



The Matter of *Matter*: Critiquing David Benatar's Antinatalism through Elif Shafak's Selected Novels

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Abstract

The present study critically examines David Benatar's antinatalist philosophy which posits that human existence is inherently harmful and that non-existence may be ethically superior due to the imbalance between suffering and pleasure. Benatar's paradigm posits suffering as the principal evaluative criterion of life; this study contests this pessimistic ontology by reassessing the philosophical importance of material existence through the selected novels of Elif Shafak. The study employs a comprehensive theoretical framework that synthesizes antinatalist discourse, narrative analysis, and metaphysical inquiry. It posits that matter—conceived both as an existential concern and as a physical entity—serves not only as a site of suffering but also as a locus of relationality, transformation, and meaning-making. Shafak's stories show that embodied life is dynamic and purposeful, which makes it harder to see existence as just harm. The study contends that by reconceptualizing material embodiment as potentially teleological, the enduring and comprehensible nature of matter creates an avenue for intentional interpretations of life that oppose the ethical imperative towards extinction. It aims to illustrate that antinatalist findings neglect aspects of meaning rooted in embodiment and transcendence, indicating that existence may hold value beyond the assessment of pain.

Keywords: Antinatalism; David Benatar; Materiality; Teleology; Embodiment; Elif Shafak; Narrative Meaning.

1. Introduction

Current philosophical discussions over the worth of human being have been significantly influenced by antinatalist ideology, most coherently expressed by David Benatar in *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming into Existence* (2006). Benatar posits the contentious assertion that existence invariably constitutes a harm, basing his argument on what he describes as the asymmetry between suffering and enjoyment. This asymmetry posits that pain is detrimental and pleasure is beneficial; nevertheless, the absence of suffering is advantageous regardless of beneficiaries, whereas the absence of pleasure is only negative if someone is deprived of it (Benatar, 2006). Consequently, Benatar asserts that non-existence is superior to existence and that procreation poses moral dilemmas. His argument finally suggests that a gradual and intentional human extinction is a morally justifiable stance.

Benatar's philosophical pessimism is meticulously formulated; however it is predicated on a fundamental assumption: that pain serves as the critical evaluative criterion of existence. This reduction risks viewing embodiment—



material, relational, historical existence—mainly as a locus of damage. Critics have observed that antinatalist arguments may inadequately consider aspects of meaning, resilience, and worth that arise specifically from embodied experience (Overall, 2012; Harman, 2009). If material existence is interpreted exclusively through the lens of suffering, its ontological and teleological potentials remain insufficiently examined. The inquiry thus emerges: does the existence of suffering diminish the significance of matter, or could matter itself produce forms of meaning that are irreducible to harm? This concern resonates with broader philosophical debates on pessimism and the value of existence, particularly within the tradition of philosophical pessimism articulated by thinkers such as Arthur Schopenhauer, who emphasized suffering as a central feature of human life (Schopenhauer, 1966).

The philosophical tension renders Elif Shafak's narrative critically pertinent. Shafak's narratives continuously emphasize corporeality, memory, trauma, spirituality, and intergenerational connectivity. *In 10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World* (2019), the fading consciousness of Tequila Leila reveals itself through sensory memories rooted in the tangible textures of Istanbul—olfactory, gustatory, and tactile—implying that corporeal memory defies obliteration. Similarly, *The Island of Missing Trees* (2021) interlaces human narratives with botanical storytelling, wherein a fig tree serves as a witness to love, violence, displacement, and survival. In both works, matter is not a passive substance but a dynamic repository of relational significance. Corpses, terrains, and even non-human organisms engage in a network of meaning that challenges any simplistic equating of existence with suffering. Such literary explorations of embodiment and memory also align with broader discussions in literary philosophy which emphasize that narrative fiction can illuminate ethical and metaphysical questions about human existence (Nussbaum, 1990).

Philosophically, these narrative structures align with teleological and existential traditions that view material reality as directed toward meaning rather than negation. Classical teleological philosophy, particularly expressed by Aristotle, asserts that entities have inherent purposes (telos) to which they are oriented (Aristotle, trans. 1999). Contemporary existential and theological philosophers contend that pain does not diminish meaning but can coexist with or even amplify the quest for purpose (Frankl, 1946/2006). Although Shafak's fiction does not serve as a direct theological discourse, it vividly portrays a reality where material existence—despite suffering and death—maintains clarity, relational richness, and transformative capacity.

