

**THOU SHALT LOVE!:**  
**THE CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE OF RUMI IN ELIF SHAFAK'S *THE FORTY RULES OF LOVE*- A CHARACTER BASED STUDY ESTABLISHING LOVE AS THE CENTRAL THEME OF THE NOVEL AND HUMANITY**

**Dr. Afreen Faiyaz**

Department of English Language and Translation, Qassim University. Al Badaya.  
Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

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**ABSTRACT:** *This paper aims to analyse Love and its dearth in today's world that forms the crux of Elif Shafak's novel The Forty Rules of Love. The novel connects human predicament of the thirteenth century of Rumi- a poet, and his Sufi friend Shams, with the twenty-first century of Ella and her mystic friend cum lover Aziz. The novel presents several Sufi tenets, but it is Elif's conviction of love that firmly holds the Sufi theme in the novel, according it with magnitude and potency. Achieving oneness with the creator is the goal of mankind, and it is only possible through spirituality which, in turn, is indispensable to love. Therefore, Love forms the substratum of the novel in question. This paper scrutinizes Elif's portrayal of characters and their predicaments illustrating how the Oneness can be achieved despite differences through the path of love and love alone.*

**KEYWORDS:** love, oneness, Sufism, humanity, human-predicament, faith

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“The quest for Love changes us. There is no seeker among those who search for Love who has not matured on the way. The moment you start looking for Love, you start to change within and without.”(The Forty Rules of Love, 87)

## INTRODUCTION

### Background:

**Rumi**, a Sunni Muslim, jurist, theologian, scholar and above all the great mystical poet, left behind him a legacy of meaningful poems that imbibe substantial lessons. These poems are often inspired by and applicable to everyday experiences. He possessed the talent to turn mundane into sublime, and his poems leave a strong, lasting impression on readers. In the poetry of this ‘*Shakespeare of the Muslim world*’ (12), love runs like blood in the body of poems thus touching all in unique ways.

### Theoretical Underpinnings:

**Elif Shafak**, an eminent Turkish novelist, believes in mystical prowess of Rumi and is a staunch supporter of Sufism. However, she also believes that the duty of a novelist is not

to preach but be a student of life posing simple yet difficult questions leaving the readers to carve out their meanings. In the world of rising fundamentalisms and spreading “misinformation”, it is the duty of novelist “to *rehumanise* those who have been dehumanised” (*Why the Novel Matters in the Age of Anger*). To her a novel is “a free, egalitarian space where a diversity of voices can be heard, nuances celebrated, and the unsayable can be said” (Shafak). *The Forty Rules of Love* is a novel that enables us to have a glimpse into the souls, silences and sufferings ranging from the stalwarts of the society like the famous Rumi to the underdogs of society like an infamous prostitute. A moment of epiphany awaits them all. For every character and every ordeal, love is the only solution albeit in a particular form. It is a well-timed masterpiece by Miss Shafak given the fact that it is the cohesive power of love that we need in all the spheres of life especially in “*the age of anger*” (Mishra) we are living today. TFROL highlights the importance of empathy and compassion irrespective of social stratification in the world that is increasingly becoming spiritually barren.

### **The Research Problem:**

Although Sufism and the forty rules Shams of Tabriz are evident and immediate themes in *The Forty Rules of Love*, Elif Shafak’s notion of love stands at the risk of being overshadowed by the Sufi prominence in the novel. Elif’s perception of love firmly holds the multilayered meanings and pearls of wisdom like a thread. She said in an interview to Nazli Demiroz,

“I have longed to write a novel like “Apk,” for a long time but I had to reach a certain level of maturity in order to actually write it. This novel went through many stages. I wanted to discuss “love” with its divine and human dimensions. West and East, past and present.” (“Under the Spell of Divine and Human Love: Taking a Long Journey into Yourself”, Demiroz )

This research paper studies how Elif executes her theme of love under the brilliant facade of Sufism. Besides, it seeks to draw attention to the relevance of the mystical teachings across temporal, geographical or ethnic boundaries particularly in the tumultuous times we are living. This will be realised by analysis of events and characters in the fiction that are unwittingly and unknowingly suffering due to emptiness in their lives, akin to the real world, waiting to emerge out of their cocoons. Their predicament and eventual success is a significant clue to how we humans can find a relief amid global hatred and resentment today.

