

Islamic Mysticism And Inner Purity: A Study Of Spiritual Transitions In Elif Shafak's The Forty Rules Of Love (2010)

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Abstract

The study examines the spiritual journey of different characters and critiques how and what changes appear in the characters' lives when they go through spiritual experiences in The Forty Rules of Love by Elif Shafak (2010). The study uses a qualitative approach that draws on Islamic mysticism to examine the quest for spiritual self-discovery. The analysis is mainly focused on the mystical tales of Maulana Rumi, the Shams of Tabriz and Rose. Through character analysis, the study unveils the spiritual changes that several characters in The Forty Rules of Love go through, showing the vital role of mysticism in their search for inner purity. The study explores the characters' spiritual journey, highlighting contemplation, renunciation, pantheism, submission, and compassion, and the role of mysticism in inner purity, relevant for materialistic readers seeking spiritual fulfillment. This study will contribute to fostering conversations and mutual understanding among individuals of diverse faith backgrounds.

Keywords: Forty Rules of Love, Spiritual self-discovery, Mystical experiences, Rumi, Shams.

Background of the study

The spiritual self is a state of purity, deep calm, and mental satisfaction. If this great wealth is acquired, every price to purchase it seems nominal. Nicholson quotes in *Mystics of Islam* (1979) that Ibrahim Ibn-e-Adam, Ghazali, Rumi, and several others have denounced their respective thrones and

prestigious posts for the sake of spiritual search. A spiritual quest is a process of internal change. The search for a spiritual self is a strong desire to be purified from all the dirt that devitalizes a man's conscience (Ramzan & Anjum, 2014). This research paper explores the mystical analysis of a novel by a Turkish writer Elif Shafak, *The Forty Rules of Love* (2010). The research focuses on the themes of Islamic and Buddhist mysticism, examining the inner journey and change towards purity through the characters in the novels.

The Forty Rules of Love is her great contribution to Islamic mysticism, for Shafak's research on the spiritual self through mysticism has close intimacy with her disposition. In *The Forty Rules of Love*, almost every character undergoes spiritual change, exploring their silent search for spiritual self through mysticism. Shams of Tabriz, a cascade of love, converts Rumi into a prophet of love and passionate poet, breaking with rigidities and bigotries. *The Forty Rules of Love* are golden principles of Islamic mysticism, including the heart as a focusing point, love exempting from word usage, inner purification, and respecting differences as divine schemes (Lings, 1999).

Elif Shafak's novel, *The Forty Rules of Love*, has been extensively studied for its thematic elements and cultural bridging. However, there is a research gap in understanding Shafak's contribution to the Sufi tradition and her unique narrative style. Addressing these gaps can provide a more comprehensive understanding.

Statement of the Problem

This research examines Elif Shafak's novel *The Forty Rules of Love* (2010), focusing on its use of mysticism and spiritual journeys. Drawing from Islamic, it explores the characters' quests for spiritual self-discovery. The study highlights the role of mysticism in their spiritual transformations and the novel's role in fostering spiritual connection between Eastern and Western cultures. It contributes to the discourse on mysticism's relevance in human spiritual enlightenment.

Methodology and Theoretical Background

The research uses a qualitative research design with character analysis to identify traces of mysticism in the character's actions, reactions, behaviors, and attitudes in *The Forty Rules of Love*. Further, the theoretical frame the study

is viewed through is based on the mystical approach of Ibn Arabi and Al-Ghazali, who were two prominent Islamic philosophers and theologians who lived in different eras and had distinct views on various aspects of spirituality and mysticism. (Austin, 1980; Ghazzālī & James, 2010)

Both Ibn Arabi and Al-Ghazali were mystical philosophers who emphasized submission to God's will, compassion, and love as essential elements of the spiritual journey (Chittick, 2012; Ġazzālī & Skellie, 1938). Ibn Arabi believed self-discovery is a journey towards recognizing one's divine nature (Chittick, 2012). Al-Ghazali, on the other hand, focused on inner purification and the role of Sufism in achieving spiritual closeness to God (Ghazzālī & James, 2010). He emphasized the importance of surrendering one's ego and desires to God, aligning with the concept of submission to God's will. Both philosophers had mystical orientations, but their approaches differed in their focus on spiritual growth and submission. ((Al-Ghazzali, Daniel, & Field, 2015; Ġazzālī & Skellie, 1938; Ghazzālī & James, 2010).