This paper asserts that Benatar's antinatalist ontology, while logically consistent within its asymmetrical framework, is philosophically deficient when examined alongside narrative representations that illustrate matter as a site of meaning-making. This study examines Shafak's selected novels in relation to Benatar's philosophy, thereby developing the concept of the "matter of matter": the existential dilemma (matter as issue) arising from material embodiment (matter as substance). The structured persistence and narrative coherence of matter create a philosophical framework for purposeful interpretation, contesting the reduction of life solely to misery. The study aims not just to challenge antinatalism but also to redefine the evaluative framework for understanding existence.

2. Literature Review

The philosophical discussion on antinatalism has received fresh academic focus



mostly due to David Benatar's famous work, *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming into Existence* (2006), which articulates a systematic argument against procreation. Benatar's asymmetry thesis posits that the lack of pain is beneficial even in the absence of a subject to perceive that benefit, whereas the lack of pleasure is not detrimental unless a being exists to experience that deprivation. This formulation has sparked significant discourse in modern moral philosophy, especially about issues of damage, value, and the ethical implications of existence. Researchers like Harman (2009) have analyzed the internal coherence of Benatar's asymmetry, scrutinizing whether its evaluative framework sufficiently encompasses good experiences and human adaptive capabilities. Overall (2012) attacks antinatalism by asserting that reproductive choices cannot be simply based on assessments of suffering, as relational, cultural, and existential factors also play a role in human flourishing.

Additional philosophical exploration of antinatalism has revealed conflicts between pessimistic ontologies and more expansive existential or metaphysical frameworks. Philosophers influenced by existentialist traditions argue that suffering does not inherently diminish meaning; instead, meaning may arise specifically via the encounter with finitude and anguish (Frankl, 1946/2006). From this viewpoint, antinatalism may favor a limited negative evaluative standard that neglects resilience, creativity, and the human ability for transcendence. Furthermore, teleological traditions based on Aristotelian philosophy propose that entities have inherent ends or inclinations toward fulfillment, so contesting interpretations that view existence as essentially flawed or detrimental (Aristotle, trans. 1999). These philosophical alternatives offer a conceptual basis for reevaluating the ethical ramifications of embodiment beyond the confines of gloomy reductionism.

Alongside philosophical discussions, literary studies have progressively examined how modern fiction addresses issues of existence, pain, and materiality. Elif Shafak's works have garnered critical acclaim for their examination of identity, memory, spirituality, and cross-cultural affiliation. Recent scholarship has increasingly explored how contemporary novels engage philosophical debates about suffering, ethics, and human flourishing through narrative representations of embodied life (Attridge, 2015). Critics observe that Shafak's narratives often highlight embodied experience and sensory memory, portraying the body not just as a locus of pain but also as a conduit for the construction of relational meaning (Gökner, 2013; Erol, 2012).

In *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World*, scholars have emphasized the novel's revolutionary narrative structure that places awareness in the transitional space between life and death, thereby highlighting the enduring nature of memory as an embodied experience. *The Island of Missing Trees* has been regarded as an eco-narrative that integrates human history with non-human viewpoints, indicating that material surroundings actively influence ethical and emotional realities (Bowes, 2025). These analyses underscore that Shafak's literature defies simplistic conceptions of suffering by depicting material reality as fluid and interrelated.