### **Analysis and Discussion:**

#### **A: Love, Religion and the Human Predicament:**

Betraying any utopian dream that the artists and Samaritans throughout the history of civilisations and culture may have fancied, the world today is increasingly becoming pugnacious- bereft of kindness, love and spirituality. On macro-level, terrorism, racism, poverty, government indifference, wars, gender discrimination, genocide are ever rampant. Such dominant violence subverts extensive education and scoffs any altruism which is a

unique factor in our century. Dystopia today is an accurate rendition of T.S. Eliot's *Wasteland*: barren, with a heap of broken images, bleeding humanity reeking of materialistic greed, lust and hostility- desperately in need of a saviour now than ever before! Historically, the appalling episodes of bloodshed in the name of intolerance to religious differences dispel the very scruples of religiosity. "One man's religion is a poison to another" (Sidhwa, 39), says Bapsi Sidhwa, an eminent Pakistani American novelist. Ironically, the mob crusading in the name of religion has abandoned spirituality. Just as prayers exist without meditation, religions do without God! Marriages live without love or procreation and society without transitive social connections; in short, the body is without the soul.

Religion forms an underlying theme of the novel, but Shafak's story suggests that the fundamental purpose of all religions is to practice Love and tolerance with a common end to unite with the Creator. There are several examples in the novel that interconnect different religions or necessitate bonding of religion and spirituality. Rumi marries a Christian who although converted, always carries the love of Mary in her heart. Ella was a Christian who married a Jew and then fell in love with Sufi Aziz. Her daughter wants to marry a Christian. There is a debate between Shams and T Shiekh Yasin, both Muslims, on the theological issues. There are innumerable examples of contrasts among faiths, yet the common goal of all is to seek fulfillment by uniting with the One. "We are not hundreds and thousands of different beings. We are all One" (135). There are numerous passages in the book that suggest ways to achieve it, the most notable advice by Shafak being: "We were all created in His image, and yet we were each created different and unique. No two people are alike. No hearts beat to the same rhythm. If God had wanted everyone to be the same, He would have made it so. Therefore, disrespecting differences and imposing your thoughts on others is an amount to disrespecting God's holy scheme." (140)

Addressing the issue of religious clashes, Elif Shafak articulates her thought in the novel by saying that faith is only a word if there is no love at its centre, so "flaccid and lifeless, vague and hollow-not anything you could truly feel (*The Forty Rules of Love*, 180). This a noteworthy thought as it is the absence of spirituality that promotes a breeding ground for the zealots and demagogues. The demagogues take advantage of disoriented people reducing them to mere tools implementing their ulterior motives. Shafak says in her article: "Populist demagogues dehumanise the Other because it provides fertile ground on which to sow the seeds of racism, misogyny and other kinds of discrimination. If you can convince masses that immigrants resemble animals, blacks are inferior, women have lower IQ, LGBT people are perverts, or Jews or Muslims are untrustworthy, you can legitimise all kinds of violence." (*Why the Novel Matters*, Shafak)

Thus, Shafak writes in the novel that instead of losing themselves in the Love of God and fighting against their ego, religious zealots fight other people, generating wave after wave of fear. Their life is a state of bitterness and hollowness, and discontentment follows them

wherever they go. The anecdote of Moses in the story clearly illustrates that God sees the heart of the worshipper and He enjoys unique prayers that are heartfelt that might sound blasphemy to others. She adds a noteworthy point: "The totality of religion is far greater and deeper than the sum of its component parts. Individuals rules need to be read in light of the whole. And the whole is concealed in the essence...He is neither of the East nor of the West. He belongs in the Kingdom of Love. He belongs to the Beloved." (181). Further in the novel and in one of his monologues, Shams says in one of his rules:

“For your faith to be rock solid, your heart needs to be as soft as a feather...The only way to get closer to Truth is to expand your heart so that it will encompass all humanity and still have room for more Love.” (244)

Thus, the issue of religion is not only addressed by Shafak, but she also prescribes important remedies to deal with current day moral chaos.

