



Analyzing Islamic Philosophy in Elif Shafak's Forty Rules of Love

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this analysis is to explore the Islamic Philosophy of Sufism within Elif Shafak's *The Forty Rules of Love*. The research on the selected novel covers the Islamic philosophy of Sufism in the story and the characterization of the story and the philosophies of Sufism through the philosophy of Love in the story. The textual and content analysis is done by utilizing qualitative approach. By dissecting the novelist's argument, from the textual level, small as speech, to the larger level of thematic argument and the arguments built about the core subject matters. The research concludes that Elif Shafak was able to incorporate and present the Islamic philosophy of Sufism through the characters and their progression through these philosophies. Thus, the novelist had managed to address the ways in which love is represented by the religion Islam and how it was presented through the teaching of Sufism. The authors had also discussed the way through which Sufism has been able to conquer and influence Elif's writing. The research covers historical account of 13th century Sufi, Rumi and Shams of Tabriz and provides a feminist perspective of the ways in which concepts of mystical and mundane get interlinked.

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1. Introduction

Ella, who is a married woman with children and has a career that is taking her places, begins to grow unhappy and unfulfilled with her life. She longs for a change. When she undertakes reading a new novel called *Sweet Blasphemy* by a mysterious author named Aziz Zahara and becomes captivated by Zahara's tale of the Sufi mystic Rumi and Shams of Tabriz, she gets the inspiration she has been longing for. The second part of the novel begins with the story of Rumi and Shams, which is told through Aziz Zahara's novel. The story is set in thirteenth-century Konya, Turkey, where Rumi is an Islamic scholar and a respected preacher. On the other hand, Shams is a wandering dervish in search of a spiritual guide. Though Rumi is happily married, he and Shams form an intense friendship that deepens the intellect and spirituality of both men. It is that friendship that takes them on a spiritual journey that transfigures both of them and their world. Ella's immersion in Zahara's novel leads her to a new understanding of her own life and her own relationships. Ella corresponded by e-mail with the author. Over time, these e-mails led her to another kind of transformation, as this correspondent becomes a dear friend. *The Forty Rules of Love* is a novel that explores the ideas of love, spirituality, and self-discovery through the parallel tales of Ella and Rumi, as well as delves into the teachings of Sufism and philosophy of Islam along the way. As the philosophies of Islam and Islamic Sufism is a rich area of study that has been built up by several academics over centuries, though its study in the form of books is relatively new, its inclusion in ancient and contemporary literature is important as literature serves as an important device for the expression of any idea or belief. This research aims at examining the portrayal of Islamic philosophy via fiction, as an idea or belief in fiction is still an important device and medium for the expression of an idea or a belief, and to see that

how this fiction has been applied and employed by the authors' to convey their ideas and beliefs. A Fiction in point for this might be Elif Shafak's novel, *The Forty Rules of Love*, a novel which employs the Islamic philosophy of Sufism, which is a mystical Islamic branch that places an emphasis on the inward search for God and spiritual development, the love and devotion to God, as the novel charts on the principles of Sufism as part of its exploration through the concept of love in the philosophy of Islam.

