

MYSTICAL LOVE AND SPIRITUAL TRANSFORMATION: A SUFI INTERPRETATION OF ELIF SHAFAK'S *THE FORTY RULES OF LOVE*.

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**Abstract**

This study examines the redemptive potential of mystical love in Elif Shafak's *The Forty Rules of Love* from a Sufi perspective, drawing on the concept of *Ishq-e-Haqiqi* (Divine Love). The article proposes to discuss how, in the novel, love is not merely an emotional energy but a spiritual catalyst for the purification of the self and the realization of one's true self. Through thematic analysis, the study mirrors in tandem the journey of Ella Rubinstein, a contemporary American woman on a quest for meaning, and the thirteenth-century spiritual friendship between Jalal al-Din Rumi and Shams of Tabriz. From the metaphysical musings of pre-modern Sufi thinkers like Rumi, Al-Ghazali, and Ibn Arabi, the paper traces how Shafak transforms Sufi adaptations of love and ego destruction into a modern literary genre. This focus is also applied to Shafak's narrative approaches, proclaiming spiritual awakening and transcendence beyond religious and cultural divides. Finally, this study makes the case that *The Forty Rules of Love* is a work of Sufi wisdom that demonstrates the universal ability of divine love to arouse human consciousness and foster harmony between religions and cultures.

**INTRODUCTION**

The literary works on Sufi mysticism have reflected the ultimate expression of the human search for meaning and transcendence. *The Forty Rules of Love* (2009) is one of such recent works that revitalize the richness of the spiritual culture of Sufism through the use of past and present in a new way. The novel has not only revived but also shown how relevant it is to revive the spiritual connection between Rumi and Shams of Tabriz, who lived in the thirteenth century, in a modern setting due to the relevance of their

mystical teachings. In its essence, the novel explores the Sufi concept of love as an omnipresent, almighty force that directs the soul towards spiritual awakening and eventual communion with the Divine. The novel is written in two parallel worlds: the one about Ella Rubinstein, a middle-aged American woman trapped in a dissatisfying marriage, and the other story of one of the most famous Sufi saints, Rumi, and Shams. The account or manuscript, *Sweet Blasphemy* on the Rumi-Shams relationship, is the situation that leads to

a transformation of Ella in her own experiences of life. As Ella reads the Forty Rules of Love presented by Shams, she gradually changes and turns into a spiritual creature. The story shows the central Sufi belief that religion does not limit God-love to religious dogma and traditional morals but rather is a redemptive force, beyond limitations. Weaving the two plots together, Shafak has made a very strong statement about the universality of Sufi philosophy, especially the centrality of love as a journey toward spiritual revelation. This introduction provides the framework through which the current paper will explore in detail how this mystical love in The Forty Rules of Love presents itself as a quality in the conduction of spiritual transformation and what this has to say about the Sufi perception of the journey of the soul.

### **Problem Statement and Scope:**

This paper aims to examine the way in which Elif Shafak makes The Forty Rules of Love a kind of text that epitomizes mystical love and forms a sort of vehicle through which spiritual change can be identified in terms of a Sufi philosophy. Although the scholarship has been quite successful in recognizing the literary value of the novel, the spiritual value of the novel has, however, been relatively neglected, as well as the metaphysical existence of the Sufi dimension about the process of ego dissolution, union with the divine, and the metaphysical role of love has not been explored much. The two-way narrative form of the novel provides a rare chance to study the eternity of the Sufi concepts applied to both historical and modern characters. In this paper, I will discuss the following points: (1) a Sufi interpretation of love, as both divine and transformative; (2) the character arcs of Shams, Rumi, and Ella to provide the different levels of spiritual transformation; (3) illustrate on some of the rules and how they fit with some of the classical Sufi literature; and (4) the literary strategies that Shafak uses to reveal such philosophical thoughts. The hermeneutic approach to reading the narrative will be employed, especially taking into account the issues of symbolism, allegory, and intertextuality. The main thesis of the present paper is that the novel breaks the time and cultural barriers to demonstrate love as the ultimate force of spiritual regeneration. In such a way, it gives new readers of

modern times a redefined meaning of the Sufi path where the route to God is an inward journey that is driven by love and self-annihilation.

