

## **Rewriting Faith: Sufism as a Deconstruction of Religious Rigidity in Shafak's The Forty Rules of Love**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This research intends to deconstruct the established traditionalist narrative presented by rigid scholars and Sufism. Through egalitarian approach of Sufi Islam towards the Quran, Sharia, the creation of God, and devotional practices, the paper seeks to subvert the traditional literal interpretations. At its core, the study aspires to encourage inclusivity, tolerance, and compassion. The research is based on qualitative analysis, utilizing Jacques Derrida's deconstructive framework as the guiding theoretical lens. The study analyzes the primary dichotomy between orthodox interpretations and spiritual mysticism to unveil the fundamentalist approach towards Islam as the basis of fear, hate, division, and discrimination in society. Textual references have been employed to elucidate how polyvocality and multiplicity of narratives promote an inclusive understanding of religion, love, and spirituality. The key findings indicate how traditionalists misuse religion by molding and distorting selective aspects of Islam to maintain their dominance in society, consequently dividing communities and spreading intolerance. Conversely, Sufi thinkers pursue and promote closeness to God through love, compassion, and inner purity rather than external rituals and conformity. Opposed to the conservative and exclusionary fundamentalists, the inclusive worldview of Sufism advocates love, kindness, and empathy — the virtues that are needed now more than ever. The research encourages readers to reflect deeply on their beliefs and approaches toward Islam. It further seeks to foster an inclusive understanding of religion aimed at encountering and neutralizing widespread extremism in society.*

**Keywords:** Sufism, orthodox, deconstruction, shams, The Forty Rules of Love

### **INTRODUCTION**

There is no denying the fact that the famous lines *I am the Truth (Ana'l-Haqq)* uttered by the Persian mystic, Mansour al-Hallaj, carries multiple interpretations (al-Hallaj, 1931/2012). Some have varied opinions about this utterance and many choose to stay quiet considering its controversial status. The question as to why people have hundreds of different opinions about a single statement within a single philosophical interpretation is still a debatable topic.

We are living in a world where there are no monolithic answers to any single phenomenon. The modern world is fluid, always flowing from one point to another. If a person tries to find a single grand narrative, he cannot because there exists none. The age of objectivity and stability is long gone. Now there is a constant push and pull between the polarities causing instability and imbalance in the world. Countries are fighting other countries, politicians are fighting other politicians, ideologies are fighting other ideologies and religions, which are believed to be the unifying agents, are also seem to be a clash with one another (Huntington, 1996). This is how extreme polarization has been generated that is in the dire need of moderation. That is why today's world is known as "times of unprecedented religious clashes, cultural misunderstandings, and a general sense of insecurity and fear of the other" (Shafak 2015, 15).

This new stage of world history is characterized by the complete rejection of "grand narratives". Meaning has been deconstructed and has become multifaceted and subjective, challenging the earlier notion of its universality and objectivity. Jean- Lyotard (1984) defines the postmodern as "incredulity towards metanarratives" referring to postmodern as an era of plural and fragmented reality (p. xxxiv). It refers to the amorphous nature of the relationships, identities and societies in the present world where phenomena of the upcoming times will be indefinable; when one is unable to tie things around a single pole. Elif Shafak's marvelous piece of art *The Forty Rules of Love* (2015) explained this vision about this fluid nature of the world where "We are all going to be walking on moving sands" (2017). She explores the lives of 13<sup>th</sup> century mystic Hazrat Jalal Ud Din Muhammad Rumi (RA), his spiritual mentor Hazrat Shams al-Din Muhammad ibn Ali ibn Malikdad al-Tabrizi (RA), a 21<sup>st</sup> century housewife Ella Rubinstein and a Sufi Aziz Zahara. She deconstructs the traditional notion of religion, love and spirituality through the multiplicity of the narratives held at distant times and places. What one thinks of love others do not, what one believes to be the core of a religion others disagree and what one experiences at a certain station of spirituality others may not. The conservative beliefs are juxtaposed with the mystical or Sufi beliefs of Islam, to expose the hatred and extremism one side has been preaching for centuries against the other. Ways to reach God cannot be bound to mere physical acts of worships as She believes that there are as many paths to reach God as the numbers of hearts beating (Shafak, 2017).