A substantial amount of research exists on post-9/11 literature and the portrayal of Islam and Muslims in literature; however, there is a dearth of literature on the portrayal of Islamic philosophy in fiction. This paper aims to fill the gap in research by discussing the portrayal of Islamic philosophy in fiction, specifically in the context of Sufism. The historical background of Islamic philosophy in the context of Sufism is necessary for the understanding the portrayal of Islamic philosophy in Elif Shafak's *The Forty Rules of Love*. Sufism, sometimes referred to as Islamic mysticism or the esoteric dimension of Islam, traces its origins back to the 8th and 9th centuries, mainly in the Middle East, particularly present-day Iran and Iraq (Chittick, 2008). The movement is characterized by its pursuit of inner peace and enlightenment through the cultivation of the inner self and the attainment of divine love and knowledge (Chittick, 2008). In subsequent centuries, Sufism spread throughout the Muslim world, including Anatolia, the place now known as modern-day Turkey. Anatolian Sufism, a combination of Persian and Arabic Sufism, began during the 12th and 13th centuries, and it soon evolved into a critical element of Turkish Islamic culture. The Ottoman Empire, which lasted for multiple centuries from the 14th to the early 20th and ruled over Anatolia and a large swath of the Muslim world, greatly affected the evolution and expansion of Sufism within that same region. The Ottoman Empire was influential in fostering the spread and integration of Sufism into Turkish Islamic culture and elevating it into a sophisticated art form through the Empire's patronage of the Sufi orders, or *tariqas*, within Islam (Chittick, 2008). The rich cultural and historical traditions of Anatolian Sufism jump off the pages of Elif Shafak's "*The Forty Rules of Love*," set in contemporary Turkey. The book reflects the centuries-old influence of Sufism on Turkish Islamic culture and the historical and cultural depth of its roots in the country. This research examines the portrayal of Sufism within Elif Shafak's work of fiction through textual analysis and delves into the characters' journeys and experiences as medium to effectively convey the principles of Islamic philosophy, in particular Sufism, through the lens of love, its role in spiritual development and its role in the understanding of Islamic philosophy within the framework of contemporary literature.

1.1. Objectives of the Study

- To explore the portrayal of Islamic philosophy, particularly Sufism, in the novel *The Forty Rules of Love* by Elif Shafak.
- To analyze how the characters, journeys and experiences reflect the principles of Islamic philosophy, particularly Sufism.
- To examine the role of love in the context of Islamic philosophy and its portrayal in the novel.

1.2. Research Questions

- 1) How is Islamic philosophy, particularly Sufism, portrayed in the novel?
- 2) How do the characters' journeys and experiences reflect the principles of Islamic philosophy, particularly Sufism, in the novel?
- 3) In what ways does the novel explore the concept of love in the context of Islamic philosophy?

1.3. Significance of the Study

This research contributes to the research on Islamic philosophy, particularly in Sufism, in a work of literature in a contemporary setting. This research helps to understand how Islamic philosophy in particular Sufism is represented in a work of fiction and how it has shaped the characters and their journeys. This research helps the readers to understand how it authors portray Islamic philosophy in relation to the role of love and how this is presented in Shafak's novel and other contemporary literature. This research also adds to the understanding of the historical background of Sufism and how did that make an impact on the author's writing. This research brings the potential to increase our understanding about Islamic philosophy out of traditional scholarly literature and bring it to a more popular audience through literature.

2. Literature Review

Islamic philosophy dates back many centuries and has been the subject of extensive academic inquiry. However, the field of Islamic philosophy in fiction is relatively new. Fictional representations of Islamic philosophy can make complex beliefs and ideas accessible to a broader audience. This literature review explores contemporary literature in the field of the representation of Islamic philosophy, and its larger significance in contemporary literature. Soliman (2016) examines the rise of literature on Islam and Muslims and suggests that post-9/11 literature has significantly contributed to this increase. Soliman argues that the literature featuring Islam and Muslims has demonstrated implications for shaping public opinion and consequently, the treatment of Muslims and Islam itself, by Americans. However, his focus is largely on the representation of Islam and Muslims in American fiction, and disregards the representation of Islamic philosophy including American fiction. In "Modern Muslim Intellectuals and the Qur'an", Taji-Farouki (2006) explores the relationship between the Qur'an and the modern Muslim intellect. This work provides an insight into the role of the Qur'an in the contemporary discourse of Muslims and how it is rationalized by modern Muslim intellectuals. While Taji-Farouki's (2006) work centralizes the the Qur'an, it shows the relevance of fiction of Islamic philosophy in contemporary discourse and how it is rationalized by modern scholars. Sufism: An Introduction to the Mystical Tradition of Islam by Cornell (2007) offers an introduction to the mystical philosophy of Sufism, which is best defined as a branch of Islamic philosophy that represents the inward path to Islam that seeks to purify the soul by letting it die to the life of the ego and be reborn into the eternal and unending life of the spirit in God. This work is highly relevant to the analysis of Muslim philosophers in fiction given that it provides an overview of the principles of Sufism as well as the context in which they originated, which will help to understand the way that the philosophy is portrayed in the literature.