#### B. Love and the characters in the novel:

The forty rules of love that the title mentions are coincidental in metamorphosing the characters that evolve from their current state of misery to attain spiritual calmness, including the protagonist Ella –an educated and judicious American Jew, a middle-aged housewife and a mother of three.

##### **B (i) Love and Ella:**

The Prologue of the novel concludes that Ella’s tranquil life is entirely and unexpectedly transformed; the reason being love. Before that conclusion, the novelist explains the reason why such a turn of events may be deemed shocking to the readers. The narrative skillfully introduces Ella’s life as an extended metaphor of ‘still water’ which forms large circular ripples when a stone is hurled at it by an outsider. The metaphor of stillness in water is apt as it correlates to stagnancy upon metacognitive reading. Just as stagnancy in water nurtures disease-causing germs; Ella's quiet and routine life is breeding unappreciated hard work, oblivion and lovelessness- the lovelessness being the most difficult of the lot. Being a dutiful wife and a caring mother, Ella built around herself a secure world and feared to challenge its tranquillity despite an infidel husband -as confrontations of any kind unnerved her. Shafak describes her thus:

“Building her whole life around her husband and children, Ella lacked any survival techniques to help her cope with life’s hardships on her own. She was not the type to throw caution to the wind. Even changing her daily coffee brand was a major effort.” (3)

After Prologue, follows part one: ‘Earth- The things that are solid, absorbed and still’. The title of the section is significant as it relates to Ella’s indifference to love. Her views on love are practical and utilitarian even though she was a student of literature. Romance is a

ridiculous and inconsequential emotion to her. She shares the common materialistic world view that love and marriage are incompatible. She objects to her teenage daughter Jeannette's question if she was ever in love by exclaiming, "Come on, honey. Which century are you living in? Just get it in your head, women don't marry the men they fall in love with." Her view conforms to her argument that in the twenty-first century, love is a worthless emotion which is like a momentary bubble that cannot be indulged for long for "it is bound to come and quickly go away"<sup>10</sup>. She explained to Jeannette that marriage was much more a serious decision and needed a rationale more solid than love because ultimately women only look for reliable husbands and good fathers to their children. Apparently, for Ella, the word romance is limited to teenage years or a genre of novel reserved for pass-times as she regards "naïve" people to trust in its magic. A jolt comes to her when Jeanette accuses her as loveless jealous mother intending to make the same out of her daughter.

The argument with her daughter proves beneficial as it insinuates some introspection into otherwise prudent Ella. Her composure ruffled, she sobs at the realisation of sadness lurking in her heart for so long unbeknown to herself. Enduring a strange emptiness despite a picture perfect and financially stable family, Ella is jolted when she reads a manuscript entitled 'Sweet Blasphemy' in her capacity as a reader in a literary agency. The author's note said something that "rang strangely familiar:

For despite what some people say, love is not only a sweet feeling bound to come and quickly go away."

Also, further,

*"Because love is the very essence and purpose of life. As Rumi reminds us, it hits everybody, including those who shun love-even those who use the word "romantic" as a sign of disapproval.*

Ella was bowled over as if she had read there, *"Love hits everybody, even a middle-aged housewife in Northampton named Ella Rubinstein."* (15)

One of the rules of Sham of Tabriz in the novel that "intellect ties people in knots and risks nothing, but love dissolves all tangles and risks everything"<sup>(66)</sup> perfectly describes Ella's transformation as sixteen months later and after a series of e-mail exchanges, we see Ella risking it all in the name of love. Part four of the book called 'Fire: The things that damage, devastate and destroy' reveals Ella's impending destiny. Leaving her family, city and the so-called blessed life, Ella embarks on a new journey with Aziz even though his days are numbered. Aziz's words to her are of great significance:

"...you can be Rumi. If you let love take hold of you and change you, at first through its presence, then through its absence—" (327)

Thus, the short journey of true love transforms Ella into an independent and self-reliant woman capable of beginning her life afresh and alone. Elif says that many women are suffering from similar emptiness that Ella faces. She said in the interview:

“I know many women like Ella. Not only in the West, there are a lot more women like that in Turkey. At first sight, Ella is a Jewish woman living in Boston. She feels trapped. Maybe women in Burdur, Istanbul and Izmir know this feeling too. When you lift these apparent differences, you realise that the stories beneath are similar and global. We can build empathy with each other with these similarities. There are many people that are imprisoned in an unhappy marriage and they don't make any effort to find a way out or to transform themselves and just live their lives the way they are.” (Under the Spell of Divine and Human Love: Taking a Long Journey into Yourself)

### **B(ii) Love and Rumi:**

In the 'Earth' part of the book again and eight centuries apart, we encounter another character suffering a strange yearning of the soul- the great Rumi himself. Foreword to the novel within the novel introduces him as being transformed from mainstream cleric to a “committed mystic, passionate poet, advocate of love...opening his doors to people of all backgrounds.”(19). This transformation is a result of nothing but love, albeit of a different kind. Already a venerated theologian with thousands of followers and fulfilled with “knowledge, virtue, and the capability to help others find God” (98), Rumi wonders at the wave of sadness that has engulfed him resulting in sleepless nights. He speaks about it thus: “It gnaws at my soul like a disease and accompanies me wherever I go, as quiet as a mouse and just as ravenous.”(99) Nothing but his encounter and friendship with Shams-of-Tabriz could reconcile his inner disquietude. It is in Shams that he finds his prophesied mirror and a true companion. Naturally, his admirers grow resentful leading Rumi to compare his story to the story of famous lovers Laila and Majnun. To the kings' astonishment, Laila was an ordinary woman and failed to understand Majnun's madness for her. In her defence, Laila replies that she should be seen through the eyes of her lover. Similarly, his love for Shams cannot be understood by the confounded commons. There is no way to understand the meaning of love without becoming a lover first. Recounting the tale of Laila- Majnun itself indicates the intensity of Rumi's passion towards Shams that forms the very nub of this comparison. The chapter concludes with Rumi's verses:

“Love cannot be explained. It can only be experienced.

Love cannot be explained, yet it explains all.”(194)

Thus, Rumi's and Shams-of- Tabriz companionship has set a great example of pure love, and it was this friendship that turned Rumi into the famous poet that we know today. Love rendered great depth to his poems and through them, an eternity to his friendship. Rumi's



yearning was a yearning of a love of rare kind which only equals can experience, and he longed for it. Shams makes an interesting point in the novel:

Loneliness and solitude are two different things. When you are lonely, it is easy to delude yourself into believing that you are on the right path. Solitude is better for us, as it means being alone without feeling lonely. But eventually it is best to find a person who will be your mirror. Remember only in another person's heart can you truly see yourself and the presence of God within you."(72)

### **B(iii) The Prostitute, the Drunk and the Leper:**

Desolation, loneliness and lovelessness do not afflict just the elites like Rumi, but it torments the abandoned underbelly of the society alike. Thus by presenting lovelessness in the lives of a prostitute, beggar and a drunkard, Elif enlarges her circle to encompass all irrespective of their differences. She also addresses the some issues that inhibit the quest of true love namely: profession, addiction and diseases and people's attitude towards the oppressed.

Desert Rose, a prostitute in the novel, is another example of society's injustice towards hapless underdogs and ill-fated women in particular. Elif has presented her case to highlight the atrocities of the hypocrites under the garb of honour and religion towards the less fortunates. The so-called custodians of society, like Baybars, the warrior, are the ones who abhor women becoming prostitutes but at the same time, they cannot allow these women to repent and return to a decent life. There is no place in society for these women, and once they fall, they should remain there forever. Elif writes:

"I don't know why this is. All I know is, some people feed on the miseries of others and they don't like it when there is one less miserable person on the face of the earth." (116)

Desert Rose feels that her body or profession may be tainted, but that cannot stop her from longing for God. She dresses like a man to visit the mosque which is the only way she can sneak in a mosque to steal some of the great Rumi's lecture before the Friday prayer. Upon this discovery, the angry mob chases her to beat the life out of her had it not been for Shams to come to her rescue. Among the mob is Baybars the furious and monstrous soldier who is a frequent visitor to the brothel.