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Researchers have put tremendous efforts in analyzing Shafak's *The Forty Rules of Love* (2015) through different lenses but a little has been done to look at the core design of the novel that unveils the rigidity within Islam and its popularization enforced by various scholars. The religion has been divided into many factions but the most obvious and disputed ones are the rigid interpretation and the Sufi Islam. Both the concepts have been positioned against each other where these schools of thoughts seem to project different perspectives. Unfortunately these notions have never been understood in their correct sense rather they have become contentious over time as evident in the novel when the relationship between Rumi and Shams is (mis)understood by the society. Seblini (2021) has pointed that novel is an attempt to normalize "Islamophobia" but it is the very system, that Shafak has shown mirror to, which is responsible for disseminating the hatred against humanity (p.2).

Various researchers have also focused on the use of postmodern elements found in the text. The society delineated by the author is categorized as postmodern, where ideas help to shape and mold the ideologies of people. The element of postmodernity highlighted by the researchers "*also reflects the hypocrisy of portrayed society that is almost identical to our contemporary society*" (Akbar et al., 2020, p. 248). Seblini (2021) focuses on how the novel prioritizes a selective Sufi narrative over non-Sufi narratives because it "*orchestrate pluralism toward the ideological ends of privileging Sufi voices that enable reconciliation of the Islamic East with the non-Islamic West*" (p.2) by promoting a generalized fear towards those who do not follow Sufism. She further argues that the version of Sufism presented in the novel is molded and

westernized to suit the Western audiences seeking spirituality beyond formal religion. The polyvocality in the novel challenges stereotypes about Muslims: however, this same multiplicity also creates a binary between Sufi and non-Sufi Islam, while presenting Sufism as the ultimate solution for resolving the conflict between the Islamic-East and non-Islamic West.

Furlanetto (2013) contends that Shafak has created an entirely different version of Rumi specifically tailored for the American market, to contribute to the ongoing “Rumi Phenomenon” (p.201) because Shafak has extensively studied Sufism; however, in the novel she domesticates it for the American readership in order to fulfill Western spiritual needs through a depiction of the exotic and mysterious East. She argues that, rather than depicting a holistic picture of Sufism, the author has appropriated it, privileging the aesthetic expectations of “*American audience*” (p.201) by strengthening “*Orientalist strategies in the ways in which she positions the East as being instrumental to the West.*” (p. 201).

### **THEORETICAL DISCUSSION**

Deconstruction is a discursive method of analysis, commenced by a French philosopher Jacques Derrida during 1960s mainly through his works “Speech and Phenomena” (1967) and “Of Grammatology” (1967). According to Tyson (2006), Derrida has used Ferdinand de Saussure’s concept of ‘Sign System’ (p.216) to challenge the structuralist view that language is “non-referential”(p.252) as it refers to the abstractions of the things rather than things themselves. He takes the concept a step further saying that language is non-referential because it refers neither to the things in the world nor to their abstractions but to the continuously changing “play of signifiers” (p.252) which composes the language itself. Structuralists define “word” (p.251) as a linguistic sign (p. 251) which is the outcome of signifier and signified. Derrida claim’s that language is not as direct and lucid as this formula because one signifier may represent many signified, as our understanding of the signified is influenced by various signifiers we have associated with it.

As signifiers are composed of and produce more signifiers, it is impossible to get beyond this play, therefore the meaning presented by the signifier is always *deferred* or *postponed* (p.252) and the meaning we make is actually based on the ‘*trace*’ (p.253) of the other signifiers that it “*differs*”(p.253) from. We come to make a meaning that “*defers*” and “*differs*”(p.253) at the same time, or presence of a meaning or an idea that is yet to come. Derrida coined a term in French, the ‘*differance*’ (p. 253) that accumulates both the concepts to *differ* and to *defer*.

