



Rumi and the Paradox of Character in *The Forty Rules of Love* by Elif Shafak

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Received: 03 May 2024; Received in revised form: 06 Jun 2024; Accepted: 15 Jun 2024; Available online: 23 Jun, 2024
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Abstract— This paper aims to study the characters in Elif Shafak's *The Forty Rules of Love* in the context of Sufism. It primarily examines what Aziz and Ella represent beyond the text. Parallels are drawn between the eponymous characters, Rumi, and other mystics of the time. Sufi philosophy is studied through symbolic significance of the elements fire and water. The Christian wisdom present is also observed. Allusions to the *Masnavi*, Rumi's magnum opus, is inferred to be present in the novel. Ella and Aziz grow and change. This growth is examined through the four stages of Sufism.

Keywords— Characters; Philosophy; Rumi; Sufism; *The Forty Rules of Love*



I. INTRODUCTION

Ernest Hemingway asserts that, "When writing a novel a writer should create living people; people not characters. A character is a caricature" (*Death in the Afternoon* 173). In *The Forty Rules of Love*, Elif Shafak modifies Hemingway's suggestion. Her characters do not stand for living people, but instead resurrect the dead. They allude to history and re-speak and re-act a beautiful Sufi past into existence. The characters have their principles. These principles lead to philosophies; In this case, to a Sufi philosophy which divulges on its own past.

The Forty Rules of Love is a 2009 novel by Elif Shafak. It follows two intertwined narratives. Firstly, the book tells the story of Ella Rubinstein, a woman nearing the age of forty, who has settled into complacency after marriage. She is the mother of three children, but exists without passion or love. Moreover, her husband cheats on her. Ella's life changes when she becomes a reader for a literary agent. She is assigned a book titled *Sweet Blasphemy*, written on the Persian Sufi poet Rumi and his guide Shams of Tabriz. The author is one Aziz Zahara who is a Sufi himself. Ella is drawn closer to Aziz through the emails they exchange. She realizes the lack of love in her life, and seeks it in Aziz.

The second narrative divulges on the fraternal love between the wandering Sufi Dervish Shams of Tabriz, and the Islamic scholar Rumi. We are exposed to the story of

Shams and Rumi Through a book titled *Sweet Blasphemy* written by Aziz, which Ella reviews. Reading this book makes her aware of the lack of love in her life.

This study attempts to respond to the below queries:

- Do characters in the novel and their circumstances have historical parallels in Sufism?
- To what extent does the novel succeed in depicting Sufi symbolism, philosophy, and way of life.

The importance of this research is that it places the novel in its rightful philosophical context. Once placed in context, all other analysis becomes easier. Although a few papers have been written with other kinds of analysis, they could be further improved using the information in this paper.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

"Postmodernity in Elif Shafak's *The Forty Rules of Love*" is a paper by Akbar, Nabila et al published in 31 December, 2020. In it, the researchers assert that Ella, Aziz and David all live in a postmodern society. But the paper also attempts to postmodernize the historical. Rumi and Shams do not live in a postmodern environment. Yet, the paper draws out such elements from them. This postmodern lens prevents history from speaking. It has to utilize this mouthpiece that censor history to fit the postmodern. Hence, it draws one's

attention away from the history and philosophy. History is postmodernised, while the postmodern society of Ella and Aziz is not viewed through the lens of history and Sufi culture.

“The ‘Rumi Phenomenon’ Between Orientalism and Cosmopolitanism: The Case of Elif Shafak’s *The Forty Rules of Love*” is a paper by Elena Furlanetto published in 15 August, 2013. It has emphasis on history. The reasons for Rumi’s popularity in the west, and how Rumi has been Americanised through Ella in the novel are explored. Aziz takes the place of Shams. But the paper fails to expand the characters beyond this linear allusion. Moreover, this comparison which lasts only a single paragraph, bases its assumption on broad similarities rather than specific details. There is an attempt to give the relationship of Aziz and Ella a historical dimension. But this is limited to comparing their relationship to that between Shams and Rumi. This comparison is based on the broad similarity of both relationships being that of a master-student dynamic, without considering specific historical details.

