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Evoking Polyvocality in Elif Shafak's *The Forty Rules of Love*

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ABSTRACT

While interest in Elif Shafak's novel The Forty Rules of Love (2010) continues to grow, commentary on issues of narrative technique is limited. The focus of previous studies is on sufism and feminism. This article examines the politics of polyvocality in Shafak's text, which aims to reflect the multiple and diverse voices within the Islamic community. While polyvocality can deconstruct the myth of the Muslim monolith, The Forty Rules of Love illustrates that this strategy is not neutral. Written in the bildungsroman form, the story follows the parallel life paths of Rumi and Shams Tabrez, a famous pair in the thirteenth century vis-à-vis the 21st century world of the Scottish (originally Christian) Sufi wanderer, Aziz Zahara, and the American Jewish housewife, Ella Rubinstein, who embraces Sufism at the end of the novel. In this article, I argue that Shafak's novel uses polyvocality to draw distinctions between the soft face of Islam, Sufism, and a fundamentalist version of the religion perpetrated by the fanatics. The text privileges select voices that reinforce Sufism's ostracism within the traditional Muslim community and prove it responsive to inclusion with the West while representing non-Sufi Islamic voices as cut out of the same cloth of fundamentalism, sanctioning phobia against Muslims who are not followers of Sufism.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholars who have previously analyzed *The Forty Rules of Love* mainly rely on a pragmatic study of the Sufi language (Abd Hassan and Alhusseini 2020, 28) or on the techniques of intertextuality (Sherwani 2020, 215) to discuss Sufism. Another study analyzes the "Sufi Phenomenon" in the novel and uncovers the Orientalist strategies that positions the East as being instrumental to the West (Furlanetto 2013, 201). Another research uses the "Sufi Phenomenon" to discuss universal spirituality and love which derive from Sufism and act as a centripetal force that can bind the East and West together (Anjum and Ramzan 2014, 1). Billy Gray deals with the teacher- disciple relationship in Shafak's novel (Gray 2020,124). Another study examines the feminist aspect of the novel (Ghandeharion and Khajavian 2019). What I offer as new to this existent body of scholarship is an analysis of how the novel partly succeeds and partly fails in bringing the East and the West together. Relying on polyvocality, the text, on one hand, aims to deconstruct monolithic perspectives of Islam as the enemy of the West. But on the other hand, it creates a binarism that privileges select Sufi voices and discounts other Muslim voices as extremists, sanctioning phobia against them. I also examine in what ways the novel's version of Sufism is contradictory and how it is decontextualized and transformed into a version that suits a Western audience looking for spirituality without religion.

POLYVOCALITY

The Forty Rules of Love takes readers from contemporary Boston to thirteenth century Konya, where Rumi, a Muslim scholar and poet, lived in a religiously diverse region. The novel counters the mainstream culture's homogenous idea of "the Islamic World" by projecting a polyvocal Muslim community that speaks multiple voices. In his essay "Discourse in the Novel," Mikhail Bakhtin views the genre of the novel as containing "a diversity of social speech types (sometimes even diversity of languages) and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized." (Bakhtin 1992, 262) For Bakhtin, the "authentic novelistic prose" stands apart precisely because it combines "the heteroglot, multi-voiced, multi-styled, and often multi-languaged elements" (Bakhtin 1992, 265). Rather than being the thematic focus in the text, polyvocality is integrated into the very form of the novel and its implications encompass the text itself.

Shafak's novel presents a diverse cast of characters with approaches to Islam that vary from Literalism to Sufism living in a religiously diverse community. Because of the contradictions they provoke, the novel's polyvocality deserves further analysis in the current historical divide of an Islamic/non-Islamic East -West. What adds importance to the novel is its bildungsroman form (Firdous 2014, 1). "Bildung" means finding oneself and in the process gradually gaining independence from the dominating powers of nature, society, and culture. Bildungsroman includes the protagonist's "entire character" development, encompassing a growing awareness of his/her individuality, identity, self-determination, alongside moral boundaries and creative abilities (Twark 2007,129) In Shafak's novel, the two parallel bildungsroman that weave Rumi's and Ella's stories of spiritual growth and opening their hearts to love do not simply reflect polyvocality. Instead, the politics of polyvocality plays an active role in the formation of a transcultural community that extends beyond the textual universe.