### **Significance of the Study**

This work adds to the literature on modern Sufi literature and spirituality in a postmodern world. With the focus being on The Forty Rules of Love, the paper articulates the role of literature as the means of sharing mystical knowledge without the time, cultural, and religious constraints. It provides an insight into the transformational power of love as envisaged through Sufism and goes on to show how memorable the teachings of Rumi and Shams still remain. Moreover, it offers an in-depth reflection of the novel being not only a fiction but also a spiritual guidance on awakening oneself.

### **Objective of the Study**

The main purpose of this paper is to see how the love of mysticism acts as a transforming power in The Forty Rules of Love, and base its elements on Sufi metaphysical theory.

### **Research Question:**

How is mystical love a vehicle of spiritual change in The Forty Rules of Love within the philosophy of Sufism?

### **Methodology**

The research design of this study is a qualitative type, and the method used for data analysis is Thematic Analysis. Thematic Analysis is especially recommended when analyzing literary works because it enables identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns and themes in the piece of literature (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Through such an approach, the study aims at identifying recurrent themes and conceptual strains that have something to do with mystical love and spiritual transformation, the two key concepts in Sufi thinking. It included a few steps: (1) You have to be familiar with the text by reading The Forty Rules of Love several times, (2) you formulate initial codes upon the recurrent ideas, (3) you identify and elaborate on the main themes, (4) you interpret the themes in the structure of Sufi philosophy, and (5) you conclude and synthesize the study regarding the whole theoretical framework of mystical love and

spiritual growth in Sufism. The thematic analysis was deductive and done based on existing Sufi notions, including *Ishq-e-Haqiqi* (Divine Love), *Tazkiyah* (purification of the self), *Fana* (annihilation of the ego), *Sohbet* (spiritual companionship), and *Tawakkul* (trust in God). These ideas could be viewed as prisms through which the story has been perceived. The structure of Elif Shafak's story, having the modern plot of *Ella* and the historic one of Rumi and Shams of Tabriz, gave an abundant ground for thematic interpretation. The findings being presented below explain the incorporation of these Sufi precepts in the novel and the way they render characters converted into spiritual beings.

### Literature Review

Sufi mysticism is a subject that has attracted various scholarly efforts in literature, especially propagated by Rumi and other classical mystics. Researchers like Annemarie Schimmel (1975) have provided some fundamental knowledge about the love of the divine and the way of self-annihilation in the Sufi tradition. Schimmel (1975), in her magnum opus *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, focuses on the symbolic, allegorical, and transformative role of love as the essence of Sufi spirituality. Such a conceptual schema is vital to comprehend the way love is depicted by Elif Shafak in the *40 Rules of Love*. Likewise, in his *The Shambhala Guide to Sufism* (1997), Carl W. Ernst offers a clear but subtler coverage of the most important Sufi concepts like *fana* (annihilation of the self), *tawhid* (unity of God), or *ishq* (divine love). The analysis provided by Ernst makes it easier to find the place of Shams' rules in overall Sufi metaphysical concepts and leaves a connecting line between classical Sufi and contemporary literary approaches. The novel also came under certain interest among scholars. Some researchers, such as Latif Tas (2014) and Nihal Abdulaziz (2018), state that *The Forty Rules of Love* is a post-modern spiritual book that can help solve existential crises in modern life with old mystics' teachings. Abdulaziz, more specifically, points to the usage of meta-fiction and inter-textuality, which Shafak employs to the effect of making the mystical understandable and close to the reader. Her analyses place the novel not just as praise to Rumi and Shams but also as a source of the contemporary spiritual rebirth. Feminist implications that *Ella* was going

through a transformation are explored by other researchers, like Shafqat Hussain (2020). Analysis implies that patriarchal structures are detracted by Sufi ideals of love and freedom. The same opinion is reflected in the book by Elham Hoominfar (2021), dedicated to discussing the intersection of gender and mysticism in the novel, in which she dwells on the way Shafak combines feminist awareness and spiritual evolution. Regarding the narrative form, the method of dual narration employed by Shafak has drawn the analysis of such researchers as Shaimaa El Nagar (2019), who states that the existence of the past and the present in combination offers the possibility of a transcendental continuity of spirit. Such a plurality of angles and voices allows the reader to have an experience of Sufi teachings on different social and cultural levels. On a more theological level, Seyyed Hossein Nasr (2007) offered a more comprehensive grounding in metaphysics through such works as *The Garden of Truth*, where Seyyed Hossein Nasr expounds the perennial philosophy of Sufism. The learning revealed by Nasr of the inward quest to achieve the divine reality is reflected in both Rumi and *Ella*. Besides, the metaphysical role of Shams as a reflection and agent is explained by Jungian psychoanalysis through critics like Fatemeh Keshavarz (2013). Her readings envisage Shams to represent the "Self" archetype, who provides a challenge to the "Ego" in Rumi and *Ella*, thereby embarking on a voyage towards individuation and divine unification. Altogether, the available literature has offered a multidimensional basis of interpreting the novel in the light of Sufi. Crossing spiritual and theological dimensions and ranging from feminism psychology, scholars have highlighted the importance of the novel as a literal as well as a metaphysical text. But what has been lacking is how to bring these attitudes into a unified reading which places emphasis upon mystical love as the prime agent of change-which is what this paper proposes to do.