Although there is an increasing amount of research on antinatalism and Shafak's literary works, few studies have directly connected these fields. Current literary criticism frequently emphasizes themes of pain, migration, or hybridity, whereas philosophical examinations of antinatalism seldom consider narrative texts as venues for ethical exploration. This gap offers a chance to investigate



how literary depictions of embodied reality may contest philosophical pessimism. This study aims to cultivate a more nuanced comprehension of material existence by contrasting Benatar's antinatalist framework with Shafak's narrative constructions of matter and meaning. It posits that matter operates concurrently as an existential dilemma and as a significant substance—a dualism embodied in the notion of the "matter of matter." This multidisciplinary approach enhances current discussions regarding the significance of existence, the function of pain, and the metaphysical consequences of embodiment.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study is based on an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that integrates antinatalist philosophy, teleological metaphysics, and narrative theories of embodiment. By juxtaposing David Benatar's pessimistic ontology with intentional interpretations of material existence, this framework facilitates a critical reevaluation of the ethical significance of embodied life as depicted in modern literature.

i. Antinatalist Ontology: Suffering as Foundational Criterion

This study is primarily informed by the antinatalist position articulated by David Benatar in *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming into Existence* (2006). Benatar's asymmetry thesis posits that pain is detrimental and pleasure is beneficial; nevertheless, the lack of pain is advantageous even in the absence of a subject to experience that benefit, whereas the absence of pleasure is not detrimental unless there is an individual deprived of it (Benatar, 2006). This evaluative framework regards pain as the pivotal standard for evaluating the morality of procreation. In this context, material embodiment is deemed a requisite condition for harm, and existence is viewed as an avoidable ethical burden.

ii. Teleology and the Metaphysics of Purpose

This study utilizes teleological traditions, particularly those stated by Aristotle, to counteract antinatalist pessimism. In Aristotelian metaphysics, entities possess intrinsic purposes (telos) to which they are oriented, indicating that existence may be purposefully organized rather than fundamentally defective (Aristotle, trans. 1999). Teleology acknowledges suffering but contextualizes it within a wider developmental framework, thereby contesting solely gloomy ontologies.

iii. Embodiment and Narrative Meaning-Making

The third pillar of the framework originates from existential and narrative theories that underscore embodiment and the construction of meaning. Existential philosophers like Viktor Frankl contend that meaning can arise even amongst suffering, illustrating that sorrow does not inherently diminish value (Frankl, 1946/2006). This viewpoint is especially pertinent for examining the works of Elif Shafak, notably *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World* and *The Island of Missing Trees*, where embodied experience is depicted as relational, transforming, and significant rather than solely detrimental. This understanding of embodied meaning also resonates with phenomenological accounts that emphasize the body as the primary site through which human beings experience and interpret the world (Merleau-Ponty, 2012).



iv. The “Matter of Matter”: Conceptual Synthesis

This study presents the conceptual notion "the matter of matter." The first "matter" refers to the existential dilemma posed by antinatalism, whilst the second signifies material substance and physical existence. The framework asserts that the existential issue cannot be resolved without reevaluating materiality itself. This study examines whether literary tales depict matter as structured, understandable, and purposefully active, in contrast to Benatar's interpretation of matter primarily as a condition for suffering. This approach contests the absolutism of pain and creates interpretive opportunities for meaningful understandings of existence.

4. Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative interpretative methodology that combines philosophical analysis with literary text interpretation. The research seeks to critically examine antinatalist theory while analyzing narrative representations of embodiment and meaning in specific literary texts, necessitating an interdisciplinary methodological approach. This work integrates philosophical hermeneutics, meticulous textual analysis, and thematic comparative reading to investigate how literary tales contest philosophical pessimism.

i. Philosophical Hermeneutics

This research is methodologically based on philosophical hermeneutics, which perceives interpretation as a dialogical interaction among text, theory, and reader (Gadamer, 2004). Hermeneutic inquiry facilitates the examination of philosophical concepts within narrative frameworks, fostering a critical interaction between theoretical assertions and literary depictions. This study examines David Benatar's antinatalist philosophy within a hermeneutic framework, exploring how philosophical assumptions on pain and existence might be reinterpreted through narrative construction of meaning. Hermeneutics acknowledges that comprehension arises from historically contextualized interpretation rather than objective detachment (Ricoeur, 1976), therefore validating the analytical investigation of intentional interpretations of embodiment.

