



An Analysis of Elif Shafak's *The Forty Rules of Love* in the Context of Cosmopolitanism

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Abstract: *Cosmopolitanism is increasingly being used by fiction writers in contemporary literature as it narrates the political, social, and cultural concerns of the present-day. Authors adapt to the needs of contemporary audiences in a cosmopolitan context by writing beyond their region and boundaries. Literature plays an important role in forming people's cultural and ethical consciousness as it offers a space where actual and imagined boundaries are continually transgressed. Likewise, cosmopolitanism provides a framework to communicate with "the other" that transcends xenophobia and parochialism, treating foreignness, globalization, and diversity with a positive mindset. In Elif Shafak's 2010 novel, *The Forty Rules of Love*, a tolerant approach to "the other" is portrayed by integrating the fictitious biography of Rumi, the Persian-Turkish with the story of a Jewish-American housewife in her repetitive and boring life seeking spiritual rebirth. Through her plot and setting, she builds a cosmopolitan society that aims to build an allegiance to the community of human beings in the entire world and aspires for a moral community where all human beings irrespective of class, nationality, gender, race or religion are treated with equality, respect and justice. This paper analyses the cosmopolitan characters and instances in the novel that reject the fixed notions of belonging and endorse a pluralistic culture that promotes the identification of oneself with the strangeness of the world. It also aims to present the attention of the readers to the relevance of mystical teachings of Sufism across the physical, geographical or ethnic boundaries.*

Keywords: *Cosmopolitanism, Sufism, Spirituality, Pluralism, Universal Brotherhood.*

Although the term 'Cosmopolitanism' is subject to different definitions and interpretations, simply put, it is a multi-dimensional ideology that upholds the existence of human beings as the "citizens of the world" on the basis of a common belonging and a universal code of moral principles regardless of nationality, race, culture, religion and other homogeneities. It has become a theoretical framework which aims to acknowledge the "otherness of the other, beyond the false understanding associated with territoriality and homogenization" (Beck 147). In different disciplines, such as sociology, liberal politics, anthropology and literary studies, cosmopolitanism has evolved as an academic method. A cosmopolitan approach encourages an appreciation of other cultures, inter-cultural interactions and multiple affiliations that are counter to the regionalism, extreme conservatism and the loyalty to a specific ethnicity or race. It maintains that all human beings have obligations and responsibilities to the society.

The idea of cosmopolitanism has been known since Diogenes, the cynical philosopher who claimed he was the "citizen of the world," thus denouncing that he was defined with his own local context. Cosmopolitanism has become increasingly important in the present age, due to globalization, migration, global social movements and the global crisis. Delanty classifies cosmopolitanism into three categories: moral, political and cultural cosmopolitanism. This paper analyses the cultural aspect of cosmopolitanism in Elif Shafak's *The Forty Rules of Love* which deals with "a less dualistic view of the relation between the particular and the universal" (Delanty, 2006: 28). In her story, Shafak attempts to overcome the cultural distinctions between particular and universal through the cosmopolitan character of Rumi who lives beyond time and space as he believes "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" (Shafak "The Forty" 121).

The Forty Rules of Love novel portrays the romantic relationship of Ella, a Jewish-American housewife, and Aziz, with a parallel thirteenth century narrative, 'Sweet Blasphemy' written by Aziz' about the Persian-Turkish Sufi poet Rumi and his spiritual companion, Shams. It is a novel within a novel that comprises of two narratives: the main plot is about the world of Ella and the sub-plot is a narrative about Rumi and Shams of Tabriz.

Beyond cultures and times, she develops a cosmopolitan work of fiction about the transnational convergence of Aziz and Ella as they encounter each other when Ella is allotted Aziz's novel 'Sweet Blasphemy' by her literary agency. Ella receives a letter to read the 'Sweet Blasphemy' manuscript from Aziz. Z. Zahara, who lives in Holland. Aziz has spent his life on the world trip, writing about the great philosopher, mystic, poet Rumi and his beloved Tabriz Shams. The charm of the novel and its enticing knowledge illuminates her mind and captures her. The novel makes Ella want to escape for a quest of an inner journey, and to lead a journey of emotional and intellectual passion, faith and transition.



