy of the love journey doubles the unhappiness experienced by the characters and defines them as tragic heroes. The conceptual metaphors that mapped throughout Arthur's marriage revolve around the themes of pain and absence, while Zaleekhah's misery is defined by pain, jealousy, guilt and death. Thus, LOVE IS PAIN, or rather, LACK OF LOVE IS PAIN is revealed when Zaleekhah is told by her husband that she is incapable to feel happy before he left her: "Because ...cheerfulness isn't you strong point. **You just don't have the capacity for happiness**" (Shafak, 2024 : 71).

This is a case of partner torture, as criticising one's spouse result in pain, especially if it is done in a harsh, unconstructive way, because frequent criticism can lead to emotional distress, reduce self-esteem and damage trust in the relationship. Moreover, criticism that feels hurtful or constant, especially when it focuses on a person's character, can feel like an attack, which happened with Zaleekhah's husband who has created an environment where she felt unloved, unappreciated, or inadequate: "It has been **a long messy break-up**, months in the making" (Shafak, 2024 : 71). Eventually, their relationship ended with a deep sense of emotional withdrawal leading to pain and frustration and pushing Zaleekhah to consider taking her own life. Zaleekhah's pain is described with the help of intensifying adverbs "excruciatingly" and "embarrassingly" in her interaction with her husband prior to the breakup: "The past few months have been either **excruciatingly quiet or embarrassingly loud...**" (Shafak, 2024 : 71). Thus, the mapping of the conceptual metaphor LOVE IS PAIN is defined by the absence of love and passion between the spouses: "It is perhaps easier to justify a relationship – both to yourself and to others – when there is a definite, tangible cause, **no matter how painful**. But it is harder **to grasp the evaporation of love**, a loss so slow and subtle as to be barely detectable, **until it is fully gone**" (Shafak, 2024 : 199-200). Lack of love is projected by the noun phrase "evaporation of love" thus, outlining the relationship as deeply painful and challenging for both partners. Since love is the emotional foundation that sustains connection, trust, and intimacy, without it, Zaleekhah's marriage felt hollow, distant, and emotionally neglectful. In this view, there is another conceptual metaphor that emerges from the loveless arguments – LOVE IS JEALOUSY. When the husband is suddenly aware that his wife might have been in love with her mentor, whom he himself despises professionally, he is stuck by jealous outrage: "I've never understood why you took the guy seriously. I'm sorry, but he was pathetic" (Shafak, 2024 : 203). He even projects his frustration of not having children into an imaginary future where his wife would procreate with her alleged lover: "You wouldn't have my child, but I bet would have his" (Shafak, 2024 : 204). Thus, the husband's behaviour translates in to the mapping of love as jealousy, which contributes to the erosion of trust, and turns the spouse into a verbal torturer and a heartless man: "Few things harden the human heart as fast as jealousy" (Shafak, 2024 : 204). The jealous husband is frustrated and bitter, while Zaleekhah feels hurt by the lack of trust and the pressure to end this abusive behavior. When one partner frequently feels jealous, they begin to doubt the other's

intentions, actions, or loyalty that often leads to constant questioning, accusations, or surveillance of the other partner's behavior, creating a toxic environment of suspicion and insecurity. Zaleekhah, the tragic heroine, experiences a feeling of alienation due to constant conflicts with her husband, increased resentment and frustration because of his jealousy towards an inexistent, imaginary lover. She finally ends the relationship in a state of physical and emotional distance, contemplating suicide and projecting the conceptual metaphor LOVELESS LIFE IS DEATH: "Dr Zaleekhah Clarke **does not wish to live**. She wants to excuse herself from a world where she often feels like an outsider..." (Shafak, 2024 : 71). This conceptual metaphor is built on the knowledge that humans are social beings, which implies that love and connection are fundamental to our emotional well-being. A lack of love can lead to chronic loneliness, which is often cited as a major risk factor for depression and suicidal ideation. As Zaleekhah feels disconnected from her partner, as well as from other people in her life, and she seems to find no meaningful relationships, she is overwhelmed by a sense of emptiness and hopelessness, fueling thoughts of self-harm or suicide. The guilt that she feels because of not having the courage to declare her love to her teacher adds to the tension and propels another conceptual metaphor – LOVE IS GUILT: "She **feels guilty** for never telling Berenberg **how much he meant to her** and she feels guilty for telling her husband how much Berenberg meant to her."