Another paper “Representing Eastern Spirituality in Elif Shafak’s Novel *Forty Rules of Love: A Critical Discourse Analysis*” divulges on Sufi spirituality in the novel. The paper is on Shafak’s views on Sufism. The author’s views on Sufism fail to incorporate important historical details. Hence, there is a gap to be filled with such details.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This is a qualitative research. The characters of the novel *The Forty Rules of Love* are analyzed through qualitative information from various books, articles, and websites. Connections are made through analyzing historical and cultural details available through various sources.

IV. ANALYSIS

4.1) Blasphemy

Rumi was a thirteenth century poet and Islamic scholar. Aziz on the other hand, is the author of *Sweet Blasphemy*, the first book Ella is assigned to read for her new job as an assistant to a literary agent. *Sweet Blasphemy* tells the tale of Rumi and his encounter with Shams of Tabriz. The title *Sweet Blasphemy* points to a certain nature of Rumi and Shams. Shams was accused of blasphemy. He was a basket weaver by profession (Lewis 147). Rumi on the other hand was an Islamic scholar. Despite this, many accuse him of uttering blasphemy through his poems. For example:

“I have lost myself in God, and now God is mine.

Don't look for Him in every direction, for He is in my soul.

I am the Sultan. I would be lying.

If I said that there is someone who is my sultan” (Shiva).

“This is you, making me drunk in a monastery.

Turning me into an idol worshiper while I am seated at Kaaba.

I have no control in this game of good and bad” (Shiva).

In the novel, Ella utters blasphemy. In the email she sends on June 5, 2008, she admits that she is unable to remember the last time she prayed. Then she remembers the last prayer she made and admits that it was “more like complaining to a higher self” (Shafak 96) than actual prayer. And like Rumi, she has the attitude that she is her own sultan. This is apparent when she tells Aziz that she is a very strict mom who employs the “strategy of a guerilla” (Shafak 96).

Shams and Aziz occupy the role of master. Rumi and Ella are followers captivated by their master’s wisdom. Just as Shams changed Rumi’s perception of the world, so does Aziz that of Ella’s. Moreover, master Sameed had told Aziz that he resembles Shams of Tabriz (Shafak 152). Does this mean Aziz and Ella stand for Shams and Rumi respectively?

4.2) What do Aziz and Ella stand for?

In many instances, Aziz seems to resemble Rumi more than Shams. The death and burial of Aziz is similar to that of Rumi. Aziz is made aware that he has only sixteen months to live. Hence, Aziz is aware of when he will die. Rumi was aware of his death too. In December 1273, Rumi fell ill; he predicted his own death and composed a ghazal, which begins:

“How doest thou know what sort of king I have within me as companion?

Do not cast thy glance upon my golden face, for I have iron legs” (Hossein 120)

Aziz’s funeral is a grand event. In fact, an old Muslim man says that it is the craziest funeral Konya has ever witnessed, except for the funeral of Mawlana centuries ago.

“They celebrated his death, as they knew he would have wanted. Children played happily and unattended. A Mexican poet distributed pan de los muertos, and an old Scottish friend of Aziz’s sprinkled rose petals on everyone, raining over them like confetti, each and every one a colorful testimony that death was not something to be afraid of” (Shafak 223).

This is similar to what Rumi would have wanted. His sarcophagus is inscribed with the beginning lines of one of his poems, which reads:

On the day I die
 As they bear aloft my bier
 Do not suppose
 I'm consumed by cares of this world.
 Don't cry for me and do not lament (Lewis 225)

Aziz is buried in a cemetery, under a magnolia tree. The section of the book that talks about this is dated September 7, 2009. We are also told that he is buried in Konya, where Rumi was buried (Lewis 450). Konya is a major city in Turkey. The season in Turkey during the month of September is autumn. Hence, the magnolia tree that Aziz is buried under would most likely be leafless. This alludes to the Green dome that encompasses Rumi's grave. Just as the magnolia is devoid of leaves when Aziz is buried, Rumi's grave was initially devoid of the green dome. But the leaves would return on the spring of the following year, just as the dome would be completed the following year after Rumi's death. Rumi was buried on 17th December 1273. The dome on the other hand was completed only in 1274.

