



**The Ineluctable Chords of Forty and Ella's Journey
from Nausea to Madhab-i-Ishq to Eudaimonia:
Prismatic Effects of Elif Shafak's *The Forty Rules of Love***

Najmul Huda Tareq

[ORCID](#)

Abstract: Elif Shafak's novella, *The Forty Rules of Love*, published in March 2009, explores the identity of one's existence through a spiritual transformation. Sufi mysticism, which Ella has discovered, transports her on an adventurous and exotic voyage of life. In this incredibly positive tale, a sense of belonging and purpose in one's life is instilled in the mind of the readers. A jar of Love will never be able to contain or define Love. Everything about it is limitless and brimming with Rahma (mercy). It is a narrative of a lost soul discovering serenity in Love, exploring the meaning of life, and re-inventing why she is still living. The recompensation for every annihilation is a cleansing of the soul, according to Sufism. Through the prism of Sufism, this paper seeks to understand Ella's transition from Nausea to Madhab-i-Ishq to Eudaimonia and to bridge several of Tabrizi's rules with Islamic beliefs and understanding.

Keywords: Sufism, Shafak, Forty, Eudaimonia, Nausea, Islam, Madhab, Love

Introduction

"B" is the letter that surprises and compels us to praise Shafak's calibre. There are no fallacies in this novella's chapters, which all begin with the letter "B". *The Forty Rules of Love*, a novella by Elif Shafak, deserves to be commended for its spiritual and philosophical mapping. As a Turkish-British author, Shafak pushes readers to think imaginatively. Postmodernism is an age whereby an individual's psyche is engulfed by sorrow and confusion, culminating in self-destruction and alienation due to the dread of sociocultural enigmas and quandaries. Ella, the novella's protagonist, is forty years old and works for a literary agency. Her first assignment is to write a book review of A.Z. Zahara's *Sweet Blasphemy*. As the tale unfolds, she becomes intensely interested in Sufism. She meets two dervishes, Shams of Tabriz and his protégé Rumi, both of whom have dedicated their lives to the quest for eternal Love. As she reads the novels, she develops an attachment to the author. She meets him and yearns to exhale her Love for him, aware that her Love has a limited lifespan on this planet. In this transcendence, she soothes herself and guides herself from Nausea to Madhab-i-Ishq to Eudaimonia. As we proceed to this journey, we will be unboxing the mysticism of this novella from a religious and philosophical outlook.

The Significance of Forty in different Religions

Like a woodworm, the question continues to bore a hole in the mind. Why is the number forty chosen rather than forty-one, forty-two, or any other number? Ella, the protagonist, is forty years old and is tremendously inspired by Shams of Tabriz's "Forty Rules of Love". Forty is everywhere. Religions have an assortment of commonalities as well. In Hinduism, there are seven vows, seven deadly sins in Christianity, and seven times circumambulation during the Muslim pilgrimage. All of them elicit an exclamatory response in our thinking. According to Islam, an individual matures at the age of forty. The Quran reflects:

Tareq, Najmul Huda. "The Ineluctable Chords of Forty and Ella's Journey from Nausea to Madhab-i-Ishq to Eudaimonia: Prismatic Effects of Elif Shafak's *The Forty Rules of Love*." *Overtones Ege Journal of English Studies* 1 (2022): 47-53.



And We have enjoined upon man, to his parents, good treatment. His mother carried him with hardship and gave birth to him with hardship, and his gestation and weaning [period] is thirty months. [He grows] until, when he reaches maturity and reaches [the age of] forty years, he says, 'My Lord, enable me to be grateful for Your favour which You have bestowed upon me and upon my parents and to work righteousness of which You will approve and make righteous for me my offspring. Indeed, I have repented to You, and indeed, I am of the Muslims' (*Quran* 46:15).