Derrida borrowed a significant idea from Structuralism, the “*binary oppositions*”(p.254) to further strengthen his theory of Deconstruction. However, the theory of Deconstructions takes the idea of binary oppositions a step further explaining that these opposites are not completely different and their supposed hierarchy is but an illusion. Derrida has basically deconstructed the binary oppositions saying that the terms in the binary are interdependent; they depend on each other to make meaning. Each term in the pair contains the ‘*trace*’ (p.253) of its opposite (p.254) which makes the distinction between them “undecidable” (p.259). Here difference enters the discussion explaining that the meaning of each term in the binary is first deferred (postponed) and secondly it has traces of the concept from which it differs. It underscores the idea that the meaning is never fully present and it is ever evolving and changing, what you perceive is actually ‘a moment of meaning’ (p.259) because the *differance* is based on *the presence that is always to come*.

### **ANALYTICAL DISCUSSION**

Ekif Shafak’s *The Forty Rules of Love* (2015) revolves around a major binary of rigid interpretations of Islam and Sufism, reinforced by various minor binaries created around certain issues in order to highlight their contradictions. It is noteworthy that She herself has not created this binary between the two schools

of thought rather she has just brought it into our awareness. This binary exists for millennia, as it is asserted in the novel as she says “It is present in the heart of every Abrahamic religion. This is the conflict between the scholar and the mystic, between the mind and the heart. You take your pick!”(260). She has brought into light certain mystical facts regarding the Holy Qur'an, Sharia, God's Creation, Soul, Body, Individuality, Sema, Music, etc., by letting the readers know what is a Sufi's take on these concepts and how a conservative scholar interprets them. The difference among their interpretations and perspectives ultimately creates a binary that the novel is trying to highlight and that how one of them is always considered superior to the other without any logical reasoning. The author has opted an inclusive approach by incorporating multiple perspectives to make people ponder how they interpret these concepts and why they prioritize one over the other, eventually deconstructing reader's long held perceptions. Hence, the deconstruction of rigid notions around religion, spirituality and love are quite evident in the text.

Shafak presents the distinction between the interpretations of The Holy Qur'an made by rigid scholars and mystics. This is the most sacred scripture in Islam and forms the base of the whole religion. However, Quran is deciphered and given meaning by certain people at certain levels as per their intellectual depth. Shams, a mystic dervish, informs the readers about four levels of Holy Quran's understanding, saying, “The Qur'an is like a shy bride.”(2015, p.196). Just as a shy bride only lifts up her veil for the beholder only if she finds him humble and loving. Similarly the Quran unveils its meaning only to those who have a compassionate and a pure heart. Shams calls the first level as “the outer-one” (p.50) that the majority of people get at same as the sharia scholars, the second level is called “the inner or Batin” (p.50) known to Sufis, then comes the third one which is known as “the inner of the inner” (p.50) and is accessible to Saints, finally comes the fourth level which is the deepest one known to “prophets and those who are closest to God” (p.50).

Shafak (2015) depicts the multiplicity in the interpretation of the Holy Quran more explicitly through the conversation between Kimya, Rumi's daughter, and Shams. It showcases how instead of embracing the Quran as whole and seeking the true essence of the Holy book, some scholars usually choose specific verses and their interpretations that align with their interests. When Kimya finds herself caught in the interpretation of a few verses from the chapter “Al-Nisa” (The Women), she goes to Shams and inquires as to why a few parts from this chapter indicate men are superior to women and are allowed to beat them. Shams satisfies Kimya's query by reciting the two different interpretations of the same verse from the chapter Al-Nisa. The first interpretation is the one that Kimya was aware of which indicated that men as the “maintainers” (p.196) of women and they can “beat them” if they fear desertion. However, the second interpretation made by Shams is quite different as it does not prioritize men over women rather it indicates that men are “the support” (p.196) of women. Now that is the difference between how a religious scholar interprets the holy Quran and how it is interpreted by a Sufi saint. The former sees the verse as highlighting men's superiority over women while the later finds the verse as indicating that men and women are each other's counterparts and each other's support. Instead of propagating the conventional system of literal interpretation that is considered superior in our society Shafak has foregrounded the other one that requires personal struggle and a pure, passionate heart. This reflects that the meanings are always in the state of flux i.e. continuously shifting and evolving as per one's understanding.