ii. Close Textual Analysis

Close reading functions as the principal analytical method for scrutinizing certain excerpts from *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World* and *The Island of Missing Trees* by Elif Shafak. Close textual analysis prioritizes meticulous examination of narrative structure, imagery, symbolism, linguistic patterns, and sensory nuances (Culler, 2011). This methodology enables the analysis to discern the construction of embodiment, memory, and relational experiences inside the books. Through meticulous textual analysis, material existence is examined not solely as a realm of misery but as a dynamic center of meaning and transformation. Close reading remains a foundational method in literary scholarship because it enables researchers to uncover deeper layers of symbolic meaning and narrative structure embedded within literary texts (Barry, 2017).

iii. Thematic and Comparative Analysis

The study utilizes thematic analysis to discern recurring themes concerning pain,



purpose, relationality, and transcendence throughout the chosen novels (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Themes are subsequently assessed in relation to the philosophical framework established by David Benatar, including his asymmetry argument and ethical implications for procreation (Benatar, 2006). A comparative philosophical-literary analysis enables the examination of whether story representations affirm or contest antinatalist beliefs regarding the disvalue of being. The methodology emphasizes conceptual coherence and interpretive plausibility instead of actual verification.

iv. Analytical Scope and Limitations

The research is confined to two specific books by Elif Shafak, selected for their thematic exploration of mortality, memory, embodiment, and intergenerational trauma. The study does not assert factual evidence of metaphysical teleology; rather, it presents a philosophically informed interpretive analysis that examines alternative ontological possibilities beyond pessimistic reductionism. This approach corresponds with qualitative literary research methodologies that prioritize interpretative depth rather than generalization (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Analysis and Discussion (Part I): Matter as Suffering vs Matter as Meaning

David Benatar's antinatalist philosophy posits that material existence necessarily subjects persons to suffering, thereby making birth morally questionable (Benatar, 2006). In this context, embodiment is largely perceived as the state that enables the occurrence of harm. The asymmetry argument prioritizes the avoidance of suffering over the possibility of pleasurable experiences, asserting that non-existence is ethically superior. This philosophical perspective prompts a critical inquiry: does material existence serve just as a conduit for pain, or can matter itself produce meanings that challenge pessimistic interpretations?

Benatar's thesis is based on a negative evaluative ontology where pain holds normative precedence. Critics have noted that this paradigm may simplify the intricacies of human experience to a single moral standard (Harman, 2009). The reality of suffering is indisputable; nonetheless, the belief that suffering diminishes the value of living may neglect aspects of relationality, creativity, and narrative identity that arise from embodied life. Philosophical traditions informed by existentialism propose that meaning is frequently derived from confronting limitations and mortality rather than evading them (Frankl, 2006). Contemporary fiction intricately examines the contradiction between mortality and purpose.

Elif Shafak's *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World* presents a persuasive narrative contrast to antinatalist pessimism by depicting matter not as passive substance but as an active site of memory and social continuity. Despite Leila's clinical death, the narrative asserts that "her brain was resisting, a fighter till the end" and that "her memory surged forth, eager and diligent, collecting pieces of a life that was speeding to a close" (Shafak, 2019, p. 8). The book undermines the finality of death by claiming that "a corpse was brimming with life" (Shafak, 2019, p. 4). These instances emphasize the significance of embodiment, even in the face of impending annihilation. Matter is not nullified at death; rather, sensory memory—"the feel of it on her skin and the taste of it on her tongue" (Shafak, 2019, p. 8)—constitutes the fundamental framework through which identity endures. This narrative focus undermines Benatar's



simplification of embodiment as only a source of unavoidable suffering by exposing the intricate complexity of lived material experience.

Likewise, *The Island of Missing Trees* extends embodiment beyond humanity by bestowing narrative consciousness upon a fig tree. At the beginning of the novel, the narrator observes that “legends are there to tell us what history has forgotten” (Shafak, 2021, p. 13), positioning matter as a repository of repressed memory. The well at the narrative's core symbolises temporal resilience, and the narration figuratively notes that “time is a songbird...” “However, time cannot be restrained indefinitely” (Shafak, 2021, p. 16). Through such imagery, physical entities—trees, wells, soil—serve as witnesses to violence, exile, and generational continuation. The island is shown as sensorially vibrant—“golden beaches, turquoise waters, lucid skies” (Shafak, 2021, p. 13)—despite its division and trauma. Matter here is not passive substrate but relational presence. It assimilates history, retains sorrow, and conveys remembrance across generations.