Islamic philosophy is a vast and diverse area of thought, ranging from metaphysics to ethics, and literature has been shaped by its influence throughout history (Nasr, 2001). Another school of Islamic philosophy is Sufism, which emphasizes the inner dimension of Islam, focuses on spiritual growth, and seeks love from God (Chittick, 2008). One can easily note this in Shafak's novel where Sufi philosophy reigns deeply. In it, she applies the principles of Sufism to describe how love can influence a person and then help them become close to God (Rumi, 2005). Love, a major concept in Islamic philosophy, is often considered to be the most important purpose of existence and the means to find God. "The Forty Rules of Love" centers on the transformative power of love. For instance, it is love that binds together Ella and Aziz, helping them break free from societal norms and establish a deep spiritual connection.

The Forty Rules of Love: A Novel of Rumi, a novel by Shafak (2010) is an example of the manner in which Islamic philosophy, specifically Sufism, can be portrayed within a fictional work. The novel incorporates Sufism's principles in telling the story and examines the nature of love and the nature of love's role in spiritual growth. The novel reflects the principles of Sufism in that it is through their individual quests that characters find life changes and realizes things that Sufi philosopher would like us to know and contributes to a variety of portrayals of Islamic philosophy within contemporary literature in the modern and postmodern critical tradition. While there is a large body of literature on Islamic philosophy, its portrayal in fiction is a relatively recent area of study. The existing literature highlights the possible significance of the portrayal of Islamic philosophy in fiction, especially in helping to shape the public's opinion and understanding of Islam and Muslims. This research on the analysis of Islamic philosophy in fiction hopes to add to the growing body of literature in this area and help to illuminate the portrayal of Islamic philosophy in contemporary literature.

Shafak's perspective on these journeys brings to light how believing in one's internal truth can lead to profound transformation. The eminent Sufi figures of yesteryears, Rumi and Shams foremost among them, symbolize the highest ideals of Sufism while guiding mankind on the arduous path towards true enlightenment and self-realization. Thus, Shafak's subtle explorations of inner landscapes demonstrate how Islamic philosophy can shape an individual's destiny. Elif Shafak's novel "The Forty Rules of Love" stands as a testament to this marriage between artistry and philosophy, drawing deeply from Sufism's principles for its noble objectives. In using Sufi teachings and principles of love, exposure, and transformation, Shafak has written a novel that leaves a deep impression on its readers. Furthermore, character journeys in the novel lead

readers to ponder timeless topics such as the nature of life, the meaning of events, and the quest for enlightenment.

3. Research Methodology

In order to analyze Islamic philosophy in *The Forty Rules of Love* by Elif Shafak, qualitative research approach is applied. The novel served as the primary source for the research and the secondary sources for the research consisted of academic journals and books on Islamic philosophy, Sufism, and contemporary literature. This analysis focusses on identifying the prominent themes related to Islamic philosophy in general, and Sufism in particular, in the novel and how these themes are portrayed through the journeys and experiences of the characters.

3.1. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of Kristeva (1980) is used for the representation of Islamic philosophy in fiction which involves the use of literary devices and techniques to express complex ideas and beliefs. The concept of intertextuality is crucial to understanding the depiction of Islamic philosophy in fiction. As Kristeva (1980) maintains, every text is made up of other texts and these texts carry over the meaning of the old into the new. The depiction of Islamic philosophy in fiction draws upon existing traditions and discourses within Islamic philosophy and imports them into the narrative. We believe that the portrayal of Islamic philosophy, specifically Sufism, in the novel, *The Forty Rules of Love*, has significant implications for our understanding of Islamic philosophy in contemporary popular culture.