The multiplicity in narrative around Sharia is denser than anything else among the orthodox scholars and Sufis, establishing the groundwork for the major binary created between rigid interpretations and Sufism. Shafak has shown great courage to bring it to common men and women's awareness how the approach of an orthodox scholar differs from that of a Sufi. Both schools of thought revere Sharia deeply but their views are not the same. Sharia is basically a system of “laws and legislation” (2015, p.259) to help people live a righteous and balanced life, and is based on the teachings of Quran, Prophet (PBUH) and centuries of Islamic scholarship. The approach of a Sufi towards Sharia is labeled as sacrilegious by the fundamental

clerics. The distinction among the interpretations of sharia is thoroughly elucidated by Shams when he meets the Judge at the dervish lodge. The Judge comes from a long lineage of religious scholars and wears expensive silk garments, fur coat, heaving rings as a show of his status' grandeur. Like the most of orthodox scholars he shares the same opinion about Mystics' "esoteric interpretation of Islam" (p. 47) as it has nothing to do with Sharia rather pose a threat to Islamic teachings. Shafak enlightens the audience saying that "Sharia is like a candle" (p.50) that guides people through the darkness but if one does not know where they are going and remain focused only on the candle then what good is it for them. When Shams reveals that a Sufi has a deeper understanding of Quran than a rigid scholar, who only possesses an outer knowledge, the Judge starts warning him against committing "sheer blasphemy" (p.50). This is the true face of modern society, where people are not even allowed to ask questions and they are bound to keep their uncertainties and muddled thoughts with them. It is then Shafak who, through the character of Shams, makes people aware on how God looks deep into individuals' hearts and the purity of their intentions rather than their physical rituals and ceremonial practices through the story of Moses and the shepherd. The novel reflects back on the incident when Moses one day sees a shepherd praying in his own unique way with his hands spread towards the sky and his tongue uttering the songs of his love for God. The Shepherd expresses absolute devotion, declaring that he would "slaughter the fattest sheep in [God's] name ... roast it and put its tail fat in [His] rice to make it more tasty" and later "wash [His] feet and clean [His] ears" (Shafak, 2015, p. 51). Initially Moses misunderstands the whole concept of Shepherd's prayer and scolds him. The shepherd feels ashamed and asks Moses to teach him the right way of praying. Teaching the Shepherd some formal ways of worshipping, Moses sleeps at night and hears the voice of God saying that he failed to understand and identify shepherd's love and sincerity behind his prayer. God tells Moses he was immensely pleased with the shepherd even though the shepherd did not say the right words in the right way "I was pleased with him. His words might have been blasphemy to your ears, but to Me they were sweet blasphemy." (p.51)

The orthodox scholars fail to understand the individual and unique connection of humans with God simply because it does not follow the framework of physical worships. While Sufism teaches humans to build a unique, personal and a pure connection with God independent of any ceremonial restrictions. Sufism encourages us to adopt a more inclusive approach where no one is left outside or marginalized just because they have found their own personal way to talk to God and get closer to him. The rigid scholars themselves do not follow the true Sharia rather carve out specific laws and rules to satisfy their own ego and maintain their stern status in the society.

Islam is a religion of love and acceptance not of hatred and exclusion. Shafak (2015) has not crafted fictional stories rather she has portrayed the cruel reality of the society and culture that has been dragged away from the true Islamic principles. How sharia is misinterpreted and misused by the so-called preachers is well evident in the novel when the Desert Rose, a prostitute, goes to the mosque to listen Rumi's preaching. People in the mosque recognize her and force her out calling her "*a whore*" who "*has no place in a holy mosque!*" (p.124). The Sharia has no such rule where it says that prostitutes are not allowed to enter mosque, then why people consider it forbidden for prostitutes. This hateful and extremist attitude has been incorporated in the masses to maintain the status quo of power. Blindly following the rigid scholars, people usually forget what the Prophet (PBUH) said "Every son of Adam commits sin, and the best of those who commit sin are those who repent" (Sunan Ibn Majah 4251).