This polyvocal novel interweaves an Islamic East with the fabric of a non-Islamic West. Multiple Muslim voices fall under two broad categories: the literalist-orthodox acceptance of religion and Sufism's personal mystical exploration of faith. The vexed question of intra-faith pluralism has not been examined in depth in The Forty Rules of Love. This paper takes up the issue of internal plurality within Islam and analyzes polyvocality neither as an end in itself nor as an ideal to counter the mainstream culture's simplistic, reductive assumptions of Muslims forming an inert, exotic monolith. Instead, I argue that literary representations of polyvocality in Shafak's text orchestrate pluralism toward the ideological ends of privileging Sufi voices that enable reconciliation of the Islamic East with the non-Islamic West and resurrecting binary distinctions such that it legitimizes Islamophobia by normalizing hatred for non-Sufi interpretations of Islam. The bildungsroman's insistence on reconciling Islam with an idealized Sufi form of subjectivity requires polyvocality's pluralism to be turned into a binary distinction. To distinguish themselves as Sufi wanderers, Shams and Aziz draw binary distinctions between Sufi and Orthodox Islam and legitimize hierarchies between them. They privilege Sufism as the sole voice amenable to international assimilation and dismiss other approaches to Islam.

The Forty Rules of Love, therefore, offers a complex understanding of polyvocality. It demonstrates how polyvocality actively catalyzes power relations within the Muslim community and how it produces its own hierarchies, injustices, and even erasures. The novel partly succeeds and partly fails. On one hand, polyvocality challenges commonly held monolithic and essentialist stereotypes about Muslims. On the other hand, multiple voices create a new binarism of Sufi vs Orthodox Islam with Sufism being the univocal solution for the conflict between a polyvocal Islamic East and a non-Islamic West.

SUFISM AND BINARISM

- In *The Forty Rules of Love*, Sufism is westernized and presented as a univocal solution to the polyvocal problem of interaction between the East and the West. This form of Sufism spreads a psychological rather than a faith-based message. Furlanetto argues that Rumi's work is oversimplified and decontextualized in Shafak's novel (Furlanetto 2013, 201). This "Rumi phenomenon" is perpetrated by Western popularisers privileging the interests of American readership over a more complete image of Sufism. There has been imposition of foreign philosophical frameworks – that are not necessarily congruous with Rumi's own metaphysical principles – on the Sufi system. This reform renders Islam a "westoxicated" religion (Kökcü 2020, 138). It also satisfies the secular West's interest in the mystical dimensions of religion.

In addition, the novel aligns the hate-mongering, exclusionary version of Islam with the parochial points of view of characters like the Judge, Baybars the warrior, and Sheikh Yassin. This renders the literalist orthodox Islamic approach as nothing more than a Sharia proposition, something only believed by non-Sufi Muslim people. Sheikh Yassin is caricatured cursorily as someone who has done much harm to the teachings of religion with his own constrictive and narrow-minded view of the words. He incites followers to worship by creating horrors about the flames of hell prepared for those who sinned, and he pictures the rewards of Heaven waiting for those who hold Sharia high. So much obsession is crafted that followers forget their present and fret for an imaginary future. Religion is presented as the root-cause of wars as God is fashioned as a moody patriarch ready to curse the sinners and reward the virtuous.

Shafak's text rejects the most visible manifestations of Islamic tradition in Sufism, such as the Quran, and retreats to the internal world of ethics and spirituality. Aziz disciplines his faith to the extent that he becomes a religious subject without God. This transformation is about losing all his ideas about God and faith and Islam in order to experience that deepening of the heart that the Sufis identify as the result of closeness to the divine source. But Aziz is a world Sufi not because he gives up everything to attain Allah. Aziz's object of desire is neither divinity nor Sufism but the world, and it is only when he provides a univocal Sufi resolution to polyvocal Islam and renounces the outward trappings of religion that he can attain the respectability of international belonging. Ella can belong in the world only as a devout skeptic, for whom religion is nothing more than an intellectual pursuit, something to read about in books and letters.