3.2. Data Analysis

In Elif Shafak's novel *The Forty Rules of Love*, Islamic philosophy and in particular, Sufism plays a central role. It is told in the dual narrative, with the 13th-century Sufi mystic Rumi's story intertwining with that of a contemporary housewife, Ella Rubinstein. The novel explores Rumi and Ella's quest for the deepest meanings of life, shedding light on the themes of spirituality, love and the yearning for God's love in a profoundly human way. One of the primary ways that Islamic philosophy especially Sufism is shown in the novel is through the character Shams of Tabriz, a wandering dervish who is Rumi's spiritual tutor. Shams is portrayed in the novel as a master of Sufi teachings and practices. This includes the artful use of poetry and storytelling as vehicles for conveying profound spiritual truths. The novel also explores one of the central philosophical concepts in Sufism that of the unity of being. It is articulated through Rumi's role in the novel as someone who lives in continuous spiritual union with the divine. Perhaps most subtly, the novel also explores the role of women in Islamic philosophy and Sufism through the character of Ella, a modern woman who is grappling with her own spiritual and personal growth. Ella's journey mirrors the journey of countless modern women who are living and working in Islamic societies. Through her character, she becomes a vehicle for exploring some of the unique opportunities and challenges that women encounter in the Islamic world. Through these and other themes, *The Forty Rules of Love* paints a rich, multi-dimensional portrait of Islamic philosophy and Sufism in particular. Spanning the depths of history and the complexities of modern life, it draws on a rich tableau of insights and truths about Sufism that invite the reader to discover this philosophy and their own place within it even as they reach the novel's final pages.

Firstly, Shams of Tabriz is a guide and mentor to Rumi, introducing him to the principles of Sufi philosophy and helping him on his spiritual journey. Shams teaches Rumi to forsake material possessions and move toward a life of humble simplicity and direct devotion to the Divine: In Sufi symbology, to embrace detachment (nothingness) to extricate oneself from concern for the desires arising from the animal side of one's nature in order to devote oneself to spiritual growth. Secondly, the novel emphasizes the principles at the heart of Islamic philosophy, including love and compassion of love as the primary engine of transformation of both self and universe, of love as the supreme unifying force. The relationship between Shams and Rumi is presented as a prime example of this kind of spiritualized love a subject which both men explore in their conversations, with the result that they reach a far deeper understanding of the Divine and love: The healing of old traumas is shown to be love's work, as is the bringing together of individuals. Fourthly, the novel explores the theme of surrender, a fundamental principle of Sufi philosophy. Rumi, as well as Ella, must learn to surrender his ego and desire in order to wholeheartedly embark on his spiritual quest. In their respective voyages, they understand that one of the requirements for spiritual growth is the willingness to accept that one cannot always be in control and to loosen the grip and surrender to the divine. Finally, the book examines the

role of women in Islamic belief and in Sufism. Ella symbolizes the challenges and the struggles of contemporary Muslim women. She challenges social and patriarchal norms that she sees in her daily life. But by participating in their journey of spiritual exploration and through being exposed to Sufi thought, she starts to feel a sense of empowerment and starts to gain the sort of agency that women in the Sufi tradition have often always had. Islam is a religion of love and progress which accepts difference of opinion. Rule 35 goes on to say:

"In this world, it is not similarities or regularities that take us a step forward, but blunt opposites. And all the opposites in the universe are present within each and every one of us. Therefore the believer needs to meet the unbeliever residing within. And the nonbeliever should get to know the silent faithful in him. Until the day one reaches the stage of Insan-i-Kamil, the perfect human being, faith is a gradual process and one that necessitates its seeming opposite: disbelief."(309)

In sum, the paths that the characters in *The Forty Rules of Love* take while having the experiences they do reflect the principles of Islamic religious philosophy, Sufism in particular, the importance of: detachment; love and compassion; the oneness of being; and the role of women in Muslim society. They also reflect these characters having the kinds of experiences that serve to give the reader a nuanced, complex view of Islamic religious philosophy and spirituality: that is, what it looks like, and what it feels like how it's experienced. In Elif Shafak's *The Forty Rules of Love*, the author discusses love in Islamic philosophy in several ways. To begin with, the novel highlights the idea of divine love as central to Islamic philosophy. The relationship between Rumi and Shams of Tabriz is portrayed as one that is intensely spiritual as well as loving. Through their love for Shams and their love for one another, Rumi and Shams become better able to appreciate and understand the divine. Their love isn't just sexual or even romantic, but deeply spiritual, rooted in their profound connection to things that are holy, or divine in the Christian sense. Second, love as a source of profound healing that can move across generations, physical bodies, and spiritual planes also underpins the novel. Ella, for example, is forced to confront the pain of a difficult marriage and past traumas. Yet as she journeys through Sufi philosophy and spirituality, she comes to understand that love is the only thing that can truly make her whole. She realizes that by truly loving herself and others, she can work through her own pain and in turn can work through that of those around her, who she comes to realize are just like her worthy of love and yearning to connect with those around them. This emphasizes one other thing about love that the novel considers a cardinal feature of the emotion. In Islamic philosophy, compassion is arguably the feature of love, as Islamic characters and the Sufis do in this story, help characters show compassion for those who wrong them the Islamic concept "rahma" denominates this, the idea that ideal love means being kind and merciful to all of God's creation, and showing compassion to the numerator. The novel fifthly suggests that love allows spiritual enlightenment. Characters search for their creator by locating and loving the divine in all mundane and otherworldly and obtain spiritual enlightenment.

