

## Exploring the Intersection of Hybridity and Sufism in Elif Shafak's Novel, the Forty Rules of Love

Sabiha Nahid<sup>1</sup>, Dr. Tandra Das<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Research Scholar, Department of English, Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankaradeva

Viswavidyalaya, Nagaon, Assam

<sup>2</sup>Professor, Department of English, Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankaradeva Viswavidyalaya, Nagaon, Assam

### Abstract

An internationally acclaimed Turkish-British writer of the contemporary period, Elif Shafak is renowned for her prolific thoughts concerning issues like identity, gender, politics and culture. Born in France, her Turkish upbringing has imparted multicultural traits to her thoughts. Her narrative style and thematic preoccupations are addressed by her transcontinental life, bridging and encapsulating both the cultures of the East and the West. Due to her active participation in contemporary social affairs, she has rightfully acquired the audacity to lend out her bold voice for those who could not. Some of her important novels are *The Bastard of Istanbul* (2006), *The Forty Rules of Love* (2009) and *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in this Strange World* (2019) that frequently criticized and challenged patriarchal norms by exploring the unimaginable experiences of women in conservative and oppressive patriarchal societies.

The novel taken for the current study is *The Forty Rules of Love*, A Sufi novel that seeks to explore the cultural interplay and the emergence of new identities created due to the cultural interactions. The novelist incorporates hybridity in the novel by blending Eastern and Western philosophies, Sufism and modernity as well as traditional and contemporary narrative styles.

Both hybridity and Sufism are intertwined in a unique manner to create an affluent cultural matrix to include social, philosophical and spiritual ideas. Two parallel narratives from two different ages are juxtaposed to create a tapestry of diverse ideas. Sufism's emphasis on love, unity and transcendence serves as the background of the novel, whereas hybridity emerges as a result of the blending of contrasting cultures. The interaction of all these elements that lead to the construction of a hybrid space is the core of the present study.

**Keywords:** Sufism, hybridity, culture, spiritualism

### Introduction

Elif Shafak's *The Forty Rules of Love* intertwines two parallel stories- one set in the contemporary times about Ella and Aziz, and the other in the 13<sup>th</sup> century Anatolia about Rumi and Shams. The modern and historical narratives reflect upon each other with Ella's journey paralleling Rumi's transformation under the guidance of Shams of Tabriz. It explores the forty rules of love of Shams that emphasise upon love, unity and spiritual growth.

### Objectives

1. To explore the intersection of hybridity and Sufism in the novel.

2. To understand the character transformations through the intersection of hybridity and Sufism
3. To analyse the role of Sufi teachings in hybridity

### **Hypothesis**

Elif Shafak's *The Forty Rules of Love* is a demonstration of the transformative power of love understood through the Sufi philosophy. With the help of a dual narrative, the writer deals with cultural interactions resulting in the creation of a hybrid space.

### **Methodology**

For the current study, the primary source i.e the novel is read using the theory of Hybridity propounded by Homi. K. Bhabha. The theory is applied to understand how it intersects with the idea of Sufism which is the backbone of the novel.

Elif Shafak who has been known for her Turkish writings became a popular figure in the literary market after the publication of her romantic novel *The Forty Rules of Love* in 2009. Her novels have been so intriguing that they have been translated into more than 40 languages and had been published by some of the leading presses of the world. Like in many of her novels, in this particular novel *The Forty Rules of Love* also, one would clearly find the traces of transcontinentalism which is a characteristic of all her novels.

Born in France as the daughter of a Turkish diplomat and a scholar of social psychology, Shafak had been educated in Spain and Turkey and she finally moved to the United States for achieving her profession first in order to look into the transcontinental characteristics of her novel, it is very important to understand the biography of the writer because a close reading of all her works would lead the researcher to find traces of her biography in her literary thoughts. It is unarguably accepted that Shafak locates herself as a world cosmopolitan citizen and introduces herself as a storyteller because of the combination of her literary thoughts along with contemporary issues of identity and belongingness which are the sole concerns of her fiction. These contemporary themes have appealed to the readers from all across the globe because of the relevancy of the issues that she deals with. Because she calls herself as leading a half nomadic life it becomes easier to find autobiographical details in her writings as well as her deep thoughts.

As a British Turkish writer Elif Shafak has vigorously voiced and debated in both national and international concerns. Her novels are significantly considered as cultural exports because of the relevant thoughts that she has imparted to her writing. The present study is basically concerned with the themes of hybridity and cosmopolitanism which are articulated through the concepts of identity and belongingness. The theoretical discourse of politics of resistance that she deals with is presented against globalization. The authorial position of the writer can be studied in the context of world literature because of the themes of cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism. These relevant issues require close examination and re examination in order to highlight the multifaceted layers of vision of the writer that she has used to resist the Euro centric approaches.