From a philosophical standpoint, these literary depictions resonate with teleological interpretations of existence in which material reality is structured toward meaning rather than negation (Aristotle, trans. 1999). Teleology does not negate suffering; rather, it contextualises it within a larger framework of intentional development. If matter continually produces relational significance—through Leila’s enduring awareness or the fig tree’s account across partition—then Benatar’s reduction of embodiment to harm seems ontologically deficient. Literature serves as a realm where different metaphysical possibilities are creatively explored. Philosophical interpretations of literature often suggest that narrative representation can reveal dimensions of human meaning that remain inaccessible to purely abstract ethical reasoning (Ricoeur, 1984). Furthermore, story representation incorporates timing and relational embeddedness that are lacking in abstract ethical asymmetry. Antinatalism assesses existence by hypothetically contrasting presence with absence, but Shafak's narrative portrays existence as a tapestry of memory, environment, and emotion. Suffering is indisputable; nonetheless, it lives alongside attachment, observation, and continuity. Matter emerges not only as a state of vulnerability but as the channel through which meaning is rendered palpable. Consequently, embodiment cannot be fully encapsulated by the assessment of harm; it serves as the fundamental basis upon which value is revealed.

Analysis and Discussion (Part II): Matter as Evidence of Purpose — Beyond Antinatalist Ontology

Antinatalist philosophy views material embodiment chiefly as a source of sorrow, whereas an opposing philosophical perspective regards matter as representative of a purposive structure. David Benatar's asymmetry argument assesses existence within a negative ethical framework, emphasising the prevention of suffering over the prospective benefits of life experiences (Benatar, 2006). This evaluative framework assumes that material existence is devoid of inherent significance or purpose. In contrast, teleological and metaphysical traditions propose that the organised coherence and durability of matter may indicate intentionality rather than mere randomness.

Teleological philosophy, especially within Aristotelian thought, asserts that entities are directed toward ends (telos), suggesting that existence is not inherently accidental but aimed at forms of fulfilment or realisation (Aristotle,



trans. 1999). In this context, matter is not merely a passive substance but an active principle that transforms potentiality into actuality. If embodiment signifies intentional structure, then reducing material existence to damage may neglect its ontological intricacy. Current philosophical discussions on meaning contend that existential significance cannot be exclusively diminished to hedonistic assessments, since meaning frequently emerges from narrative coherence, interpersonal connections, and contact with the transcendent (Metz, 2013).

Elif Shafak's *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World* is a literary expression of intentional materiality through the endurance of physical awareness. Following Leila's demise, the narrative illustrates that “her brain was resisting, a fighter till the end” and that “time became fluid, a rapid amalgamation of memories merging, rendering the past and the present indistinguishable” (Shafak, 2019, p. 8). The narrative illustrates memory as dynamically structured and purposefully organised, rather than portraying matter as suddenly devoid of meaning at death. The narrative suggests that if a boundary exists between life and the afterlife, “it must be as permeable as sandstone” (Shafak, 2019, p. 5). This imagery undermines strict dichotomies between existence and non-existence, implying continuity instead of negation. The earliest memory—“the feel of it on her skin and the taste of it on her tongue” (Shafak, 2019, p. 8)—demonstrates that sensory experiences are the foundation of identity. Embodiment is not a haphazard collection but a narratively structured experience, retrospectively integrated into coherence.

Likewise, *The Island of Missing Trees* enhances intentional materiality via ecological and temporal symbolism. The novel asserts that “legends are there to tell us what history has forgotten” (Shafak, 2021, p. 13), framing matter as a vessel of repressed memory. The well that hides the slain remains is characterised as a structure whose secret will ultimately emerge, for “no captivity is forever” (Shafak, 2021, p. 17). Time is symbolically shown as being resistant to enduring obscurity: “Time is a songbird...” “However, time cannot be restrained indefinitely” (Shafak, 2021, p. 16). Through these narrative metaphors, matter is shown as directed towards revelation and restoration. The fig tree narrator, grounded yet insightful, represents continuity amid political upheaval and generational pain, indicating that material existence engages in processes of resilience and rejuvenation. This ecological perspective subtly challenges anthropocentric pessimism by placing human suffering within a wider relational context.