Prophet Muhammad (sm) has received the divine revelation at the age of forty and has gone for seclusion in mount Hira for forty days. Prophet Musa (as) "entered the cloud and went up on the mountain. And he was on the mountain forty days and forty nights" (*Exodus* 24:18). Surprisingly, historically, religiously, and philosophically, the forty is a collection of mysticisms. There is something miraculous about it that only God understands, and Sufis have attempted to comprehend it since they regard themselves as Prophets' successors. Each principle necessitates spiritual interpretation, purpose, and didactic value. The novella is centred on these forty rules of Love. Each rule has a number of different interpretations. This paper will examine several of the extraordinary rules articulated by Shams of Tabrizi, emphasizing their application from an Islamic perspective. Sufis are distinguished by a number of distinguishing characteristics that separate them from ordinary people. They adhere to a broad set of principles. Their single mission is to seek divine Love by serving humanity and this is the one goal they have set for themselves. They enjoy employing strange metaphors in their writings and teachings to strike a balance between what is right and what is erroneous:

Sufi poetry is filled with metaphors, the most striking of which revolve around wine, taverns, and drunkenness. In this symbolic language of Love, 'Wine' represents the divine Love that intoxicates the soul; 'getting drunk' means losing oneself in that Love; the 'cup' refers to one's body and mind; and the Saaqi (the Cupbearer, the Maiden who pours the wine) is the grace-bestowing aspect of God that fills the soul's empty cup with wine of Love. The Sufis even have a word for 'hangover' which suggests that lingering effects of Love. (Star xii-xiii)

We have a grasp of the concept of how Sufis view the complete reversal of creation. Never in our wildest dreams would we have imagined that drinking wine, becoming intoxicated, and forgetting oneself might bring one closer to God. They, on the other hand, have a very different perspective on the world and the cosmos. Sufism is built on a solid foundation and basis. Ultimately, this is the foundation upon which the entire philosophy of Sufism is built. Famous Sufi Junayed indicates that:

Sufism is founded on the eight qualities exemplified by the eight prophets: The generosity of Abraham, who was willing to sacrifice his son. The Surrender of Ishmael, who submitted to the command of God and gave up his dear life. The Patience of Job, who endured the affliction of worms and the jealousy of the Merciful. The mystery of Zacharias, to whom God said, 'Thou shalt not speak unto men for three days save by sign.' The solitude of John, who was a stranger in his own country and an alien to his own kind. The detachment of Jesus, who was so removed from worldly things that he kept only a cup and a comb- the cup he threw away when he saw a man drinking in the palms of his hand, and the comb likewise when he saw another man using his fingers instead of a comb. The wearing of wool by Moses, whose garment was woolen. And the poverty of Mohammad, to whom God sent the key of all treasures that are upon the face of the earth (in Star xviii).

Clearly, the prophets are their source of inspiration, as has already been revealed. They have taken lessons from the teachings and lives of every prophet and applied them to their own lives in order to grasp them from every conceivable point of view. The enigmatic significance of the number forty has yet to be uncovered. However, this particular number is both provocative and compelling. The novella is a tale inside a tale, as the title suggests. Every time a rule is introduced for which a cause and effect relationship is shown. Shams Tabrizi becomes more

successful in his goal of converting Rumi into a Sufi of Love with the assistance of a scholar. The same can be said about Ella's character, who is inspired by the work of Abdul Aziz, for whom she abandons her family in order to pursue her dreams. The purpose of this study is to provide an explanation for a few of the forty laws of Love conceived from the teachings of Shams Tabrizi through Islamic and Sufism perspective. The First Rule is as follows: "How we see God is a direct reflection of how we see ourselves. If God brings to mind mostly fear and blame, it means there is too much fear and blame welled inside us. If we see God as full of Love and compassion, so are we" (*The Forty Rules of Love* 30).

Shams Tabrizi, amid a heated dispute with the innkeeper, offers this amazing idea of comprehending God. The innkeeper has continued to argue with him, but