

RESEARCH ARTICLE



ISSN  
INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
INDIA  
2395-2636 (Print); 2321-3108 (online)

## Sublime Sufi ponderings on love in Elif shafak's "Forty rules of Love"

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DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.13.3.245](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.13.3.245)



### Article info

Article Received: 06/07/2025

Article Accepted: 05/08/2025

Published online: 08/08/2025

### Abstract

Elif Shafak is a Turkish-British novelist and women's rights activist. In her novel "Forty Rules of Love" she discusses the embalming and transforming power of love on human beings with the backdrop of the life of the famous spiritual leader Rumi and his mentor Shams of Tabriz. There is a parallel story of a frustrated middle-aged housewife Ella struggling to find meaning to her drab existence. The number forty seems to have a special significance as highlighted in the novel. There are forty rules of love, Ella is forty years old, Shams and Rumi discuss spirituality for forty days and so on. With the backdrop of bloodshed and religious fanaticism of the Middle Ages of Mongolian invasions and Crusades, the universal love of Sufism is brought live through the life and teachings of Shams of Tabriz. Juxtaposed is the growing Sweet Blasphemy of Ella with Aziz. Elif Shafak has shown great intuition into the workings of the minds of different people of different ideologies and at the same time reinstated the principles of love above everything. It is also a probe into the depths of Islam, offering different layers of meaning to the preachings of Muhammed. In this paper I would like to highlight the tenets of Sufi philosophy and their relevance to present day violence and intolerance. Centuries have passed by since Rumi but their philosophy still reverberates within every soul hungry for love. They are proven ageless and timeless.

Keywords: Mystic, sweet blasphemy, wandering dervish.

Elif Shafak, the author of "*The Forty Rules of Love*" (2010) is a Turkish speaker, columnist, essayist, academic, and an author. She writes in Turkish and English. She is the author of seventeen books, from which eleven are novels.

She has to her credit novels like *The Bastard of Istanbul*, *Honour*, *Black Milk*, *The Flea Palace* etc. Her third novel *The Forty Rules of Love: A Novel of Rumi* (2010) follows the parallel life paths of Rumi and Shams Tabrez, a famous pair

in the thirteenth century vis-à-vis Ella-a Jewish, house wife with her first editing job of the novel "Sweet Blasphemy" by Aziz Zahara,

Elif Shafak is a great story teller. She depicts in her novels, the voice of the voiceless and the peripherals. She talks in an interview about how art is about resistance. She brings the 'other' into the mainstream and makes the readers empathise with them. She has the rare distinction of having readers from diverse backgrounds ranging from liberals, conservationists, secularists, women with headscarfs to those wearing miniskirts. In this novel, Elif shafak inspires us to the universal appeal of love cutting across the barriers of language, history, continents and cultures as she also believes in 'global solidarity'.

This novel titled *Forty Rules of Love* is a semi-historic story of the spiritual journey of a Sufi poet Rumi and his friendship with an extraordinary dervish Shams of Tabrez, and parallel to it, she depicted a modern love affair of a middle-aged housewife of New England and a Sufi author. The story of Ella begins in the year 2008 and ends in 2009, whereas Rumi and Shams's story begins in 1242 and ends in 1248. The novel starts in 1252 where a killer is narrating his perspective. The novel is set in multiple settings majorly in Northampton, Samarkand, Konya, Alexandria and Baghdad. Though the stories are set in different times, the situations are pretty much the same. The thirteenth century was torn apart by crusades, violence, bloodshed, intolerance and insecurity. Even twenty first century is known for its jingoism, intolerance and spiritual anarchy. Elif Shafak brings to life through the universal love concept of 'Sufism' highlighted by the thirteenth-century Sufi poet and mystic, Muhammad Jalal ad-Din Balkhi, known to the Anglophone world as Rumi. According to the biographers of Rumi, his poetry carries the idea of love for humanity which appeals his readers from every part of the world. His teachings are useful for the people of West and East both, as they are beyond any limitations of linguistics,

cultures and geographical barriers. According to Muhammad (2007), on the basis of the contribution of Rumi to Islamic Mysticism, like other Muslim world Sufis, he is regarded as saint and well known Sufi Master. The teachings of Sufism promote Spiritual wisdom, peace, love and hope for all the humanity without making any ethnic division and for this very reason the concepts of Sufism are adopted by many literary figures. Elif Shafaq is a Turkish writer whose work is deeply influenced by Islamic Mysticism and especially by Mawlana Jalal al-Din Rumi.