In their spiritual journeys, both photospheres prominently emphasize reflection and renunciation, whereas Ibn Arabi separates from worldly attachments and Al-Ghazali stresses God's transcendence.

Literature Review

Elif Shafak's *The Forty Rules of Love* (2010) is a novel that weaves together contemporary and historical narratives, exploring themes of mysticism, love, and spirituality. This literary work has received significant attention from scholars and critics for its unique storytelling and exploration of Sufi philosophy. *The Forty Rules of Love* explores mysticism, incorporating Islamic Sufism's mystical dimensions, with prominent Sufi figures like Rumi and Shams of Tabriz highlighting the transformative power of spiritual love (Kundu, 2015).

The study explores a diverse range of characters, with Ella Rubinstein, a Jewish housewife, undergoing a profound spiritual transformation through Rumi's poetry. (Ahmed, 2017).

Shafak's novel effectively bridges cultural divides by examining Sufi philosophy's universal appeal and its potential to connect people across Eastern and Western cultures (Aslan, 2011).

Shafak's novel is replete with the theme of spiritual enlightenment, highlighting Rumi's teachings and the transformative power of love and spirituality in the characters' quests (Yildirim, 2019).

Elif Shafak's *The Forty Rules of Love* is a captivating novel centered on themes of mysticism, love, and spirituality, bridging cultural divides and highlighting the transformative power of spiritual experiences.

Analysis and Discussion

This study analyzes the spiritual experiences of major characters in *Forty Rules of Love*, Rumi, Desert Rose, and Shams. The examination of love, mysticism, and self-discovery throughout the text centers on these characters. By focusing on the individual characters, we can explore their unique motives, growth, and the significant effects of their choices on the overall story and other characters.

In Elif Shafak's novel, *Forty Rules of Love*, the study explores the spiritual journey and mystical experiences through the characters like Rumi, Desert Rose, and Shams, who embody core principles of renunciation, worldly attachments, and desires for spiritual enlightenment. These characters undergo a profound transformation as they renounce the materialistic aspects of their lives to embark on their spiritual quests.

Rumi, initially a scholar and teacher, undergoes a dramatic shift in his life when he encounters Shams of Tabriz. Rumi's decision to forsake his scholarly pursuits and embrace a path of spiritual seeking aligns with the concept of renunciation in Islamic mysticism. Similarly, Desert Rose, a character who leads a life of sin and indulgence, experiences a significant transformation when she begins her spiritual journey. Her renunciation of her sinful past and her commitment to seeking spiritual purity reflect the central role of renunciation in her quest for spiritual growth.

Shams, the enigmatic spiritual figure in the novel, also embodies the idea of renunciation. His unconventional and ascetic lifestyle, characterized by his detachment from worldly possessions and norms, serves as a profound example of renunciation as a means to attain spiritual enlightenment (Shafak, 2010, p.73).

Shams is portrayed as an inspirational figure and guide, often taking on the role of a reformer rather than a mere seeker (Shafak, 2010, p.84). His charm, dignity, and unruliness make

him a role model in the Dervish Lodge (Shafak, 2010, p.84). This role distinction sets Shams to purify others (Shafak, 2010, p.84).

The ultimate goal of spiritual seekers is to find God, a concept prevalent in Islamic mysticism. Shams emphasizes the interconnectedness of all things, a reflection of the mystic theme of pantheism, where everything is seen as a manifestation of the divine (Shafak, 2010, p.135). Ibn Arabi believed that self-discovery is a journey toward recognizing one's own divine nature. He wrote about the importance of knowing oneself as a means to knowing God ("The Bezels of Wisdom") (Austin, 1980). Al-Ghazali also discusses the purification of the soul (tazkiyah) and the inner journey toward spiritual purity. (Al-Ghazzali, Daniel, & Field, 2015)

Shams acts as a compassionate reformer who awakens dormant selves and believes in the power of repentance (Shafak, 2010, p.140). He views love as essential in the spiritual journey, with falling in love leading to spiritual ascension and falling in hate leading to spiritual descent (Shafak, 2010, p.140).