For a better understanding of the novel *The Forty Rules of Love*, it requires to be studied under the framework of Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity which is heavily embedded into the novel. Homi Bhabha discusses that the "unsettling of categorisations serves as a bridging concept extending the parameters of analysis and highlighting a mode of explanation which is alert to the role of difference and contingency in contemporary society" (Papastergiadis 2000: 5). Cultural hybridity helps in understanding of identity and culture in societies. However, this term is also not free from problems because of the emergence of global capitalism that tries to level up all the differences of the society. The novels of Elif Shafak relate to cultural diversity, migration and multiple belongings since these are used to represent her literary universe. Cultural conflict and cultural diversity are different phases in the process of multiculturalism that are presented with utmost skill in her novel.

### **The Forty Rules of Love as a Study of Hybridity**

According to Homi Bhabha, Hybridity "is a cite where transformations occur. As a liminal space between the cultures of the coloniser and postcolonial subjects, hybridity makes both undergo a process that recasts their identity and renders possible the third space of enunciation" (Dogangun, 2014, p. 207). In a hybrid space, it becomes possible and easy to address the internal differences for the creation of identity. Pnina Werbner is of the view that hybridity is understood as "subversive and pervasive, exceptional and ordinary, marginal and mainstream" (Werbner, 1997, p. 1). On the other hand, Marian M Kraidy has a different view that the openness of hybridity allows for arbitrary and exclusionary closure (Kraidy, 2002, p. 322).

In an interview with TED Talk in 2010, Shafak talks about hybridity thus:

"There is a fuzzy category called multicultural literature in which All authors from outside the western world are lumped together. I'll never forget my first multicultural reading in Harvard Square about ten years ago when three writers- one from the Philippines, one Turkish and one Indonesian, like a joke you know, and a reason why we were brought together was not because we shared an artistic style or a literary taste it was only because of our passports".

Elif Shafak is a critique of multiculturalism because her experience is the perfect example of "the elusiveness created by hybridity that allows for a reduction of complexity to a statement of mixture" (Dirlik, 2002, p.93). She is of the view that hybridity is hegemony constructed in the interest of the socially dominant. She states that her past and her fiction have been deeply shaped by the notion of borders. It is found that Elif Shafak talks about the complications of identity politics yet she stands strong while defining her own identity. The construction of a hybrid identity is the thematic concern of the novel *The Forty Rules of Love* which is instrumental in voicing the development of contradictions. The characters in this novel are allowed by the writer to move beyond their stipulated localities and reach different and higher identities, thereby creating space for hybridity. There are the interactions of Eastern and Western cultures and the relationships are shown as reciprocal because of the dominance of the perceptions of the present and the past.

Sufism being the background of the novel the writer beautifully touches on the transcendental nature and influence of love with respect to issues of belonging. The main characters of the novel Ella, Aziz, Shams of Tabriz and Rumi, the master, are bound in intersecting lives

nuancing each other which is the basic background of the story. It focuses on the friendship between Rumi and Shams in parallel with the contemporary story of the companionship between Ella and Aziz. The novel begins with Ella's inner transformation after she was hired to edit the beautiful book of Aziz titled *Sweet Blasphemy* which focuses on the close friendship between Rumi and Shams who lived in the 13th century Anatolia. Ella is an American woman but after reading the novel her curiosity reaches a different level about its author Aziz whom she wants to meet desperately but Aziz at that time was residing in Amsterdam.

The novelist introduces the readers with the typical middle-aged Ella who is entangled in an unsatisfying married life, characterised by monotony surrounded by husband and children. Despite living in a rich suburban area in Northampton New England, the distance and unfaithfulness of her husband had been the main reason of the unsatisfied conjugality in her life. Her introduction to *Sweet Blasphemy* can be treated as a kind of resort because she had developed a sweet corner for Aziz, a man of Scottish origin who later became a Sufi, adopting a new name and destiny, "photographer and traveller and a dervish at heart" (Shafak 324). Sufi philosophy is followed by Aziz and interpreted and he is highly influenced by Shams of Tabriz, according to whom love is a kind of journey in which "east, west, south, or north makes little difference. No matter what your destination, just be sure to make every journey a journey within. If you travel within, you'll travel the whole world and beyond" (Shafak, 2009, p. 86).

The parallel stories of Rumi and Shams, along with Ella and Aziz intermingle with each other as the writer desires to slowly transcend beyond the borders of nation and faith. The perception of love that is imbibed in the thoughts of Shams are the main source of influence of the writer and these thoughts are reflective in her writing when she says, "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" (Shafak, 2009, p. 135).