The novel highlights the specific concept of Ibn 'Arabi which indicates that all human beings possess the Divine Spirit within themselves and when they acknowledge that presence in them, they are set to a spiritual journey by God which makes them aware of the realities which are not easily seen or understood by common people. Ahmed (2016) argues that the character of Shams in the novel under discussion depicts the concept of "Wahadatul Wajud or Unity of Being" that is the highest level of mystical elevation as Shams showed the characteristics of the creator in the novel. The concept of Oneness of Being refers to the level of spirituality that one attains after he goes through a journey in the search of the One. And the person, who strives to find God, is motivated by love for the Divine. The seeker ascends the ladder of knowledge and self-recognition in order to achieve the level of Unity with the Real in which love plays a vital role. The seeker through patience and submission through Love for the Divine, moves from "Know Thyself" to "Know Thy God". And after that, the human gains unification with the Real Being and also gains some Divine attributes which unveil the secrets of the universe to him. It makes him look at the world beyond its limits and he is able to do some extraordinary things which are difficult to perceive and understand by the senses of an ordinary person. Shams was one such person who had this contact with the divine since his childhood. He talked to God and had visions and he thought were common to all. His own

father misunderstands his dreams and sayings. No wonder he is misunderstood by rigid clerics of Islam in the thirteenth century for his universal love. He was considered a heretic who didn't believe in Sharia and hence was murdered. But Shams was aware of his fate right from the beginning as he had his divine visions and prophecies! Through his training, Shams also makes Rumi a lover of the Divine in the truest sense.

The novel has many phrases and allusions to Quran. Each chapter begins with the letter "b". For Sufi mystics the secret of the Koran lies in the verse Al-Fatiha, the essence of which is contained in the word *bismilahirahmanirahim* (in the name of Allah, the Benevolent and Merciful), with the quintessence of the word in the dot below the first Arabic letter, a dot that embodies the universe. Shams espouses multiple readings of the Koran.

"Each and every reader comprehends the Holy Qur'an on a different level in tandem with the depth of his understanding. There are four levels of insight. The first level is the outer meaning and it is the one that the majority of the people are content with. Next is the Batm—the inner level. Third, there is the inner of the inner. And the fourth level is so deep it cannot be put into words and is therefore bound to remain indescribable." (p.37)

In trying to interpret the lines of Quran, Shams becomes controversial. The normal clerics who cannot understand the deep meaning of the Quran accuse Shams of blasphemy. Ella commits blasphemy by choosing love over a failing marriage and to stand by Azia Zahara.

The novel is cosmopolitan as well as provincial. It operates at individual and universal levels. At the individual level, it is the transformation of two individuals: Ella and Rumi through Love. At the universal level, it is

the healing power of tenets of Sufism operating at different continents, ages and cultures.

The novel also has postmodern techniques of narration and themes. Postmodern literature entails 'pastiche' which deals with pasting multiple elements unitedly because a narrative can be a fusion of various genres. The story is told using various techniques of using first person narrative, e-mails, letters and the characters themselves. The view point of not only the main characters like Ella and Shams are delved into but also the story moves forward through the eyes of minor characters like the desert rose (harlot), Hasan the beggar, Suleiman the drunk, Baybars the warrior, Kimya, Sultan Walad etc., The chain of events leading to the murder of Shams of Tabriz, the prophecy, the visions, the dreams, the common man's reaction --- are portrayed with sincerity which leaves a non-committal report of the happenings for which no one can be hated; not even the murderer.

