



DECONSTRUCTING BINARIES AND SPIRITUALITY: A POSTMODERN AND INTERTEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF HISTORY IN ELIF SHAFAK'S *THE FORTY RULES OF LOVE*

Ammara Maqsood

(Minhaj University Lahore)

amqadri.eng@mul.edu.pk

Gulzeeb Yousaf

(Dar e Arqam School)

M. Ashiq Malik

(Nest High School)

Abstract

*In this study, the novel *The Forty Rules of Love* by Elif Shafak is critically analyzed based on its advanced technique of mixing the historical story with postmodern fiction. The study draws on the theoretical concepts of postmodern historiography and intertextuality to develop the ways in which Shafak dismantles conventional binaries, including past/present, East/West and realism/spiritualism, to develop an alternative form of historical metafiction. The focus of the analysis is twofold: first, to analyze the way in which the idea of Sufism is applied in the form of bridge in order to merge the historical (13th century) and the contemporary (21st century) narratives; and, second, to distinguish and interpret the main aspects of postmodernism that orchestrate the novel. In a qualitative, intertextual, pastiche, and temporal distortion, and binaries deconstruction approach to the novel, this study contends that Shafak utilizes these strategies not only as forms of style but as principles of pluralistic, love-focused philosophy based upon Sufism. The paper is finding that the novel is a critical discourse that promotes the cosmopolitan, spiritual interpretation of Islam that goes beyond cultural and temporal division.*

Keywords: Historiographic Metafiction, Postmodernism, Intertextuality, Sufism, Deconstruction, Binaries

Introduction

Elif Shafak has become one of the most convincing and well-read literary voices to come out of Turkey in the 21st century. A cross-pollination of cultures, histories, and narrative forms that is ambitious in its cross-pollination, Shafak is a novelist, essayist, and public intellectual who writes both Turkish and English fluently. Her novels, such as *The Bastard of Istanbul* and *The Forty Rules of Love*, have gone globally viral and have been translated into dozens of languages and have produced cross-cultural discussions on identity, memory and the rifts between East and West (as cited in the thesis document). Shafak stands in a special state of a public intellectual, balancing on the fine line between elite literary writing and mass audience readership and walking the political hot topics of the Armenian problem, gender politics, and the Turkish self (Saeed, Ali, and Iqbal, 2020).

Thematically pervasive and possibly her most commercially successful work, *The Forty Rules of Love* (Shafak, 2010) is perhaps the best-case study of her artistic and philosophical work. The novel is written on a dual narrative level: it follows Ella Rubinstein, a dissatisfied housewife of America in 2008, and with an interpolated novel titled *Sweet Blasphemy*, the book tells the story of the transformative friendship between the Persian mystic poet Jalaluddin Rumi and the wandering dervish Shams of Tabriz. It is more than a stylistic flourish; it is the working mechanism behind an extensive examination of the ways in which history permeates and influences the way people think in the present. The novel is not just a history but an active fusion of history and fiction that encourages readers to perceive



the past not as a hermetically sealed repository but as an active and ever-present power (Rasha Dayekh, Al-Hindawi, and Al-Sowaidi, 2019). This mingling is what makes Shafak work squarely in the sphere of postmodern literature, and in the sub-genre that Linda Hutcheon (2003) calls historiographic metafiction.

This genre of writing is a self-conscious fictionalization of real historical events and characters, not because it tries to falsify the past, but because it challenges the very mechanisms through which historical knowledge is produced, told and authorized. It confronts the positivist conception of history as a unique, objective fact, and suggests that history is a story, to be given or told in the prejudices, silences, and interpretations of its narrators. This is reflected in *The Forty Rules of Love*, which does not show Rumi and Shams through the lens of authoritative history, but as the subject of a multi-perspectival and fictionalized account, which is in turn read and interpreted by one of the main characters, thus further layering the process of historical reception (Saeed et al., 2020).

The Sufi philosophy of the mystical aspect of the Islamic faith is at the center of this historiographic metafiction. In the case of Shafak, Sufism is not projected as a dogmatic or exclusive religious practice but as a universal spirituality of love, which is out of time, space, and dogma and does not respect the limits of time and space or dogma. The thematic and structural ligaments between the two stories are the forty rules of Shams. They are the eternal knowledge to trigger the poetic enlightenment of Rumi in the past and the personal emancipation of Ella in the present (Firdous, 2014).