This destabilizes normative religion and creates a new binarism: Sufi versus non-Sufi Islam with Sufi Islam holding the universal ethical message for humanity and non-Sufi Islam teaching doctrines that create conflicts among human beings. Ironically, this puts Sufism as another extreme. Why should it be ethics or doctrines? Can't the two complement each other and guide humans to peace? As a religion, Islam is the middle path that unites Sharia and Mysticism.

Furthermore, the text maintains Orientalist discourses. As Lisa Lau notes that re-orientalism "dominates and to a specific extent distorts the representation of the Orient, consigning the Oriental within the Orient to a position of the other." This occurs by means of "generalization and totalization, and the insidious nature of truth claims" (2009, 571). The generalization happens via connotative coding that is determined by oriental biases. In his book S/Z. Roland Barthes throws light on how literary texts incorporate a connotative code that can be defined as the accumulation of connotations. What constitutes a character is semes, sequential thoughts, traits and actions. (Barthes 1974, 9) . Shafak's novel employs such oriental coding that contradicts the nuanced premise of the work. The judge, for example, is defined as possessing a broad face, a sagging belly, and short stubby fingers, each with a precious ring. This coding marks him as gluttonous, ostentatious and a man inflated with ego and pride. It evokes an image of authoritative, punishing phallic figure dressed in expensive fur coats and pricey jewelry. This marks him as a detestable character of a whimsical personality: "with one ruling he could send a man to the gallows, or he could just as easily pardon a convict's crimes lifting him up from the dark dungeons." (Shafak 2010, 46) Such indulgence of a follower of Sharia is a typical oriental construct, and eases the way for Sufi wanderer Shams to emerge glorious from all interactions.

Shams is viewed by Konya's diverse community as a crazy teacher. Jack Head, a minor character who represents Islamic Orthodoxy, describes Shams as "a heretic who has nothing to do with Islam. An unruly man full of sacrilege and blasphemy. A maverick of a dervish" (Shafak 2010, 24) The fact that non-Sufi Muslim characters are described as religious fanatics and zealots reflects the novel's constricted vision of the religion and misinterpretation of the religious commands. What the text tries to project on non-Sufi Muslims is that they fight other people and generate waves of fear instead of waging a war against their ego and losing themselves in the love of God. "Their life is a state of uninterrupted bitterness and hostility, a discontentment so vast it follows them wherever they go, like a black cloud, darkening both their past and future. (Shafak 2010, 181)

This makes readers dismiss the Sharia practitioners whether judge, sheikh, or warrior as a non-Sufi Muslim behavior, not worthy enough to understand its hazily defined contours. But most importantly, this re-Orientalist approach dismisses the non-Sufi Muslim voices (from Sunni to Shia and the diversity within the community) simplistically, and contradictorily, provides "legitimate" reasons of misconduct by Muslims, thereby sanctioning hatred against them. In other words, while the novel evokes polyvocality in Muslim characters, it ends up creating binarism that privileges Sufism as a univocal resolution to humanity's conflicts and reduces Islam to a Sharia religion, therefore denying non-Sufi Muslims any complexity or humanity and sustaining Islamophobia by portraying them as deserving of hatred.

The text takes extensive liberty with the representation of Rumi's spirituality. Franklin Lewis points out that "it will simply not do to extract quotations out of context and present Rumi as a prophet of the presumptions of an unchurched and syncretic spirituality – while Rumi does indeed demonstrate a tolerant and inclusive understanding of religion ... [He] did not come to his theology of tolerance and inclusive spirituality by turning away from traditional Islam or organised religion, but through an immersion in it; his spiritual yearning stemmed from a radical desire to follow the example of the Prophet Mohammad and actualise his potential as a perfect Muslim" (Lewis 2007, 20)