The hybridity presented in this novel has its own unconventionality. It is characterised by the description of the inner journey that Shams deals with along with a physical journey to Anatolia, the place which is the centre for Aziz to write about. In the introduction of his book, he writes "Beset with religious clashes, political disputes, and endless power struggles, the thirteenth century was a turbulent period in Anatolia. In the West, the Crusaders, on their way to Jerusalem, occupied and sacked Constantinople, leading to the partition of the Byzantine Empire. In the East, highly disciplined Mongol armies swiftly expanded under the military genius of Genghis Khan. In between, different Turkish tribes fought among themselves while Byzantines tried to recover their lost land, wealth, and power. It was a time of unprecedented chaos when Christians fought Christians, Christians fought Muslims and Muslims fought Muslims. Everywhere one turned, there was hostility and anguish and an intense fear of what might happen next". (Shafak, 2009, p. 19)

Historically, Anatolia had been a land of diverse tribes having different empires and citizens and different belief system and lifestyles. This place can be regarded as an exotic place. If viewed from the contemporary times it is the symbol of the novel's primary message because despite its chaotic situations, it had been able to bridge the temporal and the spatial gaps between the third world backbone of the story and the perception and expectation of the first world reader.

Hybridity in this novel derives its perception from Sufism because Sufism attempts to unite diverse cultures of the East with the West. The forty rules of love defined by Shams are mentioned in *Sweet Blasphemy* which is a perfect example of the perception of Sufism or Islamic mysticism because it aims to bring the soul into relation with the sanctity of the other world. Another important character in the novel is Suleman who is carried home by Shams after he gets drunk. His vision of the home is blurred here when he asks Shams if he was carrying him to his real or metaphorical home. Shams in a very poetic manner answers “What difference does it make, my friend? There is a rule that explains this: When a true lover of God goes into a tavern, the tavern becomes his chamber of prayer, but when a wine bibber 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. Sufis do not judge other people on how they look or who they are. When a Sufi stares at someone, he keeps both eyes closed and instead opens a third eye—the eye that sees the inner realm”. (Shafak, 2009, p. 141)

The idea of difference among the believers of God is projected here through the character of Shams and when he talks about the third eye, it is used not as a physical eye but as the intuition which helps us to know the truth of things. The readers here can associate with the concept of becoming one with God despite the noticeable dissimilarities among the believers.

Hybridity finds a different perspective in this novel because of its demonstration of diverse contradictions. It represents love to have the power to transcend boundaries, thereby encouraging unity and universalism and enabling detachment from the worldly affairs. One finds the beautiful fusion of Sufi mysticism and hybridity in the novel.

### Conclusion

Aziz and his exotic world are explored by Ella, representative of the West. Through this perspective, it is clear that Shafak is curious about understanding how the West desires to explore and perceive the East. By dealing with a western character exploring the east Shafak maintains her Turkish position. The novel, *The Forty Rules of Love* is characterised by a huge number of opposing influences ranging from differences in national, culture and world ethics, parochial knowledge in opposition to global awareness. These characteristics create a conflict between the local and the global hybridity that finds a place through the themes of that love in the novel that are used to reveal the fact that love transcending national boundaries either celebrate the differences or confirm the existence of the differences. This idea is quite precarious one if considered from the perspective of world literature. Hybridity here is used in context with the post colonial discourses and it continues to make its presence wherever discussions of world literature take place.

### References

1. Ahmad, A. (1996). “The Politics of Literary Postcoloniality,” *Race Class* Bhabha, Homi. K. (1994). *The Location of Culture*. Routledge.
2. Dirlik, A. (2002). “Bringing History Back In: Of Diasporas, Hybridities, Places, and Histories,” in E. Mudimbe-Boyi (ed.), *Beyond Dichotomies: Histories, Identities, Cultures, and the Challenge of Globalization*. State University of New York Press.

3. Kraidy, Marwan M. (2002). "Hybridity in Cultural Globalization," *Communication Theory*.
4. Temple University Press.
5. Papastergiadis, N. (2000). *The Turbulence of Migration: Globalization Deterritorialization and Hybridity*. Polity Press.
6. Shafak, E. (2010). *The Forty Rules of Love: A Novel of Rumi*, London: Viking.
7. Shafak, E. (2010). "The Politics of Fiction," Filmed July 2010 at TED Global, Oxford, UK. Video: 19:30. Available online: [https://www.ted.com/talks/elif\\_shafak\\_the\\_politics\\_of\\_fiction?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/elif_shafak_the_politics_of_fiction?language=en) (accessed January 10, 2025)
8. Werbner, P. (1997). "Introduction: The Dialectics of Cultural Hybridity," in T. Modood and P. Werbner (eds.), *Debating Cultural Hybridity: Multi-Cultural Identities and Politics of AntiRacism*. Zed Books.