Accordingly, the ideological tool that pushes the main argument of the novel, namely, that love is the primal, unifying human experience that has the power to bridge historical and cultural boundaries (Sherwani, Ali, and Aziz, 2021). This paper thus assumes that *The Forty Rules of Love* is an intentional and complex literary endeavor in which the form and content of the text cannot be separated. The postmodern devices that Shafak uses (the two-story, intertextuality, fragmentation and, most importantly, breaking down the established binaries (past/present, East/West, spiritual/material) are not superficial window-dressing. They become the instruments she uses to implement her discourse and philosophical vision of historiography (Akber, Asif, and Nusrat, 2020). Through her systematic de-stabilization of those binaries, Shafak establishes a hybrid space of liminality between history and fiction, the spiritual and the mundane, and the Eastern and the Western self where they can engage, confront each other, and eventually enrich each other (Qaiser & Shahzad, 2020).

This study, therefore, attempts to transcend thematic appreciation of the spiritual message in the novel to give a strict analysis of the literary machinery in the novel. It seeks to expand on how Shafak manages to accomplish her much-acclaimed mingling of history and fiction by questioning the particular postmodern tactics that organize the novel and make possible its sharp critique of history, spirituality, globalized world and cosmopolitan identity.

Objectives

1. To analyze how Shafak utilizes the principles of Sufism as a thematic and structural device to seamlessly integrate the 13th-century historical narrative of Rumi and Shams with the modern narrative of Ella and Aziz
2. To identify and deconstruct the key postmodern elements, specifically intertextuality, the breakdown of binaries, and temporal fusion, employed in the novel to create its historiographic metafictional nature

Significance/Rationale



The study is important because it narrows down to examine the mechanics of how Shafak blends history and fiction. Although the spiritual message of the novel is fairly accepted, the present study explores the how behind this fusion, the exact literary techniques that help to accomplish this merger. It also presents the contribution of the novel to the postmodern literature as it illustrates the potential of historiographic metafiction to criticize the fixed historical and cultural narratives (Saeed et al., 2020). Also, given that religious polarization is a common characteristic of the global setting, it is of paramount importance to comprehend how Shafak packs and market a more tolerant, inclusive form of Islamic mysticism (Sufism) to an international audience (Furlanetto, 2013). The paper highlights the importance of literature in the process of breaking cultural barriers and creating a unity discourse.

Research Gap

The literature on *The Forty Rules of Love*, however, has already addressed its Sufi themes, its contribution to making Rumi popular in the Western world, and its narrative format (Furlanetto, 2013; Sherwani et al., 2021). Nevertheless, there is a break in the synthesis of the way that the postmodern form in the novel directly supports its historical and cultural deconstruction project. Several works observe the existence of intertextuality or duality but do not attempt to follow a thorough process of binaries breakdown by Shafak, including that of the past/present and East/West, to fulfill a cohesive thematic purpose based on the Sufi ontology (Qaiser and Shahzad, 2020). The study addresses this gap by providing a unified analysis that clearly connects the postmodern practices used in the novel (such as deconstruction) to its ultimate purpose of spiritual and historical synthesis.

Review of the Literature

As varied as the novel itself, the critical attention to Elif Shafak and the writing, *The Forty Rules of Love*, is related to a number of thematic and theoretical axes, which are interconnected, i.e. its postmodern historiographic metafiction, its use of the Sufi philosophy, its plot, and cultural politics. There is a considerable amount of criticism that keeps the novel squarely in the postmodern literary theory. Its formal features are systematically distinguished by scholars as typical of narrative experimentation in the late 20th century.

A systematized listing of all the postmodern elements that are present in the text by Akber et al. (2020) shows that such elements as intertextuality, indeterminacy, pastiche, and temporal distortion are not something that occurred occasionally but are structural elements of the architecture of the novel. Their critique follows the wider understanding of postmodern literature as literature which denies the existence of any grand narrative, becoming pluralist, and using self-reflexive methods to challenge the nature of representation and reality. The given view is further expanded with the help of an influential concept of historiographic metafiction provided by Linda Hutcheon (2003).

Saeed et al. (2020) use this framework directly and state that Shafak fictionalizes historical figures (Rumi, Shams) with the purpose of questioning and popularizing their legacy. They underline the aspect of syncretic fusion of progress and traditionality and past and present into the single entity through the intertextuality. The novel-within-a-novel device (*Sweet Blasphemy*) is emphasized as one of the main intertextual processes, which establishes a dialogic process, re-creating the consciousness of the present-day reader (Ella) and, consequently, that of the outside reader. Intimately connected with its postmodern category is the thorough treatment of the intertextual and embedded narrative form of the novel. The



novel formula which is identified as the focal point of innovation of structure is the tale within a tale which enables the historical amalgamation and fiction.