Rumi passes the "test" by detaching himself from the assumptions of conventional Islamic piety and embracing social disrepute in the interests of spiritual development. He subsequently advises one of his own students to "throw away reputation, become disgraced and shameless," and claims that "Because of him [Shams], I learned the value of madness" (Shafak 2010, 290). Rumi does a ritual burning of his beloved and coveted scholastic textbooks, many of which he has inherited from his beloved father. He tells the Novice (a minor character in the novel): 'Intellect ties people in knots and risks nothing, but love dissolves all tangles and risks everything. Intellect is always cautious [...] whereas love can effortlessly reduce itself to rubble" (Shafak 2010, 66) At the same time, Shams states that the Sufi distances himself from all kinds of extremities, and reassuringly adds that "Sufis don't go extremes. A Sufi always remains mild and moderate" (Shafak 2010, 153). Is it not extreme to burn the letter of the law to reach the spirit of the law?

For the Sufi, the madness of unbridled love for the beloved is not a regression into chaos, but a discipline which leads one to a conscious union with the source of all things. And the ultimate goal of the Sufi is to overcome the attachment to the binding ego and attain liberation through realizing one's identity with God. Madness is merely a reference to the inner ecstasy of communion with God. It is a delightful paradox that the Sufis use worldly imagery to describe that which is beyond the world. It does not mean quitting Shariah and burning its books, it means transcending shariah and attaining liberation through realizing one's identity with God. The Sufi masters believed that outer religious forms were useless unless they inspired the inner devotion. Poetry was their tool to poke fun at the pompous and arrogant. They took great delight in exposing hypocrisy, pride, and vanity. But one needs to keep in mind that Sufism - the mystical branch of Islam- has its roots in the Quran and the Islamic tradition. Sufism and Shariah together make Islam. Shafak's text approaches Sufism from the periphery which asks for American domestication of Rumi- depriving local stories from their originality into a self-misrepresentation. Rumi's advocacy of love and tolerance is presented in the novel as evidence of an 'Other' Islam, far removed from the rhetoric of fundamentalism frequently associated with "so-called Muslim" fanatics and equally the poet's religious message is used in the text to highlight the incompatibility of genuine spirituality and institutionalised religion, the latter being depicted as dogmatic, reified and essentially divisive. This viewpoint is frequently voiced by the character of Aziz, who, in a letter to Ella dated 2008, writes: "I am spiritual … religiosity and spirituality are not the same thing and I believe that the gap between the two has never been greater" (Shafak 2010, 145)

One can be spiritual or religious but not both. However, Islam is about being both marrying religiosity and spirituality. Shafak's text sets another binarism of religion vs spirituality, which claims that religious people abandon spirituality and live without love and that being only spiritual and not religious is the journey of true love. Either case is an extreme.

Aziz says: "Why worry so much about the aftermath, an imaginary future, when this very moment is the only time we can truly and fully experience both the presence and absence of God in our lives? Motivated by neither the fear of punishment in hell nor the desire to be rewarded in heaven, Sufis love God simply because they love Him, pure and easy, untainted and nonnegotiable. Love is the reason. Love is the Goal." (Shafak 2010, 182)

This reminds of a quote by Ali ibn Abi Talib, the prophet's cousin, who once said: "Verily, some people worshipped Allah being desirous (Of His reward) – so this is the worship of traders; and some people worshipped Allah fearing (His punishment) – so it is the worship of slaves, and a group worshipped Allah in gratitude (to Him) so this is the worship of the free. *(Nahju 'I-balaghah)*. He was a pious religious man who is revered by Shia and Sunni Muslims. Doesn't his quote reflect the ultimate goal of Sufism?

American intolerance of institutionalized religions (particularly Islam) and antipathy to dogmas is reflected heavily throughout the text. Sufism is presented as an outstanding example of moderation that might be followed even by American Jews (Ella) and European Christians (Aziz). Shafak uses excerpts from Barks's translations, as Shafak specifies in the copyright section of the novel. The Orientalist implications of this move can be gauged by turning to Said's analysis of how Orientalists privileged citationary knowledge: "Amongst themselves Orientalists treat each other's work in the same citationary way. … Even when new materials came his way, the Orientalist judged them by borrowing from predecessors their perspectives, ideologies, and guiding theses. … Direct observation or circumstantial description of the Orient … are totally secondary." (Said 2003, 177)

Domesticating Islam into a version that enables non-Muslims to identify themselves with Muslim characters, the text re-presents a Euro/American- centric view with a univocal resolution to a polyvocal world. Identifying the Sufi self with hegemonic Western discourses effaces stories of local Sufi and non-Sufi Muslims. Sufism becomes an Americanized spiritualism reached only by dissociating principles of Islam.