Shafak (2015) brings to our conscience the significance of a profound relationship between Creator and creation. The relation is usually confused with a false binary of Creator and creation but God has no equal or opposite, God remains God even when the whole creation falls back to its original i.e. nothingness. God remains outside the system of binaries as He reigns Supreme. She says that "Things become manifest through opposites. Since God has no opposite, He remains hidden." (p.121). She asserts in one of the forty



rules that loving a perfect God is simple and easy as God is perfect in all His attributes but we actually require a lion's heart to love fellow human beings and embrace them with all their imperfections "Unless we learn to love God's creation, we can neither truly love nor truly know God" (P.110). But what actually happens, around us, the rigid preachers make people forget the creation completely and make people busy in rituals and ceremonial worships. How is that people pray five times a day but do not feed a hungry stomach, help the needy, guide the stranger, be dutiful to the neighbors, show mercy to animals, care for parents, respect and help the elderly. Why all this trouble if one neither has love nor a grain of kindness in his heart? This attitude of people has not built over night rather it is the outcome of people's negligence towards the God's creation because the main aim of scholars have always been the incorporation of fear of Hell and an obsession with Heaven.

How the people, who are stationed at high ranks to protect the citizens, are themselves involved in hurting and torturing them on the basis of their rigid mentality and misinterpretation of divine laws. They (mis)use the golden principles of Sharia to justify their own outrage and frustrations. Shafak portrays this grave reality when one night Suleiman the drunken is returning home and unfortunately comes across the guards who have no respect for people like him, even do not consider people like Suleiman as humans. Upon enquiry when they are met with ironic answers from Suleiman, one of the guards who is young enough to be his son, starts whipping him with all his might. He whips him so hard that he blacks out. But when he comes back to his senses again he finds a Dervish, Shams of Tabriz, sitting next to him helping Suleiman to sit. Without caring for Suleiman's urine drenched clothes, stink and blood stains, he carries him up and takes him home. Along the way they delve into talks about how everyone is created in God's image and that no one is allowed to play God and decide whether one deserves God's forgiveness, mercy and love or not. Suleiman further asks about the mention of wine in Sufi poetry. Shams explain as to how the heart makes the real difference not the facade because the tavern becomes a praying chamber for the lover and remains a tavern for a drunkard. Shams give a flask of ointment to Suleiman to put it on his wounds so that he may remember God is within him. This is how a lover of God treats His creation without considering how they look or who they are. As Shams explains to Suleiman that "In everything we do, it is our hearts that make the difference, not our outer appearances. Sufis do not judge other people on how they look or who they are" (2015, p.141).

Another such example of stark difference in the treatment of downtrodden people of the society by Sufis and common folks is Hasan. He is a leper bound to suffer on the streets of Konya. People of Konya have turned a blind eye to his suffering as a leper and have even added to his miseries. He is considered an omen of bad luck, as shopkeepers force to move him out from the front and pregnant women avoid looking at him fearing this will cause deformity in their babies. The mothers point out to him to scare their mischievous toddlers and children chase him with "stones" (Shafak, 2015, p.104). People approach him only when they need him to pray for their ill and elderly relatives. Shafak reveals the true face of the society that how the attitude of people changes like seasons with the arrival of a need or a holy month such as Ramadan. When Ramadan comes, people who were earlier completely indifferent to outcasts people like Hasan, race to give alms to them as the atonement for their sins. Such inhumane attitude of people make the marginalized people like Hasan think that they are not loved by God rather left alone to suffer in this world. They lose their confidence in God's mercy as a consequence of society's actions they believe that "I don't think God hears me. I have no reason to believe He does." (2015, p. 105). But on the other hand, there are some kind and compassionate servants of God who embrace these ostracized people and fill their hearts with hope and love again. When Shams crosses path with Hasan, he does not ignore rather he kneels down to his level and greets him, asking for his name as Hassan artistically describes his situation: "Instead of ignoring my presence, the way people who saw me for the first time always did, he put his right hand on his heart and greeted me as if we were two old friends."(p.122). He then hands him over a beautiful silver mirror and requests him to keep it as a reminder that he bears God with himself.