As for Arthur, the conceptual metaphor LACK OF LOVE IS PAIN is triggered by his feelings of awkwardness and profound loneliness inside his marriage: "So much has changed in his life over the past few years, but the one thing that has remained constant is this **acute loneliness**..." (Shafak, 2024 : 223). His feeling of estrangement is amplified by the sadness of not being able to find love in his married life, and at one point, when Leila gets to meet him, he acknowledges his desolation:

"No one waiting for you?"
 'I have a fiancée,'
 'You love her?'

It is not bashfulness that prevents Arthur from speaking, but **an inexplicable sadness**" (Shafak, 2024 : 321).

Being lonely inside a relationship is extremely alienating, and Arthur felt estranged by the lack of real communication with his wife, as he later discovered that they had no common interests and there was a significant gap between their education levels. Moreover, their relationship starts with

an arranged marriage, in the spirit of the 19th century, in which Mable finds a husband who is supposed to fulfil her desires of household and motherhood, while Arthur is supposed to find purpose, but his insecurities and lack of love transpire in his constant anxiousness: "...he fears he will fail to match Mabel's expectations, he yearns for a stable home life, **a sense of belonging**" (Shafak, 2024 : 248). Hence, he had always had the impression that he was unsuitable for married life due to his eccentricities: "Arthur is aware that his colleagues and friends are trying to match make, and does not question or resist it [...] certain that she will soon tire of his eccentricities and reticence towards her..." (Shafak, 2024 : 246). Additionally, he had the impression that marriages are defined by unhappiness and boredom: "He does not have words to convey that most marriages seem unhappy to him, and, if not unhappy, **then tedious, bleak and repetitive.**" (Shafak, 2024 : 246). Besides his lack of confidence in the institution of marriage, Arthur is consumed by his inability of his wife to understand his love of research, as well as her distant attitude within the relationship. The distance between them increases when he senses that his wife is a people person, one who engages in gossip and small talk, who likes parties and belittles her husband for the pleasure of the moment: "Unlike him, she is happy amongst these people (at a party). She is glowing. For a fleeting second she turns, and **her eyes glance over him coldly**" (Shafak, 2024 : 391). Thus, the absence of love further projects the conceptual metaphor LACK OF LOVE IS PAIN, which is underpinned at the end of the novel, when Arthur realises that his loveless relationship has caused him a lot pain: "The other possibility is **too hurtful**: that her focus on his reputation might have **nothing to do with love** and everything to do with their standing in the community, with his achievements chiefly a ladder to social advancement" (Shafak, 2024 : 393). On the other hand, he also pushed to return to Nineveh, to find the love of his life, Leila, where he eventually finds his death.

Conclusions

To conclude the analysis, the paper has emphasized how conceptual metaphors can decode the implied meanings of a literary work, and how meaning can be created by explaining one domain in terms of another. Thus, it is revealed how love takes the form of a journey, which is decoded with its sematic field; or it is referred to as worship, research, or pain. All these source domains come to add meaning to the concept of love, but also outline the characters' personalities, by adding tragic layer to their

psychological construction. Within the topic of unfulfilled love, the hero's quest begins or is propelled by the longing for an unattainable love—whether due to social class, distance, fate, or even death. Arthur is driven by research, as well as by fate and a state of alienation. Zaleekhah is attracted to his professor through sheer admiration, while, later, tackling a lesbian relationship out of isolation. Moreover, the yearning for an ideal love fuels the characters' actions and decisions, pushing them to greatness – Arthur finds the Epic of Gilgamesh and confesses his love to Leila, while Zaleekhah continues his mentor's research in water memory – or disaster – Arthur is estranged, does not belong to either England or Ancient Mesopotamian territories and dies of disease, whereas Zaleekhah adopts a Yazidi girl in her newly established lesbian relationship.

Unfulfilled love is often linked to tragic heroes, whose inability to attain love mirrors their larger struggles with destiny or personal flaws. In this view, both Zaleekhah and Arthur struggle with feelings of awkwardness due to loss and emotional unavailability. This unrequited love creates emotional tension for both characters, and the heroes' internal conflicts can parallel their external challenges. The tension between their deep desires (ideal love) and reality (the impossibility of manifesting ideal love into reality) contributes to the development of both Arthur and Zaleekhah. In his actions and according to his behaviour in the novel, Arthur embodies chivalry, honour and restraint when confronted with true (unattainable) love, while Zaleekhah explores different pathways to sexual and emotional fulfilment. With both characters, unfulfilled love is idealized and becomes a symbol of perfection because it remains untouched by the imperfections of reality, nevertheless, it pushes them to follow their dreams and to find accomplishment in their work.

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