Lastly, the novel challenges modern Muslim society's perceptions of love and gender roles. Ella as a character serves as a representative of modern Muslim women, who seek to break free from societal expectations and ongoing patriarchal paradigms. She seeks out, and finds, her empowerment through Asrari's journey and her adoption of Sufi philosophy on a very personal level and, in doing so, she breaks these age-old molds and ways of looking at love. *The Forty Rules of Love* contributes a nuanced examination of love within Islamic philosophy. Not only does the novel showcase divine love, the significance of compassion, and the human quest for spiritual evolution, it also depicts a struggle between these Islamic philosophies regarding love and traditional gender roles within Muslim society. A strong response to the first paragraph would analyze Shafak's depiction of Islamic philosophy in relation to the historical context of Sufism. Examining The Sufi movement might be traced back to the spiritual and mystical movements throughout the Islamic world in the eighth century, began as a spiritual and mystical movement aimed at better cultivating the inner self in order to attain divine love. Thus, Sufism has a long history of being the dominant perspective within Islamic philosophy; *The Forty Rules of Love* can be seen as a current manifestation of Sufism within Islam, affirming their relationship to the arts, to literature, to music, and even the importance of love.

Shafak's novel is rooted in a rich historical and cultural context which draws deeply from his teachings and philosophy. This extends to Sufism not only as a set of ideas, but a lived

practice whose most sacred rituals are experienced and detailed by the novel's characters. The portrayal of Rumi's relationship with Shams of Tabriz as a disciple, for example, closely mirrors the beliefs associated with the historical significance of the master-disciple relationship within Sufi circles. The Sufi path is often termed "the path of love", and the master-disciple relationship itself is marked by an intense spiritual bond which centers around the disciple seeking spiritual knowledge and insight from the master. The novel also serves an initiation into the practice of various Sufi rituals, linking the symbolic practice of the whirling dance or "sama" to the experience of altered states of consciousness in which a worshipper achieves a spiritual 'drunkenness' or ecstasy: the whirling dervish believes this is a way for them to reach and commune with the divine. And later, the novel employs the concept of "fana", the annihilation or extinction of the self in the divine, which is central to Sufi philosophy. The novel also demonstrates Sufism's historical context in relation to mainstream Islam as well as other religious and philosophical traditions. The teaching of Sufi philosophy in Shafak's novel highlight the emphasis within it on peace, tolerance and acceptance of diversity. Sufi philosophy is often shown within Shafak's novel to be at odds with the more narrow-minded and intolerant teachings of mainstream Islam, reflecting the historical reality of successive waves of Sufi communities living in the shadow of more orthodox Islamic institutions. However, it also gestures towards the historical reality of Sufi shrines and khanqahs (monasteries) coexisting with the practitioners of a wide variety of religious and philosophical traditions.