Historically, from a metaphysical standpoint, the intelligibility and coherence of material forms have been viewed as indicative of intentional design or an underlying order (Aquinas, trans. 1981). Contemporary studies may examine teleology through secular or phenomenological lenses, although the persistent literary depiction of matter as a vessel of memory and a source of continuity prompts a reevaluation of existential pessimism. If matter consistently produces coherent patterns—such as memories after death, secrets emerging from wells, and trees serving as witnesses—then existence cannot be wholly understood as a result of random misfortune.

The enduring significance of embodied narratives contests the rational boundaries of antinatalist findings. Benatar's asymmetry argument functions within the realm of abstract ethical comparison, while Shafak's tales portray existence as historically evolving and relationally situated. In both novels,



suffering is unequivocal; nonetheless, it coexists with resilience, recollection, and ethical enlightenment. Material existence thus arises not only as a source of suffering but as a means through which intentional structure becomes evident. Instead of dismissing embodiment, Shafak's narrative posits that matter itself attests to continuity, relationality, and the potential for meaning beyond pain.

Analysis and Discussion (Part III): A Critical Reassessment of Benatar's Asymmetry

David Benatar's antinatalist stance is grounded in the imbalance between suffering and enjoyment. His approach posits that pain is detrimental and pleasure is beneficial; nevertheless, the absence of suffering is advantageous regardless of any beneficiary, whereas the lack of pleasure is only detrimental if someone is deprived of it (Benatar, 2006). This asymmetry aims to illustrate that existence inherently entails harm, as non-existence ensures the absence of pain without causing loss. This argument, albeit logically organized, is based on various philosophical assumptions that require further examination.

Initially, Benatar's approach assumes that the prevention of harm is the paramount ethical value. The asymmetry creates a negative moral baseline by prioritising the prevention of pain over the attainment of positive goods. Numerous ethical systems contest the singularity of harm-avoidance as a complete moral standard. Virtue ethics, for example, prioritises flourishing (eudaimonia) as a state of fulfilment rather than simply the absence of suffering (Aristotle, trans. 1999). Contemporary analytic studies of meaning contend that existential value cannot be simplified to hedonic assessments, as meaningful interaction frequently entails struggle, risk, and vulnerability (Metz, 2013). Shafak's *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World* narratively exemplifies this tension: even in the initial minute post-mortem, "her brain was resisting, a fighter till the end" (Shafak, 2019, p. 8). The metaphor of resistance implies that existence reflects a tendency towards persistence and unity rather than just evading suffering. If worth include elements like memory, affection, and dignity, then the restricted evaluative perspective of asymmetry seems overly simplistic.

Secondly, Benatar's asymmetry relies on ascribing impersonal worth to the "absence of suffering" in non-existence. Critics have challenged the coherence of attributing goodness to a condition devoid of a subject capable of experiencing or embodying that good (Harman, 2009). If value necessitates a valuer, the assertion that non-existence is "superior" becomes logically precarious. Literary story complicates this abstraction by emphasising temporality and subjectivity. In Shafak's narrative, the distinction between life and death is conceived as "as permeable as sandstone" (Shafak, 2019, p. 5), thereby challenging definitive negation. The narrative voice challenges the simplicity of binary absence by portraying awareness as persistent, contemplative, and capable of generating meaning even under extreme circumstances. The juxtaposition of being and non-existence cannot be simplified to an impersonal calculation without obliterating experiential subjectivity.

Third, the asymmetry detaches existence from its temporal and relational aspects. Antinatalist reasoning generally assesses birth in a hypothetical context, before the story develops. Nevertheless, *The Island of Missing Trees* emphasises the retrospective development of meaning over time. The novel posits that "legends are there to tell us what history has forgotten" (Shafak, 2021, p. 13),



implying that significance is frequently comprehensible solely through narrative reconstruction. Furthermore, the assertion that “no captivity is forever” (Shafak, 2021, p. 17) metaphorically alludes to eventual revelation and metamorphosis. A life marked by suffering can yet attain coherence within larger relational and historical contexts. The asymmetry, conversely, assesses existence before such development, so precluding the notion that suffering could contribute to subsequent meaning-formation.