SUFISM AND DISTINCTION

Shafak's novel highlights that the central tenet of Sufism is the erasure of distinction:

"Nothing should stand between yourself and God. Not imams, priests, rabbis, or any other custodians of moral or religious leadership. Not spiritual masters, not even your faith." (Shafak 2010, 246)

Accordingly, Sufism draws a direct line between God and His lover. All the idols that stand between them are demolished. What contradicts this statement is the fact that the story revolves around the dual mentor-disciple relationships as the core to understand the truth about God and the self. Both Rumi and Ella are unable to see the light of God without their mentors Shams and Aziz respectively.

From Shams, Rumi recognises how "when Shams of Tabriz asked me that question […] there was a second question hidden within the first question (Shafak 2010, 165). His curiosity aroused, Rumi's response is significant: "I felt as if a veil had been lifted and what awaited me was an intriguing puzzle" (Shafak 2010, 156). What awaits Rumi is nothing less than a fundamental spiritual realignment. After each subsequent meeting with Shams, he feels "intoxicated by a substance I can neither taste nor see," and is brought to an awareness that his normal condition of spiritual insentience could only have been overcome through the extraneous guidance of a fully-fledged Sufi teacher: "Until he forced me to look deep into the crannies of my soul, I had not faced the fundamental truth about myself" (Shafak 2010, 192). Ella undergoes a remarkably similar transformation under the tutelage of Aziz Zahara, a man who defines himself as "a Sufi, a child of the present moment" (Shafak 2010, 160). When tasked with reading about the lives of Rumi and Shams in Aziz's novel *Sweet Blasphemy*, Ella initially expresses doubts about whether "she could concentrate on a subject as irrelevant to her life as Sufism, and a time as distant as the thirteenth century" (Shafak 2010, 12). Her midlife crisis has left her "beleaguered by questions and lacking answers," yet she finds herself becoming increasingly intrigued by the character of Shams, and soon realises that "she was enjoying the story, and with every new rule of Shams, she mulled her life over" (Shafak 2010, 129). Her growing interest in Aziz's depiction of the teacher–disciple component inherent in the relationship between the two prominent Sufis, is accompanied by an increasing awareness that her own relationship with Aziz is essentially replicating the dynamic that existed between Rumi and Shams, with Aziz as the symbolic reincarnation of Rumi's great mentor. She is forced to confront Aziz's influence on her life and acknowledges his pivotal role in her spiritual growth: "[…] you meet someone […] who sees everything in a different light and forces you to shift, change your angle of vision [and] observe everything anew, within and without" (Shafak 2010, 263).

This highlights that you cannot reach God and make your way to salvation without guidance. The most significant detail linking Ella and Rumi is that both suffer from an inexplicable sadness, oddly clashing with their wealth and numerous personal achievements. Rumi's sadness, which manifests itself as a restless desire to find a spiritual companion, runs parallel to Ella's latent depression, caused by social pressure and her increasing dissatisfaction with the gendered roles she had earlier gladly accepted. The intensity of Rumi's love to Shams promotes "the blasphemy" that one must go beyond religion in order to experience God. This is paralleled with Ella's extramarital relationship with Aziz who helps Ella identify the origin of her sadness and overcome it by opening her heart to love.

Furthermore, the characters of Ella and Rumi are intoxicated and even lost in the love of their teachers instead of experiencing divine love which they sought to heal their existential emptiness in the first place. Could Aziz and Shams have been trials to their students?

Rumi wonders at the wave of sadness that has engulfed him resulting in sleepless nights. He speaks about it thus: "It gnaws at my soul like a disease and accompanies me wherever I go, as quiet as a mouse and just as ravenous." (Shafak 2010, 99) Nothing but his encounter with Shams-of-Tabriz could reconcile his inner disquietude. It is in Shams that he finds his peace.

