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ELIF SHAFAK'S *FORTY RULES OF LOVE* PRESENTS THE
SOLUTION TO COMBAT TERRORISM

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Abstract. In Elif Shafak's *Forty Rules of Love*, the writer delivers the message that Sufism, which is based on accepting variance and pluralism, is the key to terminate the continuing ideological and religious clashes. In order to combat the increasing hazard of religious extremism, sectarianism, and dogmatism that are the main causes of terrorism, there is a terrible need to find a way of life which operates on the basis of inclusion and shuns exclusion. Shafak believes that Sufism provides such a way of life. The novel calls people to embrace the religion of God's love rather than any other dogmatic religion. The novel calls for love, tolerance, patience, and many other tenets that the human being should follow in order to lead a happy life. In this novel, Sufism is not presented as a theoretical and hypothetic instruction. Instead, it is vigorous, breathing, and transmitting a placid energy that can obstruct terrorism. The novel delivers the message that there is a discrepancy between spirituality and religion. Shafak's alluring, touching, and impactful novel sagaciously invigorates the visions of Shams and Rumi, and bravely elucidates the variances between religion and spirituality.

Key words: Sufism; Terrorism; Love; Shams of Tabriz; Al Rumi.

Introduction:

Shafak's exquisite Sufi novel, *The Forty Rules of Love*, revolves around love but in a spiritual way. The novel makes the reader soar high in a spiritual realm far away from the materialism in which the whole world is obsessed. So, how much we need to read such a novel during the contemporary time. Recently, the main image of Islam in the minds of many occidentals has been loaded with brutality and veiled with dread. This is the Islam of a fundamentalist extremity; it is the Islam of the current time. And that is why some bemoan the deterioration of another peaceful and more tolerant Islam. The novel calls for the practice of

Sufism, a spiritualism that focuses on the mystical affinity between the individual and God. Sufism's ideology is egalitarian, philanthropic and peace-loving. Defying axioms of the fundamentalist Islamic east and the entrepreneurial Judeo-Christian west, the novel presents Sufism as a realm of spirituality which can permeate the vacuum at the heart of both and hinder vandalism.

In this euphonious, ebullient novel, Shafak discloses two alluring parallel stories – one contemporaneous and the other set in the thirteenth century. The novel unfolds in two parallel timelines. The first timeline shows Ella's, a forty-year old American woman,

monotonous life with her children and husband, David, who is a successful dentist. The second timeline stretched over the period of the thirteenth century. This line presents the story of the odd meeting between Jalal Ad-Din Al Rumi and Shams of Tabriz. This line also unfolds the consecutive gusty events that ended in the murder of Shams of Tabriz and the transformation of Al Rumi into the best Sufi poet in the history of Islam. Then the two timelines cross each other; the two centuries intersect each other as the life of Al Tabrizi has changed Ella from being a normal passive woman into a passionate lover willing to sacrifice everything for the sake of love. The novel moves between those two eras through consecutive chapters that bear the names of different characters during each era. The novel is narrated from different perspectives of different narrators, and that facilitates the movement of the novel between the two eras in a smooth way. The novel constructs one bond between the two eras that is the novel of *Sweet Blasphemy* written by Aziz Zahara. This novel is written by a contemporary Sufi about Al Tabrizi and Al Rumi, and then it is sent to Ella to recommend publishing it or not.

Throughout the novel, the author confirms that the twenty first century is not different from the thirteenth century. In fact, both centuries witnessed religious conflicts, cultural misunderstanding, insecurity, and fear. Accordingly, the need for love during both times is stronger than any other time:

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, 2010, p.17].

A reverse-ideological reaction to nullify and counteract terrorism has become a popular theme during the contemporary time. It is broadly believed that ideology is the principal motivating force behind the prevalent wave of terrorism. In fact, it is believed that terrorism has its roots in a specific extremist version of religion. Therefore,

advocacy of a moderate and peaceful version of religion is important to defuse terrorism at its roots. Shafak finds Sufism as the best model of a moderate and peaceful version of religion.

Main Text

The Forty Rules of Love consists of two narratives that occur in two different timelines separated by eight centuries. The first narrative unfolds the story of Shams of Tabriz, who could change a Sufi person like Al Rumi to become a poet. The Eloquent preacher and Jurisprudent Al Rumi that preoccupied people's minds in the thirteenth century, the century of sectarian and religious conflicts, was transformed into a love propagandist who took off his religious cloak while summoning to the unity of religions and the preference of God's love over than any other pleasure of life. In 1244, Al Rumi met Shams of Tabriz, and that meeting changed the life of each one of them. After that meeting, Al Rumi was transformed from being a man of religion into a poet simmering with emotions and calling for love. According to Shams of Tabriz, "Yes, Rumi is right. He is neither of the East nor of the West. He belongs in the Kingdom of Love. He belongs to the Beloved" [Shafak, 2010, p.121]. So, he shackled all the restraints and the traditional rules. In his journey, Shams of Tabriz rediscovered the path to faith in its purest and simplest form. Along with Al Rumi, Shams of Tabriz used love as a method to get faith.

Another story appears to change the life of its heroine. This is the story about the forty-year old Jewish woman, Ella, who suffers from the boredom and routine of her familial life. However, after reading Zahara's *Sweet Blasphemy* that is about the story of Shams of Tabriz and Al Rumi, her life is transformed from being a stagnant lake into a choppy sea. Since then, she has started to review her familial life and abandoned everything to reach to the author. After being introduced to him via an e-mail, she finds in him sincerity, purity, and resemblance to his forefather, Shams of Tabriz, who provoked hustle wherever he went. Along with Zahara, Ella discovers that Shams of Tabriz has not died for 800 years, and his controversial character is repeated throughout centuries. For example, the

Dutch Zahara, who converts to Islam, resembles Shams of Tabriz in his wisdom and philosophy.

This novel is like a spiritual meal to the contemporary society that is alienated from spiritualities. The novel provides spiritual doses that the Jewish heroine injects into her deadly veins. These doses are represented as forty rules of love that appear throughout the novel. The forty rules sneak into the body of the novel, and they appear as an isthmus to cross over the worldly pleasures and lusts to get divine love. The forty rules constitute an attempt to renovate our contemporary false world that is characterized by rigorous conflicts and intolerance. The novel is an invitation for a collective universal spirituality that can eliminate the differences among people through internal Jihad or self-jihad as Al Rumi prescribed 800 years ago. *The Forty Rules of Love* invites societies prevailed with hatred and extremism to embrace God's love. The novel moves beyond religious sectarianism that is prevailing everywhere nowadays. For example, Shams of Tabriz got married to the Christian Kaira, and his former wife, Jawhar, was Baha'i. He was not concerned whether the religions of his wives are similar to his religion or not as he believed that the Beloved God is one. Similarly, the Jewish Ella gets in a relationship with a Christian man who converts to Islam later. So, she challenges the strict restrictions of her Jewish religion that prevents the Jewish from getting into relationships with others from different religions. Sufism accepts others and makes love the core of its philosophy. According to Seyyed Nasr, "In Sufism the highest form of worship is knowledge of God, which is always combined with love" [2007, p. 18]. Sufism accepts the Christian, the Jewish, and the Muslim as the mission of the Sufi is to communicate with all and create a love relationship with the all. John Trimmingham says that "Sufis are the people who represent Islam with peace and love in every region of the world. Sufi saints have played a significant role in the preaching of Islam" [1998, p.21].

Shafak tries to draw attention to the similarity between what happened in the thirteenth century and what is happening in the twenty first century. In the thirteenth century,

wars sparked for racial, religious, and political reasons. In addition, religion succumbed under theocratic authorities and unilateral interpretations that took it away from its main role in creating a harmonious world. It is as if Shafak's *Forty Rules of love* suggests a spiritual solution for the world's rising crises that put humanity on the verge of collapse. The novel is an invitation to rescue religion from extremism and ignorance that might lead to terrorism. Shams of Tabriz invited people during a century of conflicts for love, opening the door for the love of all people with no exceptions. How much we need this kind of invitation nowadays to purify the universe from any religious, racial or sectarian discrimination. This novel has a philosophical orientation that is very devious and vicious. That orientation revolves around the unity of religions, unity of being, and divine love far away from sectarianism.

The novel demonstrates that human's divine love can defeat sectarianism and terrorism. The novel invites for the love of God and the melting with His essence since that is what can unite all people according to the Sufi philosophy. The unity of existence and religions appears in the fourth rule:

You can study God through everything and everyone in the universe, because God is not confined in a mosque, synagogue, or church. But if you are still in need of knowing where exactly His abode s, there is only one place to look for Him: in the heart of a true lover. There is no one who has lived after seeing Him, just like there is no one who has died after seeing Him. Whoever finds Him will remain with Him forever [Shafak, 2010, p.43].

In a century in which intolerance and religious conflicts prevailed, Shams of Tabriz called all people from different backgrounds and religions to love God and love each other. *The Forty Rules of Love* starts with: "How we see God is a direct reflection of how we see ourselves. If God brings to mind mostly fear and blame, it means there is too much fear and blame welled inside us. If we see God as full of love and compassion, so are we" [Shafak, 2010, 28].

Sufis expect that loving God results in the love of God's creatures. According to the Sufi poet Yunus Emre, "We love the created for the Creator's sake" [Talat Sait, 1993, p.55]. Love is a central doctrine for Sufis. They dismantle all disjunctions among different faiths and announce love of all human beings as the foundation of their ideology [Al-Hujwiri, 1971, pp.288-297].

The Forty Rules of Love is a kind of detachment from reality and getting solitude in a spiritual world. The novel elevates the reader to the sphere of divine passion that pours out spiritual waves. Who reads the title of the novel for the first time thinks that it is about a worldly kind of a man's love for a woman. However, the title of the novel indicates another kind of a spiritual love through dismissing worldly pleasures and temptations for the sake of the Holy God. Instead of calling for Jihad or fighting against infidels as what is happening nowadays, the novel calls for internal struggle or self-jihad against temptations and lusts. This journey is essentially a combat against all human weaknesses. The Quran describes the human soul (nafs), which is tempted to evil, as one such weakness. This strife lasts throughout every one's life. This is what happens even with those who have reached the uppermost level of faith.

No novel has acquired the attention and success as *The Forty Rules of Love* has acquired. This is could be due to its portrayal of one of the most important aspects of Islamic history that is Sufism. The novel portrays Sufism with its spiritual dimensions and its humane depth that is based on freeing oneself from the talons of materialism, life burdens, and societal constrictions. Instead, it calls for delving deeply into the self and instilling love and tolerance into it. Oscillating between the past and the present through two different timeline stories, the novel concentrates on the concept of love in its absolute form. Annemarie Schimmel says:

The messages of the Sufis are universal and they illumine the mind and soul. They love every one without any discrimination. People faith on them because they are the part of Islam and they have great contribution in the preaching of teachings of

Islam. Sufi philosophy is based upon universal love and brotherhood. [1975, p.40]

In its historical and contemporary dimensions, the novel calls for absorbing the anger of others, renouncing violence that arises from religious and social clashes, and embracing tolerance. So, the novel generates forty spiritual rules about love far away from prejudice, cruelty, and absolute preconceptions that do not take into consideration the human's spirit that is created on the basis of goodness, love and purity.

The author succeeds in connecting the contemporary reader with Sufism whose core is based on the fact that God is very near to the extent that we can see Him in our hearts and souls, enlightening our roads with love, peace, and goodness. The author tries to explain that evilness, terrorism, and intolerance are generated by those who discern religion from a closed point of view. The extremist always collides with those with different beliefs and religions, but Shafak believes that

Sufis do not go to extremes. A Sufi always remains mild and moderate (...) though she was by no means an atheist and enjoyed performing a few rituals every now and then, Ella believed that the major problem consuming the world today, just as in the past, was religion. With their unparalleled arrogance and self-proclaimed belief in the supremacy of their ways, religious people got on her nerves. Fanatics of all religions were bad and unbearable, but deep inside she thought that fanatics of Islam were the worst. [Shafak, 2010, pp.102-106].

The novel invites to fight terrorism through Sufism and through the dissemination of moderation, plurality, and diversity. Stephen Schwartz has written that: "Sufis seek mutual civility, interaction, cooperation between every human being" [2008, p.14]. The goal of the author is to clarify that what we experience as terrorism and extremism is produced by Muslims who misunderstood Islam, and the solution for all that resides in understanding the essence of

Islam that is based on peace and the acceptance of others:

A committed pacifist with strong humanitarian views, Aziz believed that all religious wars were in essence a “linguistic problem.” Language, he said, did more to hide than reveal the Truth, and as a result people constantly misunderstood and misjudged one another. In a world beset with mistranslations, there was no use in being resolute about any topic, because it might as well be that even our strongest convictions were caused by a simple misunderstanding. In general, one shouldn't be too rigid about anything because to live meant to constantly shift colors. [Shafak, 2010, p.106].

Conclusion:

Sufism is a part of Islam, and it is defined as “the inner mystical dimension of Islam” [Frembgen, 2008, p.17]. By applying the principles of Sufi Islam, we can conveniently eliminate the challenges of braking sectarianism, fractionalism, and extremism that cherish terrorism in the East & the West. Carl Ernst believes that the western scholars have been considering *Sufism* as a peaceful alternative to a more violent Islamic fundamentalism. In the contemporary world of bedlam, man is slid towards animosity, antipathy, malice and hatred, and all that leads to terrorism. The need of the hour is to apply Sufism that is based on tolerance, mercy and love of all mankind without the partiality of race, faith and creed. Sufism does not believe in factious thrusts; it prefers solidarity and harmony amongst human beings without any distinction. For Sufis, love of humanity is founded on the tenets of reverence, dignity and coherence of all religions which are sincerely held by any human being or any community [Engineer, 2012, para. 5]. Sufism bestows peerless service to humanity by patronizing ecumenical tolerance and fractional concordance.

At the end of the novel, there is the very explicit idea that if one comes to embrace a

spiritual kind of love, then dogmatized religions erode. Shafak sees Sufism as the most promising hope for barring the surge of extremism in Islam. Sufism can defuse terrorism by its respect for all religions and its emphasis on universal love. Shafak considers Sufism as the embryonic solution to the extremism that has blundered people's faith and distorted it to the world. The Sufi accepts all religions. If he/she is invited to pray in a church, the Sufi does not hesitate to do so. The Sufi accepts to pray as the Jews do; the Sufi accepts to pray in a Hindu temple. This is due to the fact that Sufism considers the human heart as the place of worshipping, in which God lives. Sufism is the Message of Love, Harmony, and tolerance: “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, 2010, p. 183].

Terrorism is an exclusionary demeanor experienced by groups with a unilateral and bigoted thinking that does not take into account the right of people to have different attitudes and ideas. Accordingly, sectarianism fuels terrorism as it gives legitimacy to the incrimination, expulsion, and profanation of others. In her novel, Shafak proposes the need for a universal cohesion, cosmopolitanism, and plurality. According to Shafak, that can be achieved through Sufism, the religion of love that can demolish religious and geographical borders. Shafak proposes an antidote to terrorism by Sufism that is based on a multi-religious, multi-ethnic, and multi-cultural harmony. In *The Forty Rules of Love*, Shafak tries to say that Islam is non-savagery and non-brutality. Some Muslims misunderstand the core of Islam. Islam is mainly based on peace not on suicide bombings, retaliation, or bloodshed. Peace in Islam blossoms from the rejection of ferocity, compulsion, sectarianism, persecution, torment and abuse.

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