### Theoretical Framework

This work is based on Sufi thought, and especially on the notion of *Ishq-e-Haqiqi* (Divine Love) and spiritual change as developed by classical Sufi philosophers, such as Jalal al-Din Rumi. His teachings center on the topic of love as the way to union with the Divine and the discarding of the ego. This

structure enables us to consider not only the Sufi reading of *The Forty Rules of Love* but also emphasizes how the issue of mystical love is used in the book as a method of personal/spiritual change (Chittick, 2000).

## Discussion and Analysis

The **Discussion and Analysis** chapter interprets *The Forty Rules of Love* through the lens of Sufi thought, focusing on how mystical love leads to spiritual transformation. It examines key themes such as *Ishq-e-Haqiqi* (Divine Love), ego annihilation, and self-realization, relating them to the teachings of Rumi and Shams of Tabriz. The chapter also analyzes Shafak's narrative techniques that convey Sufi ideals in a modern literary form.

### First theme: *Ishq-e-Haqiqi* (Divine Love) as a way to God.

The concept of Divine Love is one of the most prevailing ones and the central idea of Sufi mysticism in *The Forty Rules of Love*. In contrast with worldly love, Sufi love is an ecstatic, transcendental experience that dissolves the ego in the oneness with the Divine. Shams of Tabriz in the historical subplot is a vessel of *Ishq-e-Haqiqi*. His teachings, summarized in the "forty rules," introduce Rumi to a spiritual path that turns the traditional religious priest into a mystic poet. Rule one goes: The image we have of God is simply the image that we have of ourselves. When God creates fear and blame mostly in our heads, it implies that there is much fear and blame that has brewed within us. When we look at God as a loving and compassionate being, then we are. This was a fundamental Sufi principle that the Divine is not external and alien but in the cleansed heart. Through the unconditional love the seeker shares with his beloved, like Shams, the seeker starts replicating divine attributes. The modern story is the story of Ella reading Aziz Zahara's manuscript, and this scene is an echo of the awakening of Rumi. Being at first confined in a barren marriage and dull life, Ella is attracted to the mysticism of love as an almost divine power expressed by Aziz. Her conversion from the parody of skepticism to open-mindedness on the path is similar to the path of a Sufi who follows a murshid (spiritual teacher). Her transformation also complements one of the main doctrines in Sufism:

*Ishq* is not an emotion but a spiritual stimulator which results in self-discovery and eventually consciousness.

### Theme two: *Fana* (Annihilation of the Ego).

According to Sufi spirituality, *Fana*, the act of annihilation of the self, is a precondition of unification with the Divine. This process in the novel is symbolized by the relationship between Rumi and Shams, on the one hand, and Ella entirely letting out her emotions, on the other. To start with, Rumi is subjected to his status as a renowned scholar. Status, followers, and worldly success feed his ego. The presence of Shams and his unorthodox ways shake the comfort zone of Rumi, and he is forced into being in touch with his inner self. Their friendship provides the melting pot whereby the ego of Rumi is slowly sacrificed. He discovers that intellectual knowledge is not self-sufficient and needs a heart-knowledge, or *ma'rifa*. And avoid resisting change that will come your way. Rather, life lives in you." ~ Rule 18 This rule leads quite closely to the need to surrender~ yet another aspect of *Fana*. What we witness in the transformation of Rumi to the author of such poems as the *Masnavi* is possible only when he had given up his ego. Something similar happens to Ella, but in the contemporary world. She is a religious stagnator, and this is brought about first by her definitions as a wife and as a mother. Her ego-based identity is threatened by the worldview and divinity attributed to Aziz and his portrayal of absolute love. When she starts unpeeling these identities, she approaches a more accurate self, figuring *Fana* in not-so-strict religious but psychological terms.