The society and its people consider harlots and prostitutes as symbols of impurity and filth but Sufi has respect and regard for all because he believes that “Real filth is the one inside.” (Shafak, 2015, p.111). The hatred of society towards the shunned, such as Desert Rose, is the real filth, the filth that cannot be cleansed with the pure waters but through love. The whole life of Desert Rose is a true picture of suffering until she dares to step out of it and opts the path of love, a path that she has been destined to choose. When she finally leaves everything behind and comes to meet Shams, she is kept outside just because she has been a harlot and she cannot be seen under the roof of Rumi’s house. Shams objects this absurd perception upheld by the whole society, saying, “Aren’t we all living under the same roof anyhow? Kings and beggars, virgins and harlots, all are under the same sky!” (p.266). Shafak conveys the fact that a Sufi always has an inclusive approach towards everyone without any distinction or discrimination unlike most of rigid clerics. When these fundamentalist religious authorities throw the poor and the shunned into the pits of despair and darkness, the mystic dervishes pick them up and embrace them as their own. Islam is a religion of love and love is what marks the difference between being a rigid cleric and a spiritual mystic.

Shafak has made known to the audience that nothing is beyond human’s reach, everything that one seeks is already present inside them be it the quest of God. Each and every human being embodies the whole universe, what you like or dislike is also present inside you at different levels. It is foolish to shut your eyes to the external world as she asserts in her novel, rather it is wise to “Read the breathing Quran secreted in human beings.” (2015, p.112). There is no wisdom greater than loving all the creation of God with a pure and loving heart.

The rigid scholars promote further hate and fear among the people around Sema and music as well. People, living in societies where conservatism rules, do not even think very highly of music and the dance of dervishes, the Sema. Generally the rigid people and their followers believe that music and dance are some kind of desecration. They are unable to understand for what this dance of dervishes stands for. Whatever they wear or do in Sema symbolizes something meaningful - their white skirts represent the shroud, the black cloaks symbolize grave and the honey-colored hats stand for the tombstone. When dervishes whirl with their one hand pointing to the sky while the other facing the earth, they reaffirm their vow that they will pass every glimmer of love they receive from God to his creation. But it is noteworthy that how such an insightful act of love is always met with disdain. Shafak attempts to broaden the readers’ perception about music by saying that people “think God gave us music—not only the music we make with our voices and instruments but the music underlying all forms of life, and then He forbade our listening to it” (2015, p.276). Everything around us in this vast universe is moving with a pattern, a rhythm. An in-depth observation draws our attention to the fact that the nature is singing secretly - the rustle of leaves, the thump of heart, the flap of wings, the rumble of the thunder, the murmur of the sea, the whisper of the wind, the chirp of birds, the clanging of iron by the blacksmith, the pulse of life around the baby in the mother’s womb. But obviously the signs are for those who strive to know. It is not the music but the listener who makes a difference, it can either whisper the songs of love and the secrets of universe into one’s ear or it can make one more anxious about their feelings, so it is up to the listeners what they seek. When Shams asks Rumi to perform Sema for the first time in front of whole Konya, a certain fear of people’s judgment fills his heart thinking they may not like it as this practice is strange and unknown to common folks. Shams replies that “Not everyone thinks highly of God. Are we going to postpone believing in Him, too?” (p.267). Hence, such is the difference between the insight of a Sufi and the people, swayed by the closed minded rigid clerics. These people who say music is but a sacrilege and at the same time show no restraint while backbiting and slandering the fellow human beings, the two of the most the gravest sins ever, are actually the most slanted ones.

## CONCLUSION

The purpose of the research is to depict how the views held by one side are always considered lawful and legitimate while completely ignoring the views of the other side. How the religion preached by the rigid scholars labels the faith of Dervishes and Sufis as infidel. This polarization makes people intolerant towards each other's beliefs and destabilizes the society, giving the so-called rigid clerics an upper hand over the masses. This paper attempts to deepen the understanding and to build forbearance among people towards the less privileged or derogatory paradigm of Sufi Islam. However, the choice of readers remains independent of any coercion; they may choose what they believe works best for them, or they can decide not to choose at all, but in the latter case, a decision will be made for them as a part of natural process, whether they like it or not.

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