Sufism's historical context heavily influences Shafak's portrayal of Islamic philosophy in *The Forty Rules of Love*. The emphasis on the mystical and spiritual in Islam, the importance of the master-disciple relationship and the depictions of different Sufi practices and rituals reflect the historical context of Sufism as it rose to become one of the dominant forces within Islamic philosophy and culture. The first recitation of the same verse pronounced by Shams in the novel is originally taken by Shafak from a translation of Quran:

"Men are the maintainers of women because Allah has made some of them to excel others and because they spend out of their property; the good women are therefore obedient, guarding the unseen as Allah has guarded; and (as to) those on whose part you fear desertion, admonish them, and leave them alone in the sleeping-places and beat them; then if they obey you, do not seek a way against them; surely Allah is High, Great."(Shafak, 2010)

Islamic feminism has been shown when Shams recites and closes his eyes. The translation is echoes the views of Islamic feminists:

"Men are the support of women as God gives some more means than others, and because they spend of their wealth (to provide for them). So women who are virtuous are obedient to God and guard the hidden as God has guarded it. As for women you feel are averse, talk to them persuasively; then leave them alone in bed (without molesting them) and go to bed with them (when they are willing). If they open out to you, do not seek an excuse for blaming them. Surely God is sublime and great." (197)

In terms of Islamic philosophy, Elif Shafak's *The Forty Rules of Love* performs one particularly vital service by offering a contemporary work in which Sufism is not presented as a misunderstood or marginal form of Islamic belief but as a central, crucial, and active branch of Islamic philosophy. In doing so, the novel advances our understanding of Islamic philosophy by illustrating that Sufism is indeed a rich and diverse philosophical tradition that seeks to cultivate the inner self and find one's way to divine love. It offers the reader a detailed and engaging introduction to the central concepts, practices, and rituals of Sufis. Moreover, as the novel unfolds readers find themselves with a deeper understanding of Islamic philosophy in general, as they gain a complex and multilayered view of Islam and Muslim cultures. Like many contemporary works of fiction by Muslim authors, *The Forty Rules of Love* counters the simplistic and often negative portrayals of Islam and Muslim cultures that one finds far too often in popular culture and mainstream media. Such literature is so needed in our current cultural environment, where there is a real hunger for greater understanding and appreciation of different religious traditions and cultures. At a time when so much of our world is still riven by intolerance and conflict, a novel like *The Forty Rules of Love* serves to reinforce the central tenets of Islamic philosophy: respect for other cultures, tolerance of difference, and the pursuit of inner peace and enlightenment. In such a world, this is one of the most important functions of literature on Islamic philosophy today, and *The Forty Rules of Love* is a welcome addition to it. Hashmi (2020) also

offers the similar perspective and asserts that this discourse is helping a new form fiction written by Muslim authors wherein Islam is the central theme. The novel represents an important addition to this literature, by demonstrating the importance of understanding Islamic philosophy and its workings in contemporary literature. The portrayal of Sufi philosophy as depicted in Elif Shafak's *The Forty Rules of Love* as well as the manner in which the novel "challenges stereotypes of Islam and Muslim culture" and its highlighting of the way in which Islamic philosophy suggests a wellspring of "mutual respect and tolerance for each other that provides one of the best foundations for an ideal society in a diverse world" represents a deep contribution to this strong literature on the ongoing tradition of Islamic philosophy.

4. Conclusion

The study reveals a powerful meditation on the journey inwards as one grows and develops spiritually and endorses the findings of Widhiyoga (2017). If for no other reason though, it is important for offering a refreshing portrayal of Islam and Muslim culture in general. Rather than repeating the same old stereotypes and misunderstandings that many continue to put out about the tradition, it offers a real and multi-dimensional picture of it, in all of its diverse splendor. And many of the themes that it raises diversity, mutual respect, simply in search of inner peace and enlightenment are ones that we could all likely take a bit of advice from. At a time when we are all feeling the need to take a greater and more serious look at who it is that we all are, and to then take a look at those around us with a bit of appreciation and respect for how they differ from other novels. The study also demonstrates just how relevant Islamic philosophy continues to be to the modern world today in that, the emphasis in the novel of the necessity to attain inner peace and in demonstrating the importance of the necessity of cherishing diversity and tolerating it; this is something which speaks to the world today where there is so much ignorance and so much need to cherish and tolerate other. Finally, it reminds to what extent we must challenge misconceptions, misunderstandings and stereotypes which continue to constrain Islam and Muslim culture in the minds of many.

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