In addition, Ella is aware of her own distinguished class status – of being the "chosen one" – and of the wide chasm between her model minority elite standing and working-class America. This episode mimics the irony of Sufism's history in that Sufism found its audience in the West among "the artistic and wealthy elites" (Webb 2013, 193). This is despite the fact that this movement was "motivated by discontent with the political and social situation around the ruling class and their legitimators" (Malik and Hinnells 2006, 5). In spite of Sufism's roots in challenging the wealthy establishment, the novel portrays Sufism to be an appropriate vehicle (although hardly an inevitable one) for the wealthy but does not question or challenge this hierarchy.

The idea of distinction then becomes a crucial pivot between religion and self. Both Ella's reconciliation with herself and acceptance as a legitimate religious subject rely on polyvocality as the means to establish distinction, or the idea that some are the chosen ones by God, at the expense of others. Contradictory to Sufism's countercultural history and its "anti-authoritarian" (Malik and Hinnells 2006, 5) stance toward Muslim institutions, which made it popular within America's counter-cultural movements (Webb 2013, 194), the novel deploys Sufism to appeal to the non-Muslim world as the final arbiter of accepting Islam.

The novel reveals the complex ways in which race, religion, and class inflect each other. It resolves religious conflict on the common ground of higher-class status partnerships based on compliance with the American system. That is, Ella's world belonging is based on her conformity with the national class and religious hierarchies. Aziz's belonging also depends on a move away from intra-faith Muslim polyvocality to interfaith solidarity, the more visible and acceptable vision of pluralism achieved only by the soft version of Islam, Sufism.

CONCLUSION

While polyvocality in Shafak's *The Forty Rules of Love* has been heralded as a celebration of difference or as a challenge to representations of the Islamic community as a monolith, this article has argued that it is neither a neutral concept nor an end unto itself. As Shafak's novel illustrates, the story's insistence on reconciling Islam with world belonging necessitates a univocal resolution to polyvocality, which requires the novel to create a binarism between Sufi and non-Sufi approaches and legitimize hierarchies between them. *The Forty Rules of Love*, specifically, draws on Sufism's embattled and marginalized position within Islam to project it as amenable to world inclusion, and dismisses and discounts other approaches, sanctioning hatred against them as they are reduced to fanatic attitudes. This research paper shows that Islamophobia is a product not only of Muslim stereotypes but of the "good Muslim/bad Muslim" binary that compels us to dismiss certain voices within the polyvocal Muslim community. Challenging stereotypes is, therefore, no substitute for a meaningful engagement with the intellectual, political, and spiritual histories of diverse Islamic domains without dismissing them. Such an engagement requires us to analyze the international textures of Islam and intra-faith pluralism in addition to interfaith dialogues. Conflict resolution and pluralism are not causes for complacency or celebration; instead, they require vigilance against the privileges and dehumanizing erasures that only dimly glow beneath their surface.

The novel partly succeeds and partly fails. On one hand, it makes an effort to bring the East closer to the West. On the other hand, it attempts to absorb the West entirely and in Edward Said's words "to cancel, or at least subdue and reduce, its [the East's] strangeness and, in the case of Islam, its hostility" (Said 2003, 87). *The Forty Rules of Love* appears to be completely devoted to "dispelling the threat of Islam" for American audiences traumatised by the events of 9/11 and subsequently exposed to the anti-Muslim discourses developed by the media in its aftermath (Said 2003, 87). Moreover, Shafak's construction of thirteenth-century Anatolia mirrors the contemporary United States and presents a scene of conflict familiar to a post-9/11 American readership. 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.

While the novel proposes itself as a mediator between an American readership and Islam, it views this process from a markedly Western and Orientalist perspective which does not help in creating a transcultural narrative that speaks equally to both the West and the East. There is no intention of encouraging a transformation in American culture and society. Rather than celebrating diversity, Shafak concentrates on gratifying the American sense of centrality, which is a benevolent form of control.

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