Moreover, Benatar's assertion that mankind should progressively approach extinction assumes that the elimination of future suffering surpasses the possible occurrence of future benefits. This projection regards future value as ethically insignificant in comparison to future harm. Philosophical interpretations of hope and meaning oppose such limitations. Viktor Frankl (2006) contends that meaning can arise specifically through the face of suffering, rather than its evasion. Shafak's fig tree narrator likewise conceptualises temporality as impervious to enduring repression: “Time is a songbird...” “However, time cannot be restrained indefinitely” (Shafak, 2021, p. 16). The metaphor implies an intrinsic dynamism in existence, favouring development over negation. If matter consistently produces relational continuity, future commodities cannot be regarded as simple hypothetical abstractions.

This critique does not diminish the severity of suffering. It challenges the notion that pain holds sole evaluative authority. By limiting material existence just to vulnerability, antinatalism risks neglecting the ontological depth of embodied life—its potential for memory, relationality, narrative coherence, and moral development. The enduring significance in Shafak's narrative frameworks suggests that matter serves not just as a medium for harm but also as the basis through which intentional and relational values are comprehensible. Thus, Benatar's asymmetry, while theoretically stimulating, seems to be based on an inadequate understanding of value, embodiment, and temporal development.

Conclusion

This study aims to rigorously analyse David Benatar's antinatalist ideology through a philosophical and literary examination of embodiment and material existence in selected works by Elif Shafak. Although Benatar's asymmetry argument offers a logically coherent rationale for viewing existence as detrimental (Benatar, 2006), the analysis conducted in this paper indicates that this conclusion may depend on a limited evaluative framework that prioritises suffering as the primary criterion of value. This research aims to illustrate that antinatalist philosophy, when juxtaposed with narrative depictions of embodied existence, reveals that matter cannot be comprehensively perceived just as a precursor to damage.

This study contends that material presence serves as a site of relational continuity, memory, and transformational significance through detailed analyses of *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World* and *The Island of Missing Trees*. Shafak's narrative techniques depict embodiment not only as susceptibility but as a conduit for the emergence of identity, connection, and ethical consciousness. These literary works contest pessimistic ontologies by proposing that misery and meaning coexist within dynamic narrative frameworks. Instead of diminishing worth, lived experience often serves as the fundamental basis for the construction of meaning.



The research has progressed the conceptual understanding of the "matter of matter," highlighting the dual importance of existence as both an existential issue and a material entity. This study posits that, through teleological perspectives that view existence as directed towards a purposeful structure (Aristotle, trans. 1999; Metz, 2013), matter can be understood as intelligible and meaningful rather than being merely contingent or detrimental. This perspective acknowledges suffering while challenging its elevation as the exclusive standard for assessing existence.

The criticism of Benatar's asymmetry indicates that assigning impersonal worth to non-existence has conceptual challenges, especially in contrast to narrative depictions that emphasise time and relational context. Literary narratives demonstrate that ethical assessment cannot be limited to theoretical abstractions divorced from actual experience. Meaning frequently arises retrospectively through relational continuity, creative involvement, and existential interpretation. Thus, antinatalist assertions promoting extinction may neglect aspects of value rooted in embodiment and story evolution.

This work enhances philosophical discourse by illustrating how literary analysis might reveal alternative ontologies of material existence. Interdisciplinary approaches combining philosophy and literary studies have increasingly demonstrated that narrative texts provide valuable insights into ethical debates about suffering, meaning, and human flourishing (Nussbaum, 1990).

This research juxtaposes philosophical pessimism with story constructions of meaning, so creating an opportunity to reconsider the ethical assessment of life beyond mere pain calculations. Future study may enhance this interdisciplinary debate by investigating further literary traditions, comparative philosophical frameworks, or phenomenological perspectives on embodiment to more thoroughly analyse how matter contributes to meaning-making processes. In this regard, study might persist in reevaluating whether existence ought to be perceived chiefly as a burden or as a multifaceted domain of intentional potentiality.

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