Ironically, these people who assembled in the mosque to remember God and follow the right path are seething with hatred waiting for an opportunity to vent it. Dejected, Rose regrets her audacity and is at the verge of submitting to her fate when Shams tells her the story of a prostitute who quenched the thirst of a panting dog by letting him drink some water from her shoes. (134) This kindness so touched God that he forgave her completely. Thus, visits to temples, shrines mosques, or churches may not be fruitful if the heart is evil, but simple acts of kindness and generosity may be dearer to God if done with pure intentions. Therefore, one must not underestimate the self-worth and believe others' opinions about self. Shafak says:

“How can you blame others for disrespecting you when you think of yourself as unworthy of respect?” (135)

Through her intense yearning for God's love and regular boosts from Sufi Shams, Rose succeeds in abandoning her profession in the quest for God thus purging her soul.

Suleiman, the drunk, is another distraught soul estranged from God and himself. A poet at heart, he reeks of alcohol and society's cruelty. Being a Muslim and addicted to alcohol makes him abominable in the eyes of devout. He trembles at the hatred in their eyes compelling him to drink more. He is beaten harshly and left on the road in the middle of the night to bleed to death until Shams recovers him and carries his wounded body home never minding the stench of blood, urine and wine. Touched by this humane gesture, his conversation with Shams regarding wine in Sufi poetry helps him achieve a strange tranquillity and an assurance that God loves him too:

"When a true lover of God goes into a tavern, the tavern becomes his chamber of prayer, but when a winebibber goes into the same chamber, it becomes his tavern. In everything we do, it is our hearts that make the difference, not our outer appearances." (141)

A similar loathing in the eyes of people for Hasan the beggar suffering from leprosy reflects the meanness of the society's prim and proper, prudish people. Living in the outskirts of the city and surviving on the mercy of people, the beggar derides Rumi's preaching on humanity and suffering, wondering what a rich, educated and adored scholar could know about sufferings. People like him living in ivory towers can only preach about adversity and forbearance but can never realise how it pains to be in his position. He is so disgusted by Rumi's lecture that he even scorns the distinct sound of vowel pronunciation that is characteristic of such scholars. Shams comes to empathise with him, gently asking his name and giving him a mirror to look at himself. He comforts him by saying that God exists in his (the beggar's) heart. It is an essential lesson from Shafak to us that we all are equals in the eyes of God and the anguished one is the dearest to Him for enduring the severity of their circumstances. Therefore, we should not judge others. If we love Him, we must love His creations. We must respect the differences even if there are many and obvious defects. One of the rules illustrates this:

"It is easy to love a perfect God, unblemished and infallible that He is. What is far more difficult is to love fellow human being with all their imperfections and defects. Remember, one can only know what one is capable of loving. There is no wisdom without love. Unless we learn to love God's creation, we can neither truly love nor truly know God." (110)

C: Relevance of the theme and Rumi's teaching today:

On a micro level, weakening family ties, domestic violence and emigrational uprootedness prove detrimental to self-identity thus inciting loneliness, drug addiction, and even suicide



which is a grim reality clenching our society today, tightening its grip with passing the time. This very world where the enlightened minds once dreamt of a perfect future now nostalgically looks at the past as a golden period. Are we progressing ahead or are we spinning around in a vicious circle of contempt, darkness and death creating a hell out of humans? It is about time that literature once again injects some introspection into the degenerating humanity and recreate a society where the abstract notions of equality, brotherhood and love would emanate into existence. Elif Shafak's *The Forty Rules of Love* is one such novel. She said in her article:

“The novel matters because it punches little holes in the wall of indifference that surrounds us. Novels have to swim against the tide. Moreover, this was never more clear than it is today.” (Shafak "Why the Novel Matters")

Metacognitive textual reading reveals that a parallel structure runs between the main characters of two different eras. This elicits the fact that there is no past or future to humanity but just present. The human condition is timeless and spiral. Yearnings of the human soul are repetitive and afflict all irrespective of social status or times they live in. “*The Forty Rules of Love* appears important because of the ways it highlights the connections across space and time.” (Eaton) Therefore, their famished soul is ever in need of rescue to end the unbearable agony. It is the divine power of love and the love in the divine power that can only quench the thirsts of parched souls. Aziz, the Shams of the twenty-first century in *The Forty Rules of Love*, writes on his blog in the novel:

"In many ways, the twenty-first century is not that different from the thirteenth century. Both will be recorded in history as times of unprecedented religious clashes, cultural misunderstandings, and a general sense and security and fear of the Other. At times like these, the need for love is greater than ever." (15)

Living in the age of technology, we have lost ourselves to the superficiality of the virtual world. Internet and social media have not helped either in terms of strengthening ties. Nowadays, there is a rage in the society to feign a public image of success and happiness where loneliness, stress, anger and disillusionment has become epidemic. Meanwhile, people fail to realise that the more they try to aggrandise their counterfeit bliss, the greater spreads resentment and hatred among others. Besides, too much involvement with social media may make people virtually connected, but in real life, they end up becoming more detached and lonely. “This theme comes up in several ways, such as Shams offering insights into the problem of individuality in Western society: “there is no such thing as ‘them,’ just as there is no ‘I.’ All you need to do is keep in mind how everything and everyone in this universe is interconnected. We are not hundreds and thousands of different beings. We are all One” (Eaton). Thus, in the age of technology, we pine for mystery and search for solace. This often leads to seeking peace through religion or gurus, but one needs to be conscious. One of the Sufi rules says in the novel:

“There are more fake gurus and false teachers in this world than the number of stars in the visible universe. Don’t confuse power-driven, self-centered people with true mentors. A genuine spiritual master will not direct your attention to himself or herself and will not expect absolute obedience or utter admiration from you, but instead will help you to appreciate and admire your inner self. True mentors are as transparent as glass. They let the light of God pass through them.”(88)

An excessive focus on logic and reason can create unnecessary suspicion in the matters pertaining to the heart. In the scientific age of today, people take too much at stress fretting on the unnecessary details thus losing the actual feelings behind. This can lead to communication problems at personal and professional levels. Elif clearly says in her *article “Why the novel matters in the age of anger”* about this issue: “In life, you might come across very smart people with low emotional intelligence. Wisdom is difficult to achieve because it requires cognitive flexibility...Only two decades have passed since that time of optimism, and we have entered the age of pessimism”. A major problem suffered by people today is a communication gap. Thus a rule in the novel suggests a remedy for it:

"Most of the problems of the world stem from linguistic mistakes and simple misunderstanding. Don't ever take words at face value. When you step into the zone of love, language, as we know it becomes obsolete. That which cannot be put into words can only be grasped through silence." (66)

Connecting humility with service is crucial. As humility itself is a high moral value and one of the superior characteristics of human beings, it is necessary that in service through humility love for all living beings, and particularly for humanity remains intact. It is also necessary for the reason that sacrifice is inevitable in love; in it, priorities remain for others' pleasure and prosperity, even readiness to sacrifice one's life for others ("ARTICLES: About Mahatma Gandhi"). An important rule in the novel highlights this point which is take away lesson for all of us:

“It’s easy to love a perfect God, unblemished and infallible that He is. What is far more difficult is to love fellow human being with all their imperfections and defects. Remember, one can only know what one is capable of loving. There is no wisdom without love. Unless we learn to love God’s creation, we can neither truly love nor truly know God.”(110)

#### Conclusion:

Thus Elif Shafak’s attempt to portray love as the theme of life and the novel is evidently successful. The journey of love starts from self and goes deeper into humanity. It needs practice, and its shade is for one and all. Apart from being a beautiful story, the novel provides a spiritual and educational experience. It sets us thinking and provides an enriching and fulfilling experience. Anyone who reads this book will be touched for there will always be something in the novel to strike a chord with everyone.

#### Future Research:

Elif Shafak's *The Forty Rules of Love* is a great masterpiece, and it will continue to influence its readers with genuine messages as she says: "The novel matters because stories continue to connect us across borders, and help us to see beyond the artificial categories of race, gender, class. The world is frighteningly messy today, but a world that has lost its empathy, cognitive flexibility and imagination will surely be a darker place." Every person in the story is an accurate representation of their kindred spirits and has their voice as well as point of view. Therefore, we get to see them unravel before us in flesh and blood. Employment of this technique conforms to Eliot's theory of impersonality so that each character is vivid and distinct from the author. Shafak closely follows Shakespearean genius in appending her characters with their unique language style, whether scholar or beggar, percolating to their roles in society. This in itself is an excellent area for Stylistic analysis.

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