

Thematic Concerns in Elif Shafak's Novel *The Forty Rules of Love***Vinay Yadav**

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Abstract

The present paper entitled Thematic Concerns in Elif Shafak's Novel *The Forty Rules of Love*, studies the various themes as employed in the novel. The two major themes that run throughout the novel are Sufism and love. The writer has beautifully weave the magical and mystic in the characters of thirteenth century philosophical poet Rumi and Shams of Tabriz, who stand for the perfect Sufi way of life and love. The love is a dominant aspect of every individual in its various forms. A human being from birth to death longs for love and remain at the quest to find it in right way.

Key Words: Sufism, Rumi, love, quest, unconditional, individual.

Introduction

Elif Shafak is a novelist, essayist, public speaker, political scientist and activist from Turkey based in London. She writes in Turkish and English, and has published 19 works. She is famously known for her novels, which include *The Bastard of Istanbul*, *The Forty Rules of Love*, *Three Daughters of Eve* and *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World*. Shafak's works have been translated into many prominent languages around the world. The Financial Times has described her as "Turkey's leading female novelist". Her novel *The Forty Rules of Love* is bestseller in Turkey and internationally. The setting of the most of her works is Istanbul and western cities like New York, and dealt with themes of Eastern and Western culture, roles of women in society, and human rights issues. The politically controversial concerns like child

abuse and the Armenian genocide were also the topics of her works that led to legal action from the Turkey government and forces her to immigrate to the United Kingdom.

Elif Shafak novel *The Forty Rules of Love* influenced by her degree in Gender and Women's Studies. The novel was published in March 2009. The story is about two medieval figures Maulana Jalal-Ud-Din, known as Rumi and his companion Shams of Tabriz. The book explains how Shams influence transformed Rumi, a scholar into a Sufi (mystic) through love and companionship. About 750,000 copies of the novel were sold in Turkey and France.

"A novel within a novel, *The Forty Rules of Love* tells two parallel stories that mirror each other across two very different cultures and seven intervening centuries." The book mingles the fictionalized life of the Persian-Turkish Sufi poet known to the West as Rumi, and the story of a Jewish American housewife seeking spiritual renaissance, love in her monotonous life. The two parallel stories go side by side, one from the thirteenth century and the other from the present. The novel starts when a housewife, Ella, received a book called *Sweet Blasphemy* for review. The book *Sweet Blasphemy* is about a thirteenth century poet, Rumi, and his spiritual teacher, Shams. This book presents and explains Shams's *Forty Rules of Love* at different intervals. The five elements of nature: Water, Air, Earth, Fire and Void form the structure of the book *Sweet Blasphemy*. The novel is episodic and each chapter revealed a story in line with the nature of each five element. The story presented in the novel is based on "love and spirituality that explains what it means to follow your heart."

Quest of love

The central themes that run throughout the novel are preaching the religion of love, Sufism, and frustrated married life. The writer explores the journey of the characters like Ella, Rumi, and Shams to fulfill their quest of love. Through the story of Ella, a middle-aged woman living in 2008, with children and a husband seemingly live the perfect life but her husband having extra marital affairs and lack of love from him, make her to go outside to fulfill his empty life in search of love. She starts reading the book named *Sweet Blasphemy* by A. Z. Zahara - the story of Shams and Rumi. Ella, while reading this medieval story sees shifts in her own life and

discovers herself. She starts massaging to the author of the book and develops a relationship purely based on love. It seems that Ella has found her true companion in the form of Dr. Aziz and he too starts a spiritual relation with Ella. From the humdrum of daily life she faced emptiness as described in the novel;

“It was then and there, while sitting alone at the kitchen table with only a faint glimmer of light from the oven, that Ella realized that despite her high-flying words denying it, and despite her ability to keep a stiff upper lip, deep inside she longed for love.”

She bored from the role of a perfect house wife and living a monotonous life without love. She devoted all her life for the sake of her family but in return what she get the betrayal from her husband. Women not only need a good house, luxuries, children but she also needs a companion who loves her. As Rumi said;

“Choose love, without the sweet life of

Love, living is a burden- as you have seen”.

The most fundamental love in the novel is self-love and self-acceptance. The way Ella moves about the world demonstrate her acceptance of the self. Heartbroken and unhappy in her monotonous daily life and in her marriage, Ella seems to be at the whims of her family and does not appreciate herself and her uniqueness until she explores the Sufi teachings she learns about in Sweet Blasphemy. For the sake of love, Ella, even risk her family, her children as one of the rules says;

“Intellect and love are made of different materials. Intellect ties people in knots and risks nothing, but love dissolves all tangles and risks everything. Intellect is always cautious and advises... whereas love can effortlessly reduce itself to rubble.”

The principal of Sufism as taught by Aziz to Ella allows herself to go through a powerful transformation. She finally learns to love herself and extends this love outside of herself. She also starts appreciating love in other's life and accepts her daughter's engagement. She values herself more and she falls in love with Aziz, the author of Sweet Blasphemy.