### Theme 3: *Sohbet* (Holy companionship)

In Sufism, *Sohbet* or spiritual conversation and companionship occupies the centre stage in the process of imparting the mystical Knowledge. Such a noble relationship can be easily illustrated by the relationship between Shams and Rumi. Their marriage is not carnal but spiritual in its foundation, with the common interest of achieving the Divine. The fact that Shams comes to Konya so that he could find someone to share divine-related knowledge with explains a Sufi belief that the most appropriate way of sharing spiritual knowledge is through close conversations. Their discussions can be about the

issues of meditation, which strengthen their ideas of God. The effect of this friendship is world-changing: Life without love is nothing. Do not say (as to which kind of love I ought to aim), spiritual or material, divine or earthly... There are no labels to be put on love." This regulation breaks the dichotomy of sacred and profane, which should imply that any love, when it is genuine, will bring one to the Divine. Sohbet turns out to be the means of conveying this love. This spiritual companionship is reflected in the exchanges of emails between Ella and Aziz in the modern plot. Digital and less intimate, but their conversations trigger the change that happens inside of Ella. She turns more introspective and starts doubting the way in which she sees the world, and loses her prejudice step by step.

#### **Theme 4: Tazkiyah (Self Purification)**

The idea of Tazkiyah, the Sufi idea of purifying the soul of such negative aspects as pride, envy, and anger, is also another theme of the novel that recurs a few times. This internal cleaning happens in characters within the two timelines. Although this character, Shams, is radical, even violent in his mannerisms, he is always clean in his heart. His rules are focused on inner accountability: Do not be troubled by what other people say or think about you. A real lover is aware of the fact that what is important is not how other people perceive you, but the way God perceives you." This refers to the Sufi focus on nafs (lower self) and the necessity to be beyond its illusion. Once more, the transformation of Rumi is at the center of the matter here, since he grows less concerned with his image in the world and more in touch with his spiritual core. Even the process of writing a poem is his kind of dhikr (remembrance) or outward manifestation of the inner purification. A comparable purification takes place in the experience of Ella. She loses her hatred towards the inattentive husband, wins the expectations of the society, and at last accepts the fact of Aziz being terminally ill with grace. The fact that she has the capacity to love, not in attachments, and without fear, is an indication of a sanctified heart.

#### **5th theme: Tawakkul (Trust in Divine Will)**

The Sufi way needs Tawakkul, which is the state of utter belief in the will of God, regardless of its contradiction of reason and world logic. These two

stories are full of acts of resignation. The character of Aziz Zahara is one of Tawakkul as a living example. The fact that he accepted his illness and calmly behaves indicates unceasing faith in the Divine plan. He addresses Ella in his letters, advising more than once not to be afraid of letting go of feeling and to wait to see what will happen instead. Things will go wrong in your life, in one way or another. Wonderful things outside of your control can happen, but even though the world tries to tempt you in directions you do not want to go, do not seek out the company of despair. God will create a new way open just to you, although all doors will be closed." This is the rule that sums up the Sufi spirit of radical optimism and the total submission to God. Ella starts a character who is an obsessed, predictability-and-control person, but ends up with the same mindset. The fact that she walks away from her marriage in spite of society and some danger to herself is an act of maturation into her spiritual ground. Spiritual submission of Rumi can be called the most dramatic. Once Shams vanishes (and is presumed dead), Rumi is lost in grief, but never sinks into despair. Instead, his missed desire becomes poetry. He does not find Shams in the exterior world, but in himself, which can be seen as a metaphor of finding God inside.

#### **Conclusion**

Using Thematic Analysis based on the Sufi philosophical teachings, this paper shows how The Forty Rules of Love describes mystical love as a vital agent of high spirituality. The two storylines of the novel interact with the aim of discovering eternal Sufi values, Ishq-e-Haqiqi, Fana, Sohbet, Tazkiyah, and Tawakkul, not in a theoretical context but through real life. Shafak builds a spiritual template that cuts through circles of time through the spiritual friendship of Shams and Rumi and the inner enlightenment of Ella. What the story reveals is that mystical love has nothing to do with saints or poets alone; rather, it is available to everyone provided he/she is willing to seek without guile, suffer with humility, and surrender in prayer. By doing so, the novel not only becomes a story, but it turns into a spiritual lesson per se.

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