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Love and Longing for the Reed-bed: A Comparative Study of Sufi Themes in *The Forty Rules of Love* and *the Mathnawi*

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Abstract: This article explores the recurrence of Sufi themes in Elif Shafak's novel, *The Forty Rules of Love* and draws comparisons to similar selections from Jalaluddin Rumi's *Mathnawi*. This article examines the claims that Shafak employs concepts more connected to New Age Spirituality than Sufism in her novel and has oversimplified Islamic Sufi concepts to appeal to an international readership. Through the comparative study of Shafak's fictional narrative with Rumi's poetry, I examine whether or not Shafak's characters in *The Forty Rules of Love* undergo a spiritual journey, or are Sufi seekers towards the Ultimate Truth. By using the *Mathnawi* as a form of reference for the Sufi journey, I conduct a thematic comparative analysis of selected passages from the *Mathnawi* and Shafak's narrative to investigate the Sufi dimension of this book. Through comparing close readings of selections from the novel with the *Mathnawi*, Sufi themes such as that of restlessness, searching for enlightenment *fanā'*[1], and the infinite power of Divine Love are presented. This article argues, through the thematic comparisons, that Sufi themes are predominant in the historical narrative of the novel, while the contemporary narrative lacks the Islamic basis of the Sufi path.

Keywords: *Mathnawi*, Elif Shafak, Jalaluddin Rumi, Sufism, New Age Spirituality

Introduction

Sufis in the thirteenth century, at the time of Jalaluddin Rumi, were hardly unanimous in their viewpoints, and with time, various orders appeared with different perspectives on the right path towards the Truth. Scholars, Islamic sheikhs, and Sufis throughout the centuries have attempted to explain Sufism, but as a spiritual path, it does not have one incontestable meaning. Sufism can be defined as a path that begins with the teachings of a Sufi *sheikh*, continues towards spiritual enlightenment, the annihilation of the self, and ultimately subsistence in the Ultimate Truth, God.

One of the most renowned scholars in Islamic Studies, Seyyed Hossein Nasr explains that the "Sufi tradition contains a vast metaphysical and cosmological set of doctrines elaborated over a long period by Sufi teachers and masters of gnosis" which has been maintained over centuries dating back to the Prophet (xv). The Sufi path, its discipline and beliefs, are connected to the levels of spirituality concerning "action, love, and knowledge" with the ultimate goal of reaching a "state of sanctity" (xv). The spiritual path of Sufism grants the seeker, by becoming One with Divine Love, access to the "inner levels of existence" and the reason for being (Nasr 140-1). Nasr presents here the necessary tenets known to any Sufi: The presence of Sufi teachers and the development of their doctrines, the basis of Sufism in spirituality and Islam, and most importantly, the aim of becoming One with God to comprehend the purpose of existence.

In comparison, Ron Geaves defines Universal Sufism as an interpretation of Sufism that focuses on the mystical elements without abiding by the guidelines of Islam (81). Universal Sufism is a testament to the

[1] Spiritual death.

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essentialist theories of mysticism where all higher religious experiences are considered more similar than different. This is similar to New Age Spirituality that differs across various cultures, but its main principle is to challenge any rigid moral code or religion. New Age Spirituality is a **"**descriptive category in religious studies" that is concerned with the spirituality of **"**1960s and 1970s, especially in the USA or Britain" which focuses on the **"**sacredness of nature and of the cosmic encounter of the individual with his essence" (Amaral 1117). Since Universal Sufism does not follow the principles of Islam and only concentrates on the spiritual aspects of Sufism, it can be grouped under the overarching concept of New Age Spirituality.

The principles of Sufism, especially those reiterated in Rumi**'**s poetry, will be studied with respect to Elif Shafak**'**s novel in comparison to New Age Spirituality.

Jalaluddin Rumi

Today, Rumi is considered to be the bestselling poet in the United States and millions worldwide are reading his poetry (Kafka n.p.). His works, in spite of the centuries since their creation, continue to be appealing to contemporary audiences from all over the world.

Jalaluddin Rumi, an esteemed Islamic scholar and preacher, was born on 30 September 1207, most probably in Balkh, a part of modern-day Afghanistan to Bahā al-Dīn Walad. He is widely known as "Mawlānā, Our Master", while the name Rumi, mostly common in the West, refers to the fact that he resided in the "province of Rūm (Anatolia)" or what is now known as Turkey (Safavai and Weightman 1). Rumi followed the path of his ancestors and studied Islamic theology and scripture to become a preacher and a scholar.

According to Annemarie Schimmel, Rumi**'**s legacy is his unsurmountable influence on various writers and poets of the following centuries (1982, 5). Unlike many mystical poets of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, his historical background is well known due to the literary nature of his father and his prestige in the Islamic community. Rumi was following his father's path with his position as a Muslim sheikh, preacher, and Islamic leader. Meeting Shams of Tabriz shifted the axis of Rumi's life, and he began to seek the spiritual knowledge of the Sufis. Shams was elemental in Rumi's transformation into a Sufi by first forbidding him from scholarly pursuits, such as reading Islamic texts, since scholarly knowledge is not the aim of the Sufi mystic, but spiritual wisdom (Safavi and Weightman 18). In time, Rumi was able to "shift the center of gravity" from mental and intellectual pursuits to spiritual knowledge that emanated from a person's center, the heart (Safavi & Weightman 18). This prioritization of spiritual knowledge over intellectual knowledge is repeatedly referenced in Rumi**'**s poetry.

***Mathnawi*[2]**

The *Mathnawi* is a work of about 27, 000 couplets and belongs to a didactic tradition of teaching through parables and poetry (Schimmel 1980, 47). It is divided into six volumes and was written over a period of about fifteen years. Numerous writers and researchers have interpreted Rumi's verses and deduced teachings and meanings that are incalculable. Safavi and Weightman believe that Rumi deliberately wrote the *Mathnawi* to guide his readers towards the inner path to the Truth that he had undertaken successfully. They also suggest that Rumi follows a heuristic method in the *Mathnawi*, guiding seekers on the spiritual path that takes them from the everyday reality to the spiritual world and ending with enlightenment (Safavi and Weightman 4-5). Others have reflected on Rumi's ontology expressed in this work where he ruminates on the components of creation, the concept of Being, and "the whole universe as a manifestation of God's existence" (Zamani and Asadi 5).

For contemporary readers, even those not seeking the Sufi path, Rumi's poems offer comfort and meaning to those suffering from restlessness and inner turmoil. This search for belonging is a recurrent theme of Rumi's poetry and is similarly dominant in Elif Shafak's novel, *The Forty Rules of Love.*

[2] Though often written with the Persian spelling *Masnavi (*مثنوی), I have chosen to adopt the transliteration, *Mathnawi*, throughout this article.

Shafak's Cosmopolitanism and Criticism

Elif Shafak is a writer and an academic who has published seventeen books, and was shortlisted for the Booker Prize in 2019. She focused her academic career on Gender Studies and Political Science and taught in universities in Turkey, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America.

Shafak is very vocal about her political opinions that are expressed in her speeches, interviews, and newspaper articles. The major political theories and ideologies that Shafak strongly advocates are cosmopolitanism,[3] pluralism, and multiculturalism. Shafak believes that it is possible to belong to more than one country or place and to intertwine the national culture with the international by finding similarities in people's identity and sense of belonging, and she argues that cosmopolitanism is the best way to end racism, prejudice, and hatred (2014, 21).

One of her earlier novels, *The Forty Rules of Love* has sold over seven hundred fifty thousand copies, becoming an all-time best-seller in Turkey. This novel has been lauded for its postmodern intertextuality and representations of spirituality (Saeed and Zain 29). However, Shafak has been criticized for dissociating Sufism from its Islamic principles to target audiences across barriers of East and West and portray a more spiritual narrative that can be cosmopolitan in its outreach (Cihan-Artun 175; Furlanetto 204; Kökcü 138). According to Kökcü, "she writes a cosmopolitan fiction beyond times and spaces on the transnational convergence of the story of the medieval Persian poet, Rumi and a contemporary American protagonist, Ella" (143). Kökcü argues that by adopting a cosmopolitan approach to Sufism, Shafak presents only the spiritual aspect of Sufism without the Islamic component (145-7).

Elena Furlanetto claims that in *The Forty Rules of Love,* Shafak "domesticates" (204) and Orientalizes the story of Rumi for American readers, and this contributes to the "decontexualization of Rumi's work" (201). Furlanetto continues to state that Shafak's Americanized depiction of one of the most prominent figures of Sufi Islam, results in a case of **"**self-Orientalisation" where the focus is relating the spirituality of the novel to a Western audience, instead of engaging and presenting a more complete portrayal of the complexities of Sufi Islam (204).

Fatma Cihan-Artun, in her dissertation entitled "The Politics of Rumi's Appropriation in the West", discusses how the novel greatly utilizes **"**the discourse of New Age spirituality" (173). Cihan-Artun defines "New Age religiosity" as "'spiritual seekers' who disparage institutionalized religions but appreciate the universal essentials that religions, spiritual traditions, and ethical teachings supposedly share" (175). She continues to explain that Shafak represents Sufism in two different ways in the novel, through the contemporary narrative of Aziz and Ella, and at the same time, the historical narrative of Rumi and Shams. These versions of Sufism are not compatible as Aziz views Sufism as a type of "universal spirituality" that is not adherent to Islam or other religions (174). Cihan-Artun also agrees with Furlanetto in that Shafak "domestic[ated]" and "de-contexualized" Sufism in the historical narrative of thirteenth century Rumi to make it more relatable to the modern reader represented by the character of Ella, who was not a firm believer in any religion (177). Furlanetto elucidates this point when she criticizes how the novel does not focus on *fanā',* but only on modern spiritual concepts of finding contentment and becoming more self-aware.

Cihan-Artun, Furlanetto, and Kökcü demonstrate how Shafak decontextualizes Sufism and Rumi for an American audience and fails to represent the Islamic tenets of Sufism. In this article, I will examine their claims of Sufi misrepresentation by conducting close readings of selected passages from the novel with poems from the *Mathnawi* that reveal Sufi teachings.

Methodology

[3] Thomas Pogge defines a cosmopolitan, as a "citizen of the world" who respects and values other cultures (312).

The focus of this article is analyzing the Sufi themes in Elif Shafak's novels and the selected poems from Rumi's *Mathnawi* are used as a means to evaluate these motifs. Through the comparative thematic analysis between selected passages from the novel and the *Mathnawi*, I will examine whether Shafak utilizes a more New Age approach or integrates Sufi concepts in her novel. These conclusions will be drawn through the thematic comparative analysis between selections from the novel and specific poems from the *Mathnawi* that resonate with Sufi themes such as inner dissatisfaction and restlessness, search for enlightenment, *fanā'*, and Divine Love.

Inner Dissatisfaction and Restlessness

The first theme to be compared between the *Mathnawi* and *The Forty Rules of Love* is the common feeling of dissatisfaction and restlessness of the characters struggling to find inner peace. Ella is dissatisfied with being a housewife and begins a new job to attempt to fill the void, Rumi is inexplicably discontent even though he is a very prominent religious scholar of his community, and even Shams feels incomplete since he desires a companion to share his knowledge with.

In the beginning of the narrative, the reader is introduced to the character Ella Rubinstein, whose life "consisted of still waters–a predictable sequence of habits, needs, and preferences" (*TFROL* 1). She lives her life for her husband and children and survived by "letting the days go by, the routine take over, and time run its course of inevitable torpor" (11). From her conversations with her daughter and her husband, it is clear that Ella has never been truly in love, and she continuously argues that this is a normal state of affairs since "love is only a sweet feeling bound to come and quickly go away" (16). She has accepted her life and the "continuing sadness that had, without her knowledge, become a part of who she was" (11). Even though she has taken on a new job to fill the emptiness she feels since her children do not need her as much anymore, she does not exhibit any initial enthusiasm when she complains to the literary assistant, Michelle that she cannot relate to a novel written about a Sufi in the thirteenth century. Michelle scolds the older woman, and contends that, "[i]sn't connecting people to distant lands and cultures one of the strengths of good literature?" (13). This sentence by Michelle is similar to Elif Shafak's cosmopolitan approach to writing as a way to cross barriers of religion and country to bring people closer to one another. In fact, Aziz Z. Zahara's novel does just that, as it is able to connect to a distant woman through a universal message of love. After Ella starts reading Zahara's novel, she becomes fascinated with Rumi's story and curious to know more about the writer. She researches him online, and finds that Zahara has a blog with poetry, postcards from around the world, and the following quote that resonates strongly with Ella: "No matter who we are or where we live, deep inside we all feel incomplete. It's like we have lost something and need to get it back. Just what that something is, most of us never find out. And of those who do, even fewer manage to go out and look for it" (*TFROL* 43). This quote from Zahara's blog shows Ella that her dissatisfaction is universal, that "all" people feel unfulfilled no matter where they are and what they are doing. Most people become accustomed to this feeling of restlessness, and do nothing about it by letting their routine and unhappiness dominate their lives, as is the case with Ella. The second part of this quote is what draws Ella's attention and what brings her to contact the writer through his email address listed on the website.

The more she reads and communicates with the writer, the more Ella's character changes that even her husband notices. She realizes that there is a stirring beneath the surface Ella who is either "too intrusive" or "too passive" (131). This stirring is a hidden part of her personality, "a strangled self, harboring a fast freshet of anger and rebellion" that was "waiting for her time to come" (131). Here it is clear that Ella is preparing for a major shift from her routine as she wanted to rebel against the constant structure of her daily life, and even prays for love to "absorb her whole being" (131). Her dissatisfaction eases once she understands that she needs love to be fulfilled, and she seeks this love where it has appeared in her life, in the form of Aziz Zahara.

The second character who suffers from incompleteness and restlessness is Shams. The reader is introduced to Shams through the thirteenth century historical novel Ella is reading for her job as a literary assistant. In the beginning of Zahara's story, Shams is seeking a companion to share his religious knowledge with before his death: "It wasn't death that worried me, for I didn't see it as an end, but dying without leaving a

legacy behind. There were many words piled up inside my chest, stories waiting to be told. I wanted to hand all this knowledge to one other person, neither a master nor a disciple. I sought an equal—a companion" (*TFROL* 40).

Shams's character is very different from other characters in the narrative because from the beginning he knows exactly what needs to be done to ease his worries, and sets himself on a quest to find the companion. His acceptance of death is understandable as a Sufi who has reached enlightenment since he believes that with death he will finally be reunited with God. His inevitable death does not trouble him, but the possibility of the valuable knowledge he has acquired over the years to be forgotten. At this stage in his life, his utmost desire is to share this knowledge with the right person who will make it into an unforgettable legacy.

Simultaneously in Konya, Rumi has achieved all his exoteric ambitions. He is a father, a husband, a respected scholar and *sheikh* in his community, and to all appearances, is a "happy, satisfied man" in his public and personal life (99). However, this happiness is only on the surface because he admits to feeling a "void inside [him], growing deeper and wider with each passing day[.] It gnaws at [his] soul like a disease and accompanies [him] wherever [he] go[es], as quiet as a mouse and just as ravenous" (*TFROL* 99). Rumi does not comprehend why he has this inexplicable dissatisfaction with his life even when he is successful in every way in his community. On some level, he realizes that his life was meant for more than this, and that he needs to achieve an unknown understanding before finding inner peace. It is fortunate then that Shams knows what Rumi needs because his malady is "common" among all "ordinary people" even "the beggar, the prostitute, and the drunk" (152). This suffering is a result of "separation from the One" (152). The "One" here refers to God, and Shams, unlike many of the other characters in the novel, realizes the Sufi truth that restlessness abates when one is on the path to God.

Firoozeh Papan-Matin also draws attention to the theme of longing in the *Mathnawi*'s "Reed Flute's Song" when she explains that it is an "account of the separation of the lover, personified as the reed, from the Fatherland, the reed-bed, where it had belonged in the presence of God, the beloved" (246). This longing for the reunion with God is strikingly expressed in the lines 0-4 from the poem **"**Exordium: the song of the reed" from the first volume of the *Mathnawi*:

> Now listen to this reed-flute's deep lament
> About the heartache being apart has meant:
> 'Since from the reed-bed they uprooted me
> My song's expressed each human's agony,
> A breast which separation's split in two
> Is what I seek, to share this pain with you:
> When kept from their true origin, all yearn
> For union on the day they can return. (Rumi, *Book One* 4-5)

This part of the poem echoes what Aziz and Shams have said in the novel, that every person longs to be reunited with the source or the "reed-bed". The reed here represents the people who feel like something is missing from their lives; an inexplicable emptiness. Rumi, by narrating the story of the reed, explains that this emptiness is a natural longing to reunite with the Beloved. This is explained further in the poem in lines 15-18 in the same volume,

> The day is wasted if it's spent in grief,
> Consumed by burning aches without relief—
> Good times have long passed, but we couldn't care
> When you're with us, our friend beyond compare!
> While ordinary men on drops can thrive
> A fish needs oceans daily to survive:
> The way the ripe must feel the raw can't tell,

> My speech must be concise, and so farewell! (Rumi, *Book One* 5)

In this part of the poem, Rumi explains that it is this longing or suffering to reach God that is the essence of prayer and worship. He advises the reader to dwell in this emptiness since it is a symbol of clarity that will be attained when a person reaches enlightenment. Rumi adds that unlike ordinary people who survive on "drops", the basic requirements of a religion, a mystic needs "oceans daily to survive". The more spiritual knowledge they gain, the more they realize that only True Union will ease their longing. A person, who is "raw", or unfamiliar with the spiritual path, cannot understand what a person who is "ripe" with spiritual knowledge is feeling. In this poem, Rumi is explaining that it is neither easy nor straightforward to understand God's hidden messages unless a person is truly listening. It is not within human capabilities to comprehend the complexities of the soul. What seekers must do, instead, is to empty themselves in order to sing the music given to all people. Mystics never stop trying to reach grace and oneness with God even if to the ordinary person's "raw" eye, they are already there.

Shams, Rumi, and Ella all suffer from an emptiness and longing that is similarly portrayed in Sufi literature such as the chosen selection from the *Mathnawi*. By comparing the messages of this poem to the dissatisfaction of the characters in the novel, it appears that Ella and Rumi have started to awaken to the emptiness inside them, and Shams, as a mystic, fully realizes the direction he needs to swim towards before reaching the absolute state of nothingness replete in God's love.

A Search for Enlightenment

A theme that follows discontentedness is the continuous search for enlightenment. Individuals are repeatedly searching for something to fulfill their desires or to reach happiness, but it is only a few who realize the answer to all these pursuits is finding God within themselves. This is a consistent theme in the narrative and can be seen in the below conversation from *The Forty Rules of Love* between Shams of Tabriz and Master Baba Zaman, the master of a dervish lodge in Baghdad*:*

> When asked his name, he introduced himself as Shams of Tabriz and said he was a wandering dervish searching for God high and low.
>
> "And were you able to find him?" [Master Baba Zaman] inquired.
>
> A shadow crossed his face as the dervish nodded and said, "Indeed, He was with me all along."
>
> The judge interjected with a smirk he didn't bother to hide, "I never understand why you dervishes make life so complicated. If God was with you all along, why did you rummage around this whole time in search of Him?"
>
> Shams of Tabriz bowed his head pensively and remained silent for a moment. When he looked up again, his face was calm, his voice measured. "Because although it is a fact that He cannot be found by seeking, only those who seek can find Him." (*TFROL* 48)

According to Shams, seeking God should be a quest and an intention. Sometimes travel brings truths to mind that one might know before and illuminates thoughts a person is unaware of by encountering new countries and new people; thus bringing a person closer to finding God. For others, true awakening can be found without a quest, but by inner exploration. Master Baba Zaman here seems to understand the journey of the dervish, and respects the struggles Shams must have encountered in order to search everywhere, "high and low" for God. He does not ask further questions about his search, whereas the judge, who has a more religiously orthodox mindset, finds much to mock in Shams's answer. He does not comprehend the purpose of a journey to reach enlightenment and finding God. Shams clearly addresses the judge in the second part of the conversation as a person who assumes comprehensive knowledge of religion, when he says that only those who truly search for God will find him closer than they think.

Shams believes that the only search worthwhile is the search for God and inner peace, and any other needs and desires are pointless because they are endless. It is only the true search for the Divine that brings any

real peace to individuals. This theme is also seen in a conversation between Ella and Aziz. Aziz explains to Ella his journey to his current destination in the following excerpt:

> Life is odd, Ella. In the end I never made it to Mecca or Medina. Not then, not later. Not even after I converted to Islam. Destiny took me on a different route altogether, one of unexpected twists and turns, each of which changed me so profoundly and irrevocably that after a while the original destination lost its significance. Though motivated by purely materialistic reasons at the outset, when the journey came to an end, I was a transformed man.
> As for the Sufis, who could have known that what I had initially seen as a means to an end would very soon become an end in itself? (*TFROL* 228)

Aziz, in the beginning of his journey, seeks to gain his wealth and fame by entering Mecca and Medina to take photographs no one else has taken before. He travels to Morocco to learn more about Islam and later infiltrate the city only Muslims could enter. This is Aziz's original goal that is later diverted the more he understands Islam, and in specific, Sufism. He is at a loss, continuously searching and travelling, without real purpose. He intends to take advantage of the knowledge he gains from the Sufis, but instead this knowledge changes him completely. With the spiritual knowledge he attains, the small matters like money and fame no longer had any meaning. He comprehends that he "didn't need to go anywhere" any longer since he "was already where [he] wanted to be. All [he] needed was to stay and look within" (234). What can be noticed in this passage is that Aziz refers to "destiny" as the changing factor in his plans, not his faith in God. This distinction is an example of Shafak reframing the Sufi themes to accommodate modern audiences previously commented on (Cihan-Artun; Furlanetto; Kökcü). Also, this passage is a very clear parallel to Shams' earlier statement at the beginning of the novel. The location of a person does not matter. Once the search begins, the answers will be found closer than expected, within oneself. This concept is further reiterated by Rumi in volume 4 of the *Mathnawi*, lines 3030-4:

> Thy true substance is concealed in falsehood, like the taste of butter in the taste of buttermilk.
> Thy falsehood is this perishable body; thy truth is that lordly spirit.
> (During many) years this buttermilk, (which is) the body, is visible and manifest, (while) the butter, (which is) the spirit, is perishing and naughted within it,
> Till God send a messenger (prophet), a (chosen) servant, a shaker of the buttermilk in the churn,
> That he may shake (it) with method and skill, to the end that I may know that (my true) ego was hidden. (Rumi, *Volume 4* 271)

Rumi, in this poem, compares the human body to "buttermilk" and in order to find a person's true worth, it must be "churned", in other words, rattled and shook, for the "butter" to come to the surface. This poem emphasizes the necessity of inner journeys, suffering, and false appearances. The purpose of all creation is to represent the Divine Truths hidden within them, and as both Shams and Aziz conclude after their journeys, the best and only place to find true knowledge and happiness is within oneself.

This is a point of contrast in Ella's story; however, since at the end of the novel, she distances herself from her family and duties to find herself in Amsterdam. She decides to move there, not "make plans" and "try living one day at a time" to "see what [her] heart says" (*TFROL* 349). After losing Aziz, she decides to find love outside of herself. She adapts to the idea of living in the present, which is elemental in Sufi doctrine in finding true happiness, but continues to search for love and happiness in different locations outside her own being. This is contrary to what Aziz and Shams have expressed throughout the story, and contrary to Rumi's poetry. Another key difference between the contemporary narrative and the *Mathnawi* is the representation of the stage of *fanā'* of the spiritual seeker.

True Freedom and *Fanā'*

An elemental part of Sufism is the concept of death before death, when all material possessions and the physical body are disintegrated and a person reaches a higher level of being, a state of non-existence and true freedom. Sepideh Hozhabrossadat, in an article discussing the theme of *fanā* in the *Mathnawi*, explains that "the annihilation of the ego" is the main aim of a Sufi and this path involves "two main stages that are the annihilation of ego (human attributes) and existence through the [B]eloved [*baqā'*]" (13). Kausar Khan also argues that Rumi wrote the *Mathnawi* to guide the Sufi novice towards the path of annihilation and subsistence following the example of a spiritual guide (9). A Sufi cannot reach True Union with God unless his/her self is completely obliterated, and this emphasizes the importance of *fanā'* as a Sufi concept. This concept is illustrated in the below lines (2615-22) from the *Mathnawi*, volume 4:

> When the hú that passes away has surrendered itself to Him, it becomes everlasting and never dies.
> ('Tis) like a drop of water (which is) afraid of wind (air) and earth; for by means of these twain it is made to pass away (and perish).
> When it has leaped (thrown itself) into the sea, which was its source, it is delivered from the heat of the sun and from wind and earth.
> Its outward form has disappeared in the sea, but its essence is inviolate and permanent and goodly.
> Hark, O (thou who art like a) drop, give thyself up without repenting, that in recompense for the drop thou mayst gain the Ocean.
> Hark, O drop, bestow on thyself this honour, and in the hand of the Sea become safe from destruction.
> Whom indeed should fortune like this befall? A Sea has become the suitor for a drop.
> In God's name, in God's name, sell and buy at once! Give a drop, and take (in return) the Sea which is full of pearls. (Rumi, *Volume 4* 257)

In this poem, Rumi compares human life to a droplet of water that returns to the "ocean where it came from". The ocean here can be considered the infinity of life or the endless waves of creation and rebirth. The shape of the droplet or the body changes irreversibly when joining the Ocean or God, but the essence remains the same. Only the true essence and being remains while outer appearance and physical needs become superfluous. Self-perception is surrendered, eliminating all what distinguishes a person from others to become a part of the infinite source of life. Surrendering a person's true self is not a failure, but a difficult challenge that ends in the greatest victory of joining life in its entirety. It is considered, according to Rumi, a great honor to become knowingly and willingly part of this greater whole. This is because there is no higher achievement in life than to be closer to God by dissolving the self completely.

In the novel, Kimya, Rumi's adopted daughter, reaches this stage of *fanā'*, death before death. She loves Shams, her husband, with her entire being, and when he does not share the same feelings with her, it is as if the spark of life within her fades. Shams's denial of her physical love releases Kimya from all earthly desires and brings her closer to death before death:

> There was so much kindness and compassion in God and an explanation for everything. A perfect system of love behind it all. Ten days after I visited Shams's room clad in silk and perfumed tulles, ten days after I fell ill, I plunged into a river of pure nonexistence. There I swam to my heart's content, finally sensing that this must be what the deepest reading of the Qur'an feels like – a drop in infinity.
> And it was flowing waters that carried me from life to death. (*TFROL* 321)

In this quote, Shafak draws attention to Kimya's earlier obsessive physical desires for Shams. Her "perfumed" body wrapped in "silk" represents her desperate physical need for Shams who renounced all physical and sexual demands. Once Kimya abandons the physical plane, she becomes a part of the "river of pure nonexistence". This quote utilizes the same metaphor present in Rumi's poetry: a person's being is considered a

drop of water that is submerged in "flowing waters" of infinity. Shafak also compares this feeling of the annihilation of the self as the "deepest reading of the Qur'an" suggesting that *fanā'* is the deepest level of faith a person can reach.

In the following selection (lines 1375-81) from the *Mathnawi* volume 4, Rumi cautions his readers against fearing "death" which he considers to be a form of true freedom after experiencing a lifetime of transitory attachments:

> O (dear) soul, if you are not inwardly congenial to non-existence, why are you waiting in ambush for non-existence?
> You have torn your heart away from all that you own, you have cast the net of your heart into the sea of non-existence.
> Wherefore, then, (this) flight from this sea of (heart's) desire that has put hundreds of thousands of prey into your net?
> Wherefore have you given the name "death" to (what is really) provision (for the spirit)? Observe the sorcery that has caused the provision to seem to you death.
> The magic of His (God's) doing has bound both your eyes, so that desire for the (worldly) pit has come over your soul
> Through the contrivance of the Creator, in its (your soul's) fancy all the expanse above the pit is (full of) poison and snakes;
> Consequently it has made the pit a refuge (for itself), so that (fear of) death has cast it into the pit. (Rumi, *Volume 4* 202)

Rumi makes several key points about the fruitless desires of the human condition. He first questions people's search into their inner consciousness and the constant desire to understand the inner workings of the human mind and being. He claims that nothing can be found if the "vast nothing", the core of a person's self, is not befriended. The second point he makes is linking the idea of "death" to God. God has provided a person's living conditions such as food and work, and protected and supported one throughout life. Rumi wonders why human beings who are finally able to return to this infinite state of power and oneness, call this process such a negative term such as "death". Rumi considers this point the epitome of human life, returning to the whole. He continues to note the irony between the human perception of life and death. Life, a "pit", a place of terrors and constant danger, is where people want to stay as long as possible. However, true bliss is in death, which people actually fear. Rumi emphasizes the contradiction in the human desire for finite happiness, and the fear of infinite bliss.

This contradiction can be seen in the case of Aziz, who during his journey to the final stage of *fanā,* ' encounters Ella, and is dragged back to his physical and material needs. Before meeting Ella, he assumes that he has elevated from physical concerns to become his true self and spirit. This idea is depicted in the below quote from the novel:

> In Sufism you learn how to die before death. I have gone through each of those stages, step by step. Then, just when I start to think I've got it all neatly sorted, here comes this woman out of nowhere. [...]And I realize I want to get to know this person. I need more time with her. Suddenly my life is not enough anymore. I realized I am scared of death, and one part of me is ready to rebel against the God I have revered and submitted to. (*TFROL* 325)

This quote shows that the man who writes about Shams and Rumi in *Sweet Blasphemy*, the novel within the novel, fails to reach the final stage of the Sufi journey, *fanā'*. He begins along the path, and elevates his spirit from one stage to the other, only to halt before the end to delve into a romance with Ella, instead of reaching the true state of nothingness before death. His submission to God is not with his whole being, otherwise he would have been able to distance himself from Ella, as Shams does with Kimya. This questions the idea that Aziz is a

representation of Shams, which Ella brings to attention previously.[4] Similar to Ella, it is clear that Aziz cannot be considered a Sufi in the ideology of Rumi. Ella leaves her family for the love of Aziz, and Aziz leaves his path of true knowledge and *fanā'* to be with Ella.

In contrast, in the historical narrative, both Shams and Rumi reach *fanā'* as can be understood from the following passage: "Rumi is turning into a poet himself, becoming the voice of pure emptiness, though he might not have realized this fully yet. As for me, I, too, have changed and am changing. I am moving from being into nothingness" (*TFROL* 278). Shams notices, at the end of the novel that both he and Rumi have changed into "pure emptiness and nothingness". This shows that their companionship benefits them both as they have reached the final stage of the Sufi path. Shams consciously chooses to learn from Rumi's presence to achieve annihilation of the self, while Rumi is unaware of the change that has come upon him especially since Shams is there to support him as his Sufi guide. It is only when Shams dies that Rumi's inner poet is unleashed with the wisdom of infinite bliss.

It is clear that although Aziz is on a spiritual path and Ella has embarked on hers, their path are journeys towards self-fulfillment and love of one another, not love of God and the true destination of any Sufi, *fanā'* of the self and *baqā'* in God. Even Aziz admits to Ella that "[he] cannot be Shams [...] he was way beyond and above [Aziz]", but hopes Ella can "be Rumi" if she follows the path of love (*TFROL* 328). However, in the historical narrative set in Konya, the characters of Shams, Rumi, and Kimya are described as reaching this final stage of a Sufi's journey as they accept their death before death. So unlike Cihan-Artun's claim, Shafak does in fact elucidate the Sufi concept of *fanā',* but the characters only succeed in annihilation in the historical narrative. Therefore, Shafak in the contemporary narrative describes a journey that ends in self-love or romantic love, while in the tale of Rumi, the characters who encounter romantic love suffer (such as Kimya), and the ones who find true peace are those who lose themselves in the love of God.

The Infinite Power of Love

The most important theme in the novel, the one underlying all the other themes mentioned, is the theme of love. The theme of love, according to Lindsey Palmer, is a "dominant theme in all of Rumi's work" since it is the most genuine divine experience a person can have (18). Furthermore, the significance of this theme for Shafak can be seen in the title of the book, *The Forty Rules of Love.* Sufism aims to emphasize the importance of love as a way to guide seekers towards Divine Love and Amira El-Zein emphasizes the limitations of "human love" and the importance of distinguishing it from the infinite "love of the Divine" (76). Even though Sufism does emphasize how love affects and connects all things in order to reach the Divine Love, I question whether or not Ella does in fact search for Divine Love, or simply love; love of herself, and love of Aziz.

Although Shams's rules involve different teachings in the Sufi path, they can all be encompassed in the overwhelming power of love. Without this love, knowledge, annihilation, and inner peace cannot be reached. Seyyed Hossein Nasr highlights the essential aspect of love in the Sufi tradition. Nasr explains that the journey towards the "Truth" expands a person's knowledge of the "Truth" and that a person cannot have this knowledge without "loving" and "embrac[ing]" God (60). Love in itself frees the Sufi from all material and social bonds, as Nasr elucidates, "[w]hen the Sufis speak of love, or *ishq*, they are thinking of its liberating and not confining aspect. To love God fully is to possess complete freedom from every other bond, and since God is absolute and infinite, it is to experience absolute and infinite freedom" (68).

When a person is fully immersed in the love for God, all other attachments become unnecessary, weak, and superfluous. This love will lead to true *fanā',* an escape from repetitive longings and momentary attachments. This concept of love can be seen in both Rumi's poetry and Elif Shafak's novel. In Shams's rules,

[4] Ella speculates in the following passage: "Shams of Tabriz bore than a passing resemblance to Aziz Z. Zahara. He looked exactly the way Shams was described in the manuscript [...] she suspected that Shams of Tabriz and Aziz Z. Zahara could be connected in a way that went beyond a simply literary gimmick" (185).

his emphasis on love is inescapable. His focus on this topic seems to be the foundation for all the other rules in the book: "The quest for Love changes us. There is no seeker among those who search for Love who has not matured on the way. The moment you start looking for Love, you start to change within and without" (*TFROL* 87) (emphasis original). In this quote, Shams does not distinguish between Divine Love and seems to refer to love in general, although the word "Love" is capitalized perhaps to indicate a divine status. Love, according to Shams, is the key to change and a person's development, and is the quest a person must seek to find any kind of satisfaction in life. Shams's emphasis on love is not only the love of others, but can also be considered a journey inwards towards self-love: "If you want to change the way others treat you, you should first change the way you treat yourself. Unless you learn to love yourself, fully and sincerely, there is no way you can be loved. Once you achieve that stage, however, be thankful for every thorn that others might throw at you. It is a sign that you will soon be showered in roses" (*TFROL* 135).

The first step to seeking love, either love of others or Divine Love, is to love oneself completely. If individuals cannot appreciate their own faults and value, then others will not be able to either. However, self-love will soon be attacked by others in society and this should only be considered a test for this type of love. Once this test is overcome, then comes the possibility of satisfaction and true happiness. This quote can be seen in light of Ella's character, who at the beginning of the narrative longs for acceptance and love from her family, but fails to appreciate herself first.

Furthermore, Shams distinguishes between love and intellect, emphasizing the supremacy of love over intellect, as expressed in the previous section about two kinds of knowledge: "'*Intellect and love are made of different materials,*' he said. [...] *Intellect is always cautious and advises,* '*Beware too much ecstasy,* '*whereas love says,* '*Oh never mind! Take the plunge!* '*Intellect does not easily break down, whereas love can effortlessly reduce itself to rubble. But treasures are hidden among ruins. A broken heart hides treasures*" (*TFROL* 66) (emphasis original). To find true knowledge and wisdom is not through the intellect. The intellect is limited and careful, whereas the heart can get to the extremes needed to find true love of God. To achieve True Union with God, the self needs to be utterly annihilated which is symbolized in this quote as the "rubble" or "ruins" (66). Only when a person's self is completely destroyed can the "treasure" of True Union occur. Another representation of the intellectual barrier to enlightenment is that of words and language. Shams explains that words and language are obstacles to true understanding and knowledge because of "*linguistic mistakes and simple misunderstandings*" (66) (emphasis original). When a person is fully immersed in love, then language and words become "obsolete" and what truly matters, knowledge of God, can be comprehended only in "silence" (66). Shams explains here that true knowledge does not come from learning new words, inner knowledge is about inner reflection that exists without words.

Furthermore, Rumi emphasizes the importance of love instead of intellectual knowledge in the following selection from volume 2 of the *Mathnawi*, lines 1533-9:

> Through love the bitter turns sweet, as we've told;
> Through love all copper too becomes pure gold;
> Through love the goblet's dregs turn clear and pure;
> Through love the pain we feel becomes our cure;
> Through love some even can revive the dead;
> Through love the king becomes a slave instead.
> This love results from knowledge—so how can
> The throne be taken by a stupid man?
> To love, deficient knowledge can't give birth,
> But only to what's lifeless and lacks worth;
> By what looks pretty it is easily stirred,
> As though the true beloved's voice is heard—
> Deficient knowledge can't discriminate:
> The lightning with the sun it would equate. (Rumi, *Book Two* 90)

In this poem, Rumi contends that it is only love that creates the strongest connection with God, and can transform a person from nothing to everything, or from material wealth to true belonging to God. Knowledge from books is deficient unlike the knowledge gained from pursuing what a person truly is passionate about and loves. By presenting creation through opposites, Rumi shows that their presence and their absence are the same because nothing truly matters except God. Here Rumi clearly distinguishes between the distractions of corporal love and love of God, and this separation is not emphasized in Shafak's narrative through the character of Shams. Shams advocates seeking love, either of the self or other, to bring about change and development in one's character. Based on the analysis presented, Rumi's poetry focuses specifically on Divine Love.

Love is the underlying theme of both the novel and the *Mathnawi* since it is, as explained by Afzal Iqbal, "the motive force of all creation" (246). He explains that love is "the very essence of life for it has bestowed upon [Rumi] the consciousness of a world which is hidden from the capricious eyes of those that look only at the exterior [...] and have not learnt to, penetrate the inner meaning of words" (246). The love of Shams and the love of God transform Rumi into a poet instead of merely a scholar, and Ella's love of Aziz and love of herself regains her confidence and hope in the world. It is difficult to see the parallels of Rumi's journey towards spiritual enlightenment with the struggles of Ella's self-acceptance, as they are on different spiritual planes. Rumi has shed his consciousness and released an outpour of poetry from the power of Divine Love that has overwhelmed him, while Ella moves to Amsterdam and adapts the adage of "living one day at a time" (*TFROL* 349). In the contemporary narrative, Shafak appears to be adapting the Sufi journey of love to suit a modern audience by repeating concepts reiterated by New Age Spirituality such as loving oneself and enjoying the moment.

Conclusion

In this article, I have examined the novel *The Forty Rules of Love* with selected poems from the *Mathnawi* noting various differences and similarities between the passages. This comparison has shown how Shafak simplifies the complex ideology of Sufism in the contemporary narrative, yet maintains the key concepts of Sufism in the historical narrative like longing, searching for enlightenment, the supremacy of love over knowledge, and more importantly, the true aim of Sufi mystics, *fanā'.* The contemporary narrative; however, seems to illustrate as argued by Cihan-Artun, Furlanetto and Kökcü, a more New Age Spirituality. However, my comparative thematic analysis indicates that the historical narrative includes stronger elements of Sufi thought, which can offer an alternative reading to the novel than that argued by Cihan-Artun, Furlanetto and Kökcü.

Kökcü claims that "Shafak identifies Sufism with a 'whitened' philosophy in the novel by ignoring its structural tenets" (147) while Furlanetto states that Shafak "present[s] a domesticated version of Islam" to appeal to an American and international readership (206). As can be seen in the thematic comparative analysis presented, Shafak includes significant Sufi concepts that are evident in Rumi's *Mathnawi* throughout the novel, especially in the historical narrative. By maintaining these key Sufi themes in the novel, Shafak is maintaining a strong connection to Rumi's poetry and Islamic philosophy. One way that Shafak digresses from Rumi in her novel is her representation of love. Even though both texts represent the supremacy of love over knowledge, the novel seems to refer to love in general, not Divine Love. Rumi aims through his poetry to guide the readers to be fully embraced and annihilated in the love of God, as is the goal of the Sufi path, but Shafak speaks of "rules of love" that could be applied to romantic or familial love. This suggests Shafak employs the theme of "love" throughout the novel for a cosmopolitan purpose, a way to connect to a global audience seeking love in its variety of forms.

Furthermore, Cihan-Artun argues that Shafak "barely includes any references to Islam or Islamic culture whatsoever, at least in the English version" (190). In fact, there are numerous Islamic references throughout the novel: Al-Fatiha is referenced in the prologue of the novel *Sweet Blasphemy* (*TFROL* 18), Shams recites the "ninety-nine names of God for guidance" (71), characters are noted reading verses of the Qur'an and referring to

the Qur'an in conversation (50), Shams and Kimya discuss the verse of Al-Nisa (196), Sultan Walad references the verses of Al-Kahf and the story of Moses and Khidr (209), Shams mentions how the "hafiz chant[s] [...] the verse of Joseph and Zuleikha in the Holy Qur'an" (277) and the Qur'an itself is referenced forty-one times in the novel. Consequently, despite Cihan-Artun's claims, Shafak frequently refers to the Qur'an in the novel, especially in the historical narrative, to emphasize that the characters, Rumi and Shams especially, are deeply entrenched in Sufi thought and practice, and not merely mystics attempting other forms of New Age spiritual enlightenment. It is clear throughout the novel that Sham's guide to his rules, teachings, and practice is the Qur'an, and no other text. Sufis consider the Qur'an the only true guide to reach true Union with God or *fanā'*. Carmody and Tully state that the Sufis "see through, or feel through, the [Qu]ranic text" to continuously attempt the strongest connection with "divinity" (246). Sufi mysticism is directly connected to the Qur'an, and all mystical experiences return to delving deeper and deeper in the Holy Book since "it is the divine word, the central revelation, the incarnation, and the sacrament of God" (Carmody and Tully 227). As the sole book to guide Sufis on their spiritual journey, the Qur'an is the true focus of their prayers and knowledge. This sacred devotion to the wisdom of the Qur'an, represented by Shams in the novel, is undoubtedly Islamic.

By choosing to represent the life story of Jalaluddin Rumi juxtaposed with the life of a modern American housewife, Shafak is able to bring together past events and current ones to help the reader understand and relate to historical events that may seem incomprehensible in modern contexts. Since her novel belongs to the genre of historical fiction, Shafak is able to combine "history and imagination [...] to render a representation of the past while at the same time acting as an instructional and inspirational literature tool" (Bortolotti 112). Consequently, historical events act as a starting point or a cue for the writer's imagination, and the motivation behind this fiction is to "reimagine the past so that it more closely mirrors the present" (112). Rumi's history and poetry act as the starting point for Shafak's fictional narrative, and Sufi teachings become the way to connect the past historical context to the present reader. While she misrepresents the concept of Divine Love, Shafak is still able represent Sufism in her novel as an Islamic spiritual path to enlightenment and *fanā'* that Rumi and Shams attain in the historical narrative. Other works by Shafak that represent Sufi themes such as *Honour, The Architect's Apprentice, Three Daughter's of Eve* require further analysis and investigation.

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