Ella is a secular and liberal Jew who believes that religion is the reason for fanaticism and fundamentalism affecting the world in today's world. She is against religion, since she does not distinguish between moderate adherents and extremists, but believes that Muslim fanatics appear more to build social tensions. Fanatics of any belief were intolerable, but she felt deep inside that Islam fundamentalists were the worst. (Shafak "The Forty"159). Mysticism is not compliant with modern life for Ella.

On the other hand, Aziz has taken a spiritual path by joining Sufis after losing his wife in order to seek harmony and inner peace. Aziz presents the relationship of Rumi and Shams of 13th-century and translates their teachings to the present world. He begins the novel saying,

"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 of insecurity and fear of the Other. At times like these, the need for love is greater than ever (Shafak "The Forty" 15).

Aziz's character transforms Ella and she believes him to be a "spiritual man who took matters of religion and faith seriously, stayed away from all contemporary politics" (Shafak "The Forty"159). In one of the letters Aziz says,

"I know you're not a Sufi." Aziz smiled. "And you don't have to be one. Just be Rumi. That's all I am asking of you... you can be Rumi. If you let love take hold of you and change you, at first through its presence, then through its absence... we're all subject to change. It is a journey from here to there" (Shafak "The Forty" 326).

Ella converts herself into a Rumi after her spiritual journey after meeting Aziz. Shafak replicates Rumi as Ella seeking spiritual renaissance in her monotonous life to enable American readership to understand the Islamic context.

'*Sweet Blasphemy*', the novel written by Aziz revolves around the heterodox religious practice of Turkey, Mevlevi Sufism, which is exercised through poetry, music and dance and aims to erase particular affiliations, enmity to 'the Other' and parochialism. Sufism is constructed in the novel as a means to achieve national and cross-cultural solidarity by validating Sufist ideas and provides a valuable model for a global cosmopolitan tolerance that includes both the West and the East. It creates a national-intercultural unity and cosmopolitan ideals that offer a precious paradigm for global cosmopolitan tolerance that encompasses both the East and West.

The poems and philosophy of Sufi poet/scholar, Jalal al-Din Rumi (1207-1273) has seen an unprecedented increase in the West, particularly in the US. Through the translation of influential scholars, writers, he has acquired a status of a universal icon. His cosmopolitan ideal endorses a detachment which Amanda Anderson says is "reflective distance from one's cultural affiliations, a broad understanding of other cultures, and customs, and a belief in universal humanity" (267).

Parallel to the twentieth-century, modern and cosmopolitan United States, Shafak constructs a plot of a multicultural and multi-religious Anatolian state of the thirteenth century.

Rumi is an unorthodox Islamic person who lives in a secular Mongol society. The Anatolian society of the thirteenth century is a multicultural and pluralistic society where many languages are spoken. Shams describes the entire city as the Tower of Babel (Shafak "The Forty"109).

... I roamed the streets, amazed at the mixture of religions, customs, and languages permeating the air. I ran into Gypsy musicians, Arab travellers, Christian pilgrims, Jewish merchants, Buddhist priests, Frankish troubadours, Persian artists, Chinese acrobats, Indian snake charmers, Zoroastrian magicians, and Greek philosophers... heard people speak Venetian, Frankish, Saxon, Greek, Persian, Turkish, Kurdish, Armenian, Hebrew, and several other dialects I couldn't even distinguish... Amid this chaos I stood in a place of unperturbed silence and serenity (109).

What Shafak presents is Kant's "universal cosmopolitan existence" which "is nothing less than the regulative idea of 'a perfect civil union of mankind'" (Cheah 487). The text provides many examples that bind various religions or involve connections between religion and spirit. Rumi is married to a converted Christian who has although converted but still bears love for Mary. Ella was a Christian who married a Jew and was beloved by Aziz Sufi. Her daughter wants to get married to a Christian. There are endless examples of contrasts between religions, and the common aim is to unite with the creator as its central premise to educate the people that "We are not hundreds and thousands of different beings. We are all One" (135).