Surrender to God is a common theme in Shams's spiritual journeys, and it is seen as the path to survival within annihilation (Shafak, 2010, p.259). In this state of submission, mystics find a life within death (Shafak, 2010, p.259). Both Ibn Arabi and Al-Ghazali emphasized the importance of submission (Islam) to God's will. They believed that true spiritual growth comes through surrendering one's ego and desires to the divine. Ibn Arabi's "Fusus al-Hikam" contains discussions on submission and the idea of being a "servant of the One." (Austin, 1980; Chittick, 2012)

Inspiration is a key element of mysticism, and Shams serves as an inspiring figure. His mystical powers are depicted through miracles, such as changing the color of a rose and maintaining a lit lamp in a storm (Shafak, 2010, p.276). These abilities set him apart as a unique example for those seeking spiritual self-discovery (Shafak, 2010, p.276).

Elif Shafak's portrayal of Shams in *The Forty Rules of Love* showcases him as a multifaceted mystic figure with a transformative influence on the novel's characters and the readers alike. His teachings encompass love, unity, and spirituality, aligning with the core principles of Islamic mysticism.

The theme of spiritualism is prevalent in Shams whose divine directive to find a companion and highlights Rumi as that

companion. It draws parallels between the spiritual companionship of Shams and Rumi and the concept of a spiritual guide in mysticism. It also mentions the significance of companions in sensitive spiritual journeys. Rumi's spiritual journey and his initial lack of passion for love, which is crucial in mysticism. It suggests that Shams played a pivotal role in nurturing Rumi's innate spiritual talents (Shafak, 2010, p.41). Ibn Arabi believed in the importance of contemplation as a means of seeking God and understanding the divine reality. He wrote, "Contemplation is the lamp of the heart. If it departs, the heart has no light." (Ibn Arabi, "The Bezels of Wisdom") (Austin, 1980). Al-Ghazali also emphasized the significance of contemplation, particularly in his work "The Alchemy of Happiness," where he discusses the process of self-reflection and deep thought as a means to draw closer to God. (Al-Ghazzali, Daniel, & Field, 2015)

Mystic figures like Frīduddīn Attar and Ibn Arabi emphasize Rumi's profound spiritual potential. It highlights the mystic quality of Rumi's journey (Shafak, 2010, p.60). This realization is a crucial aspect of spiritual self-discovery (Shafak, 2010, p.68). It mentions Sayyid Burhanuddin's request to Baba Zaman to join the spiritual paths of Shams and Rumi. This collaboration underscores the importance of spiritual cooperation and mentorship. (Shafak, 2010, p.68), It mentions how Shams' dreams guide Rumi toward the verses of the Holy Quran, reflecting mystical experiences. (Shafak, 2010, p.74). Ibn Arabi's perspective on renunciation is rooted in the idea of detachment from worldly attachments while remaining engaged in the world. He believed in a balanced approach, where one could be in the world but not of it. (Austin, 1980). Al-Ghazali discusses the concept of *zuhd* (asceticism) and the importance of renouncing worldly desires to focus on the spiritual path. (Ghazzālī & James, 2010)

The role of willing poverty in Rumi's spiritual journey is a resonant theme of renunciation in mysticism (Shafak, 2010, p.108). The practice of Sema (whirling dance of dervishes) reflects as a means of detachment from the self to join God, aligning with mystic concepts of annihilation (*Fana*). (Shafak, 2010, p.267)

The idea of divine synchronicity suggests that Shams' arrival in Rumi's life is part of a divine plan, highlighting the concept of destiny and divine guidance in mysticism (Shafak, 2010, p.288), the intensity of love in spiritual companionship, and

Shams' separation deeply affects Rumi. This intense love and separation are common themes in mysticism (Shafak, 2010, p.341) which collectively depict the spiritual journey of Rumi and Shams, the significance of spiritual companionship, the importance of love and renunciation, and the mystical elements present in their relationship, aligning with the broader theme of spiritualism in the text.