Another feature of postcolonialism is 'Fragmentation'. It is the realization of estrangement of any character and is a prominent element of postmodern literature. We do have estranged characters dealing with their loneliness amidst family and fame. This underlying sense of void is reflected in the following lines:

No matter who we are or where we live, deep inside we all feel incomplete. It's like we have lost something and need to get it back. Just what that something is, most of us never find out. And of those who do, even fewer manage to go out and look for it. (p 34)

Ella feels stalled despite her gracious suburban life in Northampton, New England. Her teenage children are growing away from her; her husband is distant and unfaithful. Ella was devoid of passion or emotion in her marriage life. She had convinced herself that they didn't matter after twenty years of marriage. She dumps her drab existence by

pouring herself into the household duties. When Jeanette, her elder daughter, accuses her of forcing her to make the mistake she herself did by marrying early and having kids, does Ella realize what a sham her married life was. Ella's new job as reader for a publisher introduces her to Sufism through a manuscript she is sent to read, and has life-changing consequences. It is as if she sees in Aziz the incomplete part of herself. "Sweet Blasphemy", the novel she is sent to appraise, tells the story of a 13th-century wandering Persian Sufi Dervish, Shams of Tabriz, and his inspirational relationship with Rumi, the greatest poet of the Sufi canon. Rumi too was a successful cleric and was unaware of the void in his soul until Shams of Tabriz comes into his life. He feels he had a void in his soul which he resisted seeing and remained lonely and unfulfilled inside in spite of fame and riches outside. Shams was an eclectic dervish-unreliable, unconventional and unpredictable. But through Shams, Rumi is transformed and was inspired to write the Masnavi, a key Sufi tract which weaves Koranic analysis with poetry, parables of the everyday, the mythic and miraculous. It was to beget Mevlevi Sufism, practised through poetry, music and dance.

Aziz and Shams act as mirrors in reflecting the void in the lives of Ella and Rumi. As the Qur'an says, "Believers are each other's mirrors". This contact with Aziz, sets ripples in her life. And Ella who had to put a lot of effort to change her coffee brand takes the brave decision of divorcing her husband. Love liberates both Ella and Rumi. Rumi was transformed from a mainstream cleric to a committed mystic, passionate poet, advocate of love, and originator of the ecstatic dance of the whirling dervishes, daring to break free of all conventional rules.

Challenging truisms of the fundamentalist Islamic orient and the consumerist Judeo-Christian occident, the novel proposes Sufism as a quest for spirituality which can fill the void at the heart of both. Shams says,

"Scholars who focus on the sharia know the outer meaning. Sufis know the inner meaning. Saints know the inner of the inner. And as for the fourth level, that is known only by prophets and those closest to God." P 37

And true to his words, Rumi feels that his companionship with Shams was the fourth reading of Quran which cannot be explained in words.

The very first rule of love is:

"How we see God is a direct reflection of how we see ourselves.

If God brings to mind mostly fear and blame, it means there is too much fear and blame welled inside

us. If we see God as full of love and compassion, so are we."

This perhaps is the essence of all religions – oneness of human beings and compassion for each other. Amidst the religious fundamentalism prevalent in the world today, Rumi and Shams through their Sufism seem to give answer to attain peace. Instead of a "jihad" aimed at war against non-believers, Rumi stood up for an inner-oriented juhud to struggle against our own ego, *nafs*. This seems to be the ultimate solution for the terror ridden world of today.

The writer delivers the message that Sufism, which is based on accepting variance and pluralism, is the key to terminate the continuing ideological and religious clashes. In order to combat the increasing hazard of religious extremism, sectarianism, and dogmatism that are the main causes of terrorism, there is a terrible need to find a way of life which operates on the basis of inclusion and shuns exclusion. This universal love is the talisman for the divided world today.

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