Sufism as way of life

Sufism is a term adopted from the Arabic and it is as an influential mystical tradition in Islam. Sufism originated after the death of Mohammed in 632, but it get develops into orders in the 12th Century. The orders were formed around spiritual founders, who gained saint status and shrines built in their names. Sufis seek to have a close, personal experience of God. Sufism is less a cluster or split from Islam, and more of an aspect of the Islamic belief — Sufis also consider themselves to be Muslim, and like any sincere Muslim, they pray five times a day and track the instructions of Muhammad. Sufism simply contains more mysticism and ceremonials, like the spinning dance done by "whirling dervishes."

The novel *The Forty Rules of Love* is perhaps the most influential literary text of Rumi's spiritual doctrine and one which has significantly contributed to his current status as a precursor of modern, uncharted and syncretic spirituality. A great deal of Rumi's poetry in the novel refers to the state where, through love, 'the seer becomes the eye, the eye, the seer', and when Man begins travelling on his spiritual journey. The reciprocal love between the aspirant and God plays an important role in shaping the life of Sufi and his ideals. Rumi attributes the motion of all particles through the cycle of forms to the powerful attraction of love and perceives all creation within both the physical and metaphysical worlds as a great upward spiral of transmutation. The Sufi doesn't believe in any entity as they hold the opinion that man is a whole not a fragment.

Rumi is described as a prominent scholar of Islam "who knew everything except the pits of love" despite his increasing fame and public prominence, remains inwardly dissatisfied. He finally confronted with the arrival of Shams who becomes his companion and transformed him completely into a Sufi who now no longer cares about his reputation. They live in the present not worrying of anything. As Shams says;

"Why worry so much about the aftermath, and imaginary future, when this very moment is the only time we can truly and fully experience both the presence and the absence of God in our lives?"

For the Sufi a life without love is total waste of time. They don't accumulate wealth and wonder aimlessly here and there preaching the gospels of love to the entire mankind. They don't discriminate, for them entire humankind is one whole. Shams explain about the malice in human when he says;

“Real filth is the one inside. The rest simply washes off. There is only one type of dirt that cannot be cleansed with pure waters, and that is the stain of hatred and bigotry contaminating the soul.... Only love will purify the soul.”

Religious tolerance

Another influential theme in the novel is the theme of religious harmony among the different religious groups. There is a clear message of religious tolerance throughout the novel. In the story, Rumi is married Kenna, who once was a devoted Christian but later converted to Islam after her marriage with Rumi. Though Rumi's wife has converted to Islam one can clearly see that she is still loves St. Mary. When she was preparing bread and, daydreaming, molds the dough into the shape of Mary, Shams of Tabriz walks in and, witnessing this scene, does not scold Kenna, but rather encourages her to continue valuing the relationship she has with Mary in her heart. As Rumi says;

“Not Christian or Jew or Muslim, not Hindu, Buddhist, Sufi or Zen. Not any religion or cultural system. I am not of the East, nor of the West.... My place is placeless, a trace of the traceless.”

Ella has Jewish background and Aziz is “spiritual.” There are many references to Christianity throughout the book, including stories of Moses. The underlying exploration has to do with one's relationship to God, and whether this is best achieved through spiritual connection or religious fundamentalism. On a particular instance in the novel, Shams confronts a Sheik Muslim cleric that simply because one follows the rules as ascribed by religious authorities does not make one connected to God; rather, one's ability to build a personal relationship to God through self-purification appears more important.

The role of women

Shafak, being a feminist herself, makes sure her female characters are the strongest and gripping. Women as an important part of the society play a pivotal role in any work of fiction. In the novel *The Forty Rules of Love* there are several prominent female characters like Ella, Kimya, and Desert Rose. The question arises about sexuality and the role of sexuality in spiritual quests. Can sex destroy the possibility for spiritual enlightenment? Can by giving up sexuality does one begin the quest for spiritual fulfillment? These questions appear strongly connected to the female body in the novel – Kimya, Ella, Desert Rose.

There can be question on male sexuality too; some might see the relationship between Rumi and Shams as homosexual. In fact their relationship is not erotic but solely based on the love for the companionship. They pursue their spiritual quest with the help of each other.

Conclusion

Thus various themes like spirituality, Sufism, love, and the role of women runs throughout the novel. The writer has successfully portrays the various thematic aspects in the novel through different characters. Shams of Tabriz, Rumi, and Ella represent the spiritual quest for love and companionship. The female characters like Kimya, Desert Rose, and Ella highlights the feminist aspects, role of the women in the society. *The Forty Rules of Love* force readers to think about our relationships with our fellow human beings and the society we live in. It teaches the lesson that how to reconnect ourselves with our own spiritual journeys and remember our place in an interconnected cosmos.

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