Desert Rose's journey is driven by her desire for purification and spiritual growth (Shafak, 2010, p.111) by emphasizing the importance of the search for one's spiritual self, especially in the face of a sinful life. Ibn Arabi believed that self-discovery is a journey toward recognizing one's own divine nature. Ibn Arabi also wrote about the importance of knowing oneself as a means to knowing God (Austin, 1980). Moreover, Al-Ghazali's *The Alchemy of Happiness* discusses the purification of the soul (tazkiyah) and the inner journey toward spiritual purity. (Al-Ghazzali, Daniel, & Field, 2015)

Shams serves as a spiritual companion and guide to Desert Rose, making prophetic predictions about her spiritual journey. Spiritual companionship is a key aspect of mysticism (Shafak, 2010, p.111) and Desert Rose experiences tranquility as a result of her spiritual exploration. This sense of peace and tranquility is often associated with spiritualism. (Shafak, 2010, p.121). Her love for roses and gardens to purity is connected. Despite her circumstances, she maintains a desire for purity and to be close to God. Love is portrayed as a path to purity. (Shafak, 2010, p.121)

The incident where Desert Rose is turned away from Rumi's mosque but saved by Shams emphasizes the superiority of spirituality over scholarly knowledge (Shafak, 2010, p.133). Shams reinforces the idea of self-realization and self-worth in Desert Rose, aligning it with the concept of God's realization (Shafak, 2010, p.135). Desert Rose, like other seekers in the text, seeks liberation from her sinful past and strives for a spiritual way. (Shafak, 2010, p.135)

The study analyzes the efforts for spiritualism of three characters. Rumi, Desert Rose, and Shams. Rumi abandons scholarly pursuits, Desert Rose abandons her sinful past, and Shams leads an unconventional ascetic lifestyle. Shams serves as an inspirational figure, inspiring change in others. Love is portrayed as a revolutionary force, and surrender to God is a common theme. Shams emphasizes the interconnectedness of all things, reflecting pantheism. Both philosophers stressed the significance of compassion and

love as essential elements of the spiritual journey. Ibn Arabi wrote extensively about the Divine Love, and his poetry often reflects the theme of divine compassion. (Chittick, 2012) and Al-Ghazali, in his *Ihya Ulum al-Din*, highlights the significance of virtues such as kindness, compassion, and empathy, highlighting their importance in the practice of Islam. (Ġazzālī & Skellie, 1938)

In the analysis, a key aspect that emerges is the importance of spiritual companionship and mentorship in the characters' journeys towards spiritual self-discovery. This theme underscores how individuals, particularly in the context of Islamic mysticism, often require guidance and support from spiritual mentors or companions to navigate the complexities of their spiritual quests. These mentors play a crucial role in helping individuals deepen their understanding of mysticism, facilitating their inner journeys, and providing guidance on how to overcome spiritual challenges

Further, Ibn Arabi's and Al-Ghazali's core principles like contemplation, renunciation, and submission to God's will are evident in the study. They advocated for a balanced spirituality, detaching from worldly attachments while actively engaging with the world. They also emphasized compassion and love as essential for spiritual journeys, are all represented by characters in the study.

Conclusion

The study uses qualitative character analysis to identify mysticism in the novel, based on the mystical philosophies of Ibn Arabi and Al-Ghazali. Both philosophers emphasize surrendering one's ego and desires to God, compassion, love, and renunciation as central elements of spiritual growth. The study unveils in Elif Shafak's *The Forty Rules of Love* the spiritual journey through deep reflection, detachment from worldly desires, the belief in the unity of existence, surrender to a higher power, compassion, spiritual states, and the concept of self-annihilation.

The study examines the protagonists' spiritual self-discovery journeys and discloses the critical role mysticism played in their shared quest for inner purity. In particular, it looks at Rumi, whose shift as he gives up scholarly aspirations corresponds with Islamic mysticism. This is also evident in Desert Rose's development as she sets off on a spiritual quest. Ibn Arabi's ideology is in line with Shams of Tabriz, an

enigmatic spiritual figure who personifies renunciation and pantheism. The research explores the value of spiritual guidance and company throughout the characters' journeys. Readers looking for spiritual fulfillment in a world that is often dominated by materialism will find this study to be pertinent.

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