The magnolia is common in Europe and present day USA. It does not have much significance in Turkish culture, and isn't the national flower. It was brought to Turkey in the 18th century by European slaves under the Ottoman empire. Similarly, the Green dome was constructed by European slaves as well. Despite the slaves being foreign, the dome was built in a traditional Persian architectural style. However, the same cannot be said about the magnolia. There is nothing intrinsically Persian about it. Yet, it has sneaked into the land. And it has done so with such subtlety, that few in Turkey even wonder about the origin of the plant. It has become a part of the average Turkish park, despite not even being Turkish.

This magnoliation however isn't limited to Ottoman times. It exists in its modern form in a metaphysical sense. Elena Furlanetto's paper "The 'Rumi Phenomenon' Between Orientalism and Cosmopolitanism: The Case of Elif Shafak's *The Forty Rules of Love*" sheds light on this. Broadly speaking, the paper discusses the Americanism of Rumi and his work, and most importantly, how one is blind to it. The Americanism has sneaked in without realization on part of the reader. Hence, it is a case of metaphysical magnoliation.

In the sixth email Aziz sends, he says he is 54 years old. Rumi was the same age when he wrote what is considered his magnum opus: the *Masnavi*. Rumi was prompted by his last prominent student Hasan al Chalabi (Lewis 215). He also edited the work. Ella has a similar role. She initiates the back and forth of emails between herself and Aziz. She is the last person Aziz gets close to. Hence,

she fills Hasan's role. If Ella stands for Hasan, and Aziz for Rumi, then the emails exchanged between them could be thought of as standing for the *Masnavi* itself. But the role of Ella goes beyond that of Hasan. Instead, she replaces every scribe who has edited the *Masnavi*.

"Scribes usually interpolated verses to make transitions in the narrative less abrupt, to explain incidents more fully, or to amplify the themes which Rumi treats only briefly" (Lewis 305). Ella fulfills this. For example, she commences one of her emails to Aziz as such:

"In one of your earlier e-mails, you said the idea that we could control the course of our lives through rational choices was as absurd as a fish trying to control the ocean in which it swam." (Shafak 96)

This image of the fish is not uttered in any of the emails Aziz sends. Just like the scribes, it is something Ella adds to give the emails continuation. There is lack of connection between the emails. It is as if the entire conversation isn't available. This incompleteness is visible in the *Masnavi*. Nicholson's version is the first critical edition. On its creation, he left out content he thought to be written by scribes. Nicholson's text has 25,577 lines, while previous versions have around 27,700 (Lewis 306). Hence, the *Masnavi* as we read it isn't complete, just as we aren't allowed to read the entire conversation between Aziz and Ella.

4.3) Sufi and Christian Philosophy

"The idea of a Knowing Self has generated not only false expectations but also disappointments in places where life does not match our expectations" (Shafak 96). What Aziz conveys here could be analyzed through a Sufi lens.

All practices in Sufism are aimed at letting go of one's ego, which is considered the biggest hurdle to the realization of God. Simply put, this letting go of the ego is the art of living in the present moment. The Sufis had meditations and dances that kept them in the present moment. 'Tamal', the Arabic word for meditation, means 'to watch over.' Irrelevant thoughts are considered harmful, and one must keep a watch on one's mind to make sure they don't surface at random. Sama was another practice for achieving fana'a (annihilation of the ego). The Whirling Dervishes of Rumi's Mevlevi order are probably the best-known practitioners. Participants dance in a circle, with each individual spinning on their toes. (Mevlevi Order of America)