Many passages in the book recommend ways of doing it. For instance, Shafak suggests, “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)

Through the life of a prostitute, a beggar and a drunkard, Elif represents characters irrespective of their class and stature in the society to address the attitude of people towards the oppressed, which hinder their search for meaningful life and affection. Pogge in his *Cosmopolitanism: A Path to Peace and Justice* puts forward “that the world ought to be such that people have equal opportunities is a claim about justice; the claim that social institutions ought to be designed so that people have equal opportunities is a claim about social justice” (12).

Shafak presents the character of Desert Rose, a prostitute, to illustrate how people's offensive behaviour to the honor and faith of the less fortunate people leads to social injustice. She 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 can't stop her from yearning for God, but as her body or profession is disrespected so she dresses up like a man to attend a lecture by Rumi in the mosque before the Friday prayer. The people discover her and an angry mob chases her to beat her. However, Shams rescues her.

Another disengaged man, alienated from God who suffers from society's cruelty is Suleiman. A Muslim, he is an alcoholic, and in the eyes of people he is unacceptable. He shudders at the hostility by people that pushes him to drink more. He is assaulted brutally and left to starve to death, until Shams gets him back and takes his wounded body away. Similarly, the beggar with leprosy, Hasan suffers a contempt in people's eyes. A beggar who lives on the outskirts of the city and survives on the support of people, he laughs at Rumi's preaching on morality and sorrow, as he feels that a wealthy, educated, revered preacher would not know about the sufferings of the poor. He undergoes a change when Shams politely asks his name and offers him a mirror and tells him by that God lives in his heart.

Rumi's comprehensive Islamic ideology embraces each section of a universe without excluding other religious beliefs. While allowing a central figure to be focused on faith, Shafak portrays Sufism as a universal Islam that appeals to local as well as global audiences. A great scholar of the east and the west”, (Shafak “The Forty” 155), Rumi is portrayed as cosmopolitan figure who advocates that “there is a perfect harmony and subtle balance in all that is and was in the universe” (343). Shams likewise symbolises a special diversity that refrains from extreme behaviour and attitude.

Shafak points towards Sufism as having more aspects of togetherness than Islam. Without theological complexity, Aziz's tolerant Sufi belief parallels Sham's serene spirituality. He speaks of it as a dervish “I roam east and west, searching for God high and low. I hunt everywhere for a life worth living and a knowledge worth knowing. Having roots nowhere, I have everywhere to go” (39) and believes that “Sufis don’t go extremes. A Sufi always remains mild and moderate” (153). Accommodating its inextricable cosmopolitan existence, Sufism regards Islam as a moderate religion.

Ella is transformed after the death of Aziz and rejects the conventional, narrow minded lenses through which she defined people. Her change can be represented through the advice she gives to her daughter Jeannette.

“A life without love is of no account. Don’t ask yourself what kind of love you should seek, spiritual or material, divine or mundane, Eastern or Western...divisions only lead to more divisions. Love has no labels, no definitions. It is what it is, pure and simple. Love is the water of life. And a lover is a soul of fire! The universe turns differently when fire loves water.” (Shafak “The Forty” 224).

Cheah contends that “cosmopolitanism is a necessary response to our continuing integration into a global system since ideational and affective content of cosmopolitanism fosters universally communicable values and pleasures” (Cheah 158). Cosmopolitanism views the people in the society as entities open to move around the world and not as solely defined culturally entities - irrevocably placed into a given cultural framework from the birth. The willingness of people to exist together is key to this theory. Through her stories, her cosmopolitanism can be encompassed as she believes that “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” (Shafak “Why The Novel”).

Shafak believes literature has the ability to “leap over cultural walls, embrace differences and feel what others feel” (Shafak “The Politics”). Through her novel, Shafak she also represents her desire for the “multilingual, multiethnic, multireligious” Ottoman past, which symbolizes an “astonishingly, gracefully intense and vivid cosmopolitan culture” (Shafak “Life”). A universal human capacity must be built where a variety of abilities – for language, thought, cooperation is encouraged for cultural transactions. Simultaneously, culture itself must be open to change, alterations, interpretations or combinations in a variety of arrangements where people must trust the cosmopolitan existence. *The Forty Rules of Love* condemns and challenges



a lack of contact and appreciation of differences which is an obstacle to peace in societies. In doing so, it embodies a cosmopolitan view that embraces differences and transcends the boundaries of nation, ethnicity, class, religion and race.

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