Rasha Dayekh et al. (2019) discuss how this form, as well as other postmodern strategies, intersect in describing the vision of the human condition of the author. They state that the two bodies on the walls, which are installed, do not run parallel but are convincingly intertwined forming a whole story, in which the acceptance trap of forgetting then re-learning is a persuasive argument in support of a humanistic global solidarity founded in love.

The intertextual interrelationship is commonly examined as an exchange between texts and periods. This reciprocal reflection and illumination between the modern frame narrative and the historical embedded text implies that past stories are living scripts since they can be re-enacted and re-read in present contexts. It is related to the models of history presented as linear, progressive, but suggests a more cyclical or spiral explanation of the human experience (Saeed et al., 2020).

The most notable aspect of academic interest is the spiritual and philosophical nature of the novel, which is based on Sufism. There is no consensus among critics who review the work of Shafak that there is a Sufism-based vehicle that delivers a message of universal love, tolerance, and anti-dogmatism. Using a critical discourse analysis, Sherwani et al. (2021) find that the novel is replete with the purest form of spiritual love that has eliminated the distinctions in a society. It is self-evident that their work explains how Shafak brings Sufism out of the abstract theological principles into a living, breathing way of life that can counter fundamentalism and even bring peace.

Firdous (2014) presents a harmonizing description in that she categorizes the novel as Bildungsroman or novel of formation. This discussion dwells on the inward experiences of both Rumi and Ella, stating that their similar metamorphoses, between a disciplined, restrained life and a life of mystical love and self-concern are made possible by the Sufi dogma. This spiritual education is based on the so-called forty rules, which lead the main characters to the process of self-discovery and redefining their role in the world.

Moreover, there are dedicated analyses in the text, as mentioned in the thesis, of particular Sufi terms, including *Wahdatal Wujud* (the Unity of Being), that determine how the narrative of Shafak represents such an ambiguous mystical notion of divine immanence. The novel actively deconstructs hierarchical binaries, which is an issue of critical and growing concern in the analysis of the novel: it is foundational to post-structuralist and postmodern thought. This question shifts out of observation of dualities (East/West, past/present, spiritual/material) to deconstructing the dualities on conventional dynamics of power as used by Shafak.

Kaiser and Shahzad (2020) give a straightforward Derridean deconstructive interpretation. They say that Shafak reveals and destroys the binaries that relate to social, historical and cultural conditions in the story. In their analysis, they show that, at first glance, the novel might tend to favor the spiritual East over the materialistic West, the meaningful past over the hollow present; however, the hierarchies are eventually brought down. The discussion shows that there is instability in the meanings and that these are not universal and ends that the final message of the novel is based on uncertainty and instability created intentionally on the basis of these conflicting binaries. This deconstruction is closely connected with cultural and political interventions in the novel.

Furlanetto (2013) presents a canonical criticism that is placed within postcolonial studies and analyzes the contribution of the novel to the so-called Rumi phenomenon in the



West. She claims that, although Shafak proposes a cosmopolitan, borderless society, her novel is, at the same time, searching in Orientalist strategies, instrumentalizing the East (its wise, mystical knowledge) to the needs of the Western audience, mainly Americans. According to Furlanetto, there is a disturbing conjunction between cosmopolitanism and the logics of the empire, arguing that the commercial success of the novel is pegged on the commercialization of a desirable, de-politicized form of Eastern spirituality.

Numerous articles do recognize the dual narrative or the theme of love without making the full tracing of the application of techniques such as intertextuality and, in particular, deconstruction as the main means of destroying binaries and reaching the stated objective of the novel, which is spiritual and historical synthesis (Qaiser et al., 2020; Saeed et al., 2020). This paper fills that gap by showing that Shafak does not simply create a context of the spiritual message by means of the historical background, but the mingling of history and fiction is a political and philosophically charged literary approach created with a conscious postmodern design.

Research Design and Methodology

This study is qualitative in nature, employing textual analysis as the main technique of conducting research. This method is interpretive and descriptive as it fits the delicate task of exploring the theme and technique in literature (Bogdan and Taylor, 1975). The main source of data is the text in *The Forty Rules of Love* by Elif Shafak. Peer-reviewed academic articles, books on literary theory (postmodernism, deconstruction) and reviews of the works of Shafak are considered as secondary data. The analysis is carried out in two interrelated stages in line with the objectives of the research:

(1) Thematic Analysis Sufi Integration: Thematic bridges between the two stories are identified through close reading, in which passages where Sufi principles (e.g., the Forty Rules, *Wahdataal Wujud* or Unity of Being) are applied are identified. This character transformation (Rumi/Ella) is followed as it shows how Sufi conceptions move the plots in both timelines.

(2) Formalist-Postmodern Analysis: The structural arrangement of the novel is considered based on models of such theorists as Hutcheon and Derrida. This includes:

- (a) Placing under mapping of the intertextual connection between the frame narrative (Ella) and the historical novel within it (Sweet Blasphemy).
- (b) Determining and dismantling major binaries (past/present, East/West, material/spiritual).
- (c) Comparing the methods such as the use of time distortion and multiple narrators which discontinues and reinterlaces historical narrative.

Analysis and Discussion

Sufism is the Aggregate of History Mingling: Shafak does not just compare two tales, but marries them together according to the conglomerate philosophy of Sufism. The very forty rules, formulated by Shams in the 13th century, become certain active participants in the life of Ella in the 21st century when she reads the novel by Aziz. An example, when the rule is said, “the whole universe is comprised in one human being- you” (Shafak, 2010, p. 131) triggers self-reflections in Rumi and Ella. This shows the eternal applicability of Sufism.

The novel, in turn, represents Sufism as a universal spirituality with a cornerstone of love, which literally annuls the borders of the time, space and religion. The parallel changes Rumi, the scholar to the poet through Shams, Ella, the unmet housewife to the seeker who lives through but not by the past Aziz give history to the present not as a long-term memory but as a living interactive force that directly determines the future. Accordingly, Sufism is the



thematic cement that holds the two timelines together as a sensible comment on the universal human struggle of meaning.

Postmodern Deconstruction of Binaries: The novels framework serves as an intentional means to illustrate how postmodern ideas largely work by breaking down the strict categories that are characteristic of such thought. Always shifting between 1242 and 2008, the narrative does not allow one of the two timelines to be more "real" or significant. In a binary, one term often gets more emphasis than the other (Qaiser & Shahzad, 2020). At first, Shafak appears to focus on the past as she takes the opportunity to throw a dull light on Ellas modern life by acquainting us with Rumi's historical story.

Nevertheless, going further reveals that the past story is itself a fictional novel (*Sweet Blasphemy*) authored in the present. This round interrelation is an attempt to break down the hierarchy, implying that knowledge is obtainable through both temporal perspectives. Shafak draws an opposite picture of the West/East dichotomy from the Orientalist one, where the West is considered to be the light of reason and the East, backwardness. The East, therefore, (represented by Rumi and Shams) is the source of spiritual wisdom, whereas the West (Ellas America) is depicted as being rich in matter but poor in spirit. It is through Eastern mysticism that Ellas's emancipation comes about. Nevertheless, it is not just a mere simple switching of roles. With the help of the character Aziz (a Sufi with a modern, global existence) and Ellas final voyage to the East, Shafak is leading us to a conclusion which is a combination of a hybrid space where the spiritual depth of the East meets the transformative potential of the Western individual.

Through intertextuality where the two narratives reflect and comment on each other and this systematic deconstruction, Shafak creates a truly postmodern historiographic metafiction. The novel insists that history is not a fixed truth but a narrative open to reinterpretation, and that identity, like meaning, is hybrid and fluid.

Conclusion

This confirms that Elif Shafak's *The Forty Rules of Love* is a sophisticated work of postmodern historiography that masterfully mingles history with fiction. The research objectives are met by demonstrating that Sufism functions as the essential thematic and philosophical conduit, seamlessly connecting the 13th and 21st centuries through parallel journeys of spiritual awakening; and the novel employs key postmodern elements most notably intertextuality and the deconstruction of entrenched binaries as structural foundations. Shafak does not simply tell a historical tale; she deconstructs the very frameworks (time, geography, ideology) that normally separate history from contemporary experience.

By destabilizing these binaries, the novel creates a hybrid, cosmopolitan space where the spiritual wisdom of the past becomes urgently relevant to the present. In doing so, Shafak moves beyond a simple celebration of Rumi. She offers a critical, metafictional exploration of how history can be repurposed to address modern maladies like alienation, intolerance, and cultural polarization. Ultimately, *The Forty Rules of Love* stands as both a compelling narrative and a literary argument for a pluralistic, love-centered worldview, achieved through the conscious and artful mingling of history and fiction.

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