Ella desires this state of fana'a. In the end, she goes to Amsterdam without concrete plans. She follows her

heart, which could be seen as wanting to achieve fana'a, as opposed to having a "life (that) does not match our (Her) expectations" (Shafak 96). This message could be seen throughout the novel. One such instance is not initially clear. It is the instance where Aziz wakes up from a coma, and hears the morning prayer. He says:

"...it wakes us up from dreams, and we don't like that. We prefer to keep sleeping. That's why there is a line in the morning call that doesn't exist in the others. It says, 'Prayer is better than sleep'" (Shafak 222)

This is a motif in orthodox Islam and Christianity. Dreams are seen with suspicion because they take one out of fana'a. Prophet Muhammad says:

"There are three types of dreams: a righteous dream which is glad tidings from Allah, the dream which causes sadness is from Shaitan and a dream from the ramblings of the mind" (Sahih Muslim, Book 29, Hadith 5610).

The first kind is acceptable. But it does not make up the majority of dreams. Hence, dreams are often seen with suspicion.

"... and cause me, uncondemned now, to sleep a dreamless sleep, and keep Thy servant untroubled by thoughts, and drive away from me all satanic deeds" (*Prayer Book* 47).

These are prayers from the Russian orthodox Christian belief. To the Christian orthodox as well, the sleep should be "dreamless". Having a dream means that one was able access one's unconscious. This is against fana'a, which is created by losing oneself in external reality. Aziz lives by immersion, not dreaming. Like Rumi, he has travelled a lot. Rumi's father had to gather his family and travel about 2500 miles, going to Mecca along the way. Aziz too gets the opportunity to go to Mecca as a photographer. But he stays with the Sufis instead. Both Rumi and Aziz are hence immersed in life rather than dreaming about it like Ella.

Another Christian element is apparent in the only physical letter Ella writes.

"I decided to write you a letter this time. You know, the old-fashioned way, with ink, a perfumed paper, a matching envelope, and a stamp." (Shafak 170).

Let's compare it with 2 John 1:12 from the *Holy Bible* (New International Version)

"I have much to write to you, but I do not want to use paper and ink. Instead, I hope to visit you and talk with you face to face, so that our joy may be complete." (2 John 1:12)

Both statements have similarities. 2 John is addressed to "the elect lady and her children." This lady is a mystery. But it is speculated that she is a symbol for the church as a whole (Wilder 450). Similarly, Ella sees Aziz as a symbol for Sufism as a whole, since he is the only Sufi she knows.

4.4) Allusions to the *Masnavi*

The *Masnavi* is a series of poetry books with around 25,000 verses or 50,000 lines, depending on how the counting is done. The emails by Aziz could be seen as an allegory to this great work. But Aziz writes eight emails, while the *Masnavi* has only six books. This complicates things.

Although Aziz writes eight emails, we'll consider them as seven books. This reduction to seven books is attained by reducing the following two emails into one book:

"Dear Ella,

Shams is the person who was responsible for the transformation of Rumi from a local cleric to a world-famous poet and mystic. Master Sameed used to say to me, "Even if there might be a Shams equivalent in some people, what matters is, where are the Rumis to see it?"

Warm regards,

Aziz" (Shafak 125)

And

"Beloved Ella,

It's a long story. Do you really want to know?

Warmly,

Aziz" (Shafak 125)

They both appear under one of the parts titled 'Ella'. This is unlike his other emails, which exist only one per part. They belong to the same part in the novel. Hence, each part of the novel titled 'Ella', where Aziz writes to Ella could be seen as standing for individual books of the *Masnavi*.

The *Masnavi* comprises of only six books. But it should be noted that;

"At some point, relatively late in the manuscript tradition, a forged seventh book of slightly over a hundred pages was added to Rumi's *Masnavi*" (Lewis 304)

The legitimacy of this seventh book is disputed (Lewis 305). But it was nonetheless included in the *Masnavi* canon for a period of time. Comparing each book with the emails is beyond the scope of this paper. But a thematic analysis is feasible. The *Masnavi* undergoes a thematic shift from the first book to the last. The initial books begin by preaching the dangers of earthly pleasures (nafs), and the

need to control them (Williams 22). The books grow spiritual in theme, until the final books encourage giving up earthly pleasures all together (Williams 24). The emails of Aziz have a similar transition of theme. He is initially lost in life, and indulges in sensual pleasures. But gradually, he is acquainted with the Sufis and finds his place in the universe.

Ella has her own spiritual journey. Connections between Ella and Hasan al Chelabi, the scribe have already been established. Hasan was part of the Akhi brotherhood of Sufism. The Akhis were focused on down-to-earth matters. The Mevlevi order of Rumi was antithetical to this. After accepting Rumi's discipleship, he continued to remain a part of his own brotherhood, all the while learning from Rumi. Ella is more down to earth than Aziz.

“They have incredibly cute little flats there, overlooking the canals. I can rent one of those. I'll need to improve my biking. I don't know.... I'm not going to make plans, honey. I'm going to try living one day at a time. I'll see what my heart says. It is one of the rules, isn't it?” (Shafak 223).

She tells her daughter, after Aziz dies. She desires the stability of a place to stay, but is also carried away by her heart. Like Hasan who acted as a bridge between the Akhis and the Mevlevis, Ella exists in liminality with the earthly and the spiritual.

4.5) Fire and water

In the first of the parts titled 'Rumi', we see Rumi talk about a recurring dream he has. He sees a dervish with fire arising from each of his fingers, helping him read the *Qur'an* (Shafak 65).

The dervish disappears and Rumi looks for him, only to find him dead in a well. The dervish he sees is Shams. Rumi wonders whether he is responsible for this death.

The last rule of love in the book ends thus:

“Love is the water of life. And a lover is a soul of fire!

“The universe turns differently when fire loves water” (Shafak 223)

Here, the lover is fire, and the love he seeks is the water. The lover seeks love, just as Shams, whose fingers Rumi sees alighted in flame, seeks Rumi. Shams loves Rumi. But they are opposite in character, like fire and water. The fire (Shams) knows the water (Rumi) will extinguish him. In the end, Shams lies dead in the well with his flame extinguished by the water. Rumi realizes this, and blames

himself for Shams' death. Hence, Shams loved Rumi, and his love killed him.

4.6) Allusions to Rabi'a al Basri

The symbols of fire and water could be applied to Ella as well. Apart from the scribe previously described, Ella could be viewed as an allusion to Rabi'a al Basri, an 8th century Sufi woman.

It is said that one day, Rabia was running through the streets of Basra carrying a pot of fire in one hand and a bucket of water in the other. When asked what she was doing, she said, "I want to put out the fires of hell, and burn down the rewards of paradise. They block the way to Allah. I do not want to worship from fear of punishment or for the promise of reward, but simply for the love of Allah" (Attar 109). When Ella reads the final rule that talks of fire loving water, she could be alluding to Rabi'a.

This “love of Allah” is not as straight forward as it sounds. Rabi'a was the first to talk about love being the central aspect of the relationship between human beings and God. This would later become a central aspect of Sufism. Rabi'a was approached by many men in her life, all of whom she rejected. She considered herself to be married to God himself. In many of her sayings, she expresses a romantic view of God, referring to him as her 'beloved' several times. (Just as Ella calls Aziz towards her final emails). (J and Hoffman-Ladd 82).

It seems as if Ella's love for Aziz is spiritual. But it nonetheless has a romantic element to it.

“Ella held Aziz's hand, kissed his lips.”

Shafak Says.

Moreover, it is important to observe how the opening of each email Ella writes gets more romantic in tone. She starts by addressing him as “Dear Aziz Z. Zahara” (Shafak 34), which later changes to “Dear Aziz (If I may)” (55), to “Dear Aziz” (75), and finally to “Beloved Aziz” (96). Ella refers to Aziz as 'beloved' just as Rabi'a refers to God. She gradually grows closer to Aziz just as how Rabi'a grows closer to god. In both cases however, their union isn't complete. We are never told about an intimate consummation in Shafak's book. Rabi'a, despite her romantic affection with God, claimed to never have achieved total union with him.

Ella and David separate after he discovers the presence of Aziz in Ella's life. Similarly, Rabi'a was a slave girl who was freed by her master after he discovered the presence of God in her life. Both women were born as simple earthly beings. But both of them, as Rabi'a says about herself, “Attempt to simulate the state of those who are truly afflicted with Divine Love, that I may be deemed no less than they”. Rabi'a did not consider herself to be

divine, and constantly attempted to imitate Sufi men. Ella isn't divine as well. But she constantly attempts to understand Sufism, so she could grow closer to Aziz. Here, Aziz becomes symbolic of God, and Ella becomes symbolic of Rabi'a.

4.7) Four stages of Sufism

In his three final emails, Aziz portrays his Sufi journey. In the first, he talks of his life; his birth, his love, his loss etc. There is only a trivial mention to the Sufis. But he says, "This stage of my life I call my encounter with the letter S in the word "Sufi."" But why is this stage so significant? To understand, one must understand the four stages of Sufism. The first stage is the Shariat. Shariat is known as Islamic religious law. But literally, the word simply means 'the path to be followed'. It refers to basic earthly rules to follow. This is a reflection of this first stage of Sufism in Aziz's life.

The second of these emails, where he encounters the letter U in the word "Sufi", stands for the second stage called Tariqat. This stage is an introduction to a Sufi brotherhood. This is literally what happens to Aziz in this email. The last of these emails, where he encounters the letter F, stands for the third stage called Haquiqat. This is where one grows closer to God. We see Aziz grow closer to the brotherhood. He gives up drugs, and finds peace with god.

The last stage is Marifat. This is spiritual knowledge through experience. Aziz doesn't claim to attain the last letter I of the word "Sufi". But he completes Marifat through his experience of meeting Ella. Aziz doesn't write another email. Rather, he completes the fourth stage of Sufism through experience.

Ella also goes through these stages. In pages 130 and 131, we see her list of resolutions. All of the earthly and bodily desires written in it have been accomplished. But she doesn't manage to complete the abstract goals such as evaluating her values and beliefs, or eliminating meat from her diet. On first glance, it is unclear why eliminating meat should be considered spiritual. Islam and Sufism both do not condemn eating the flesh, unless it is considered haram by the Quran. But nonetheless, both Rumi and Rabi'a were vegetarians.

Ella has successfully completed the Shariat stage of Sufism. The resolutions had been completed even before she grew close to Aziz. Tariqat is attained when she gets to know Aziz. Haquiqat is attained when she realizes the lack of love in her life. She learns more about Aziz and grows closer to him. Marifat is attained through her direct spiritual experiences with Aziz. Hence, she completes the stages of Sufism when she fulfills her tenth resolution by opening her heart to love.

V. CONCLUSION

The characters in the novel and their circumstances have historical parallels in Sufism. This is concluded by finding historical equivalents for the characters of Ella and Aziz. Aziz takes on the role of both Rumi and Shams. Similarly, Ella represents both Rumi, and the Islamic holy woman Rabi'a Al Basri. The novel also depicts Sufi symbolism, philosophy, and way of life. This is concluded by observing Sufi philosophies hidden in the words of Aziz and Ella, and also by asserting the presence of the four stages of Sufism in growth of the same characters throughout the novel. Christian elements are present as well. Fire and water are interpreted as symbols of Sufism. Moreover, the emails Aziz writes have thematic similarities to Rumi's *Masnavi*. Both Rumi and Ella show blasphemous tendencies; Rumi in his poetry, and Ella in her emails.

These findings are not exhaustive. Further examination could be conducted on each book of the *Masnavi*. Sufism is beyond Rumi. Shafak's novel is set in the twenty first century, and its presence asserts that Sufism is as contemporary as it is historical. The analysis done on the novel thus far is limited to the past. Further possibilities may lie in the analysis of this novel through Sufism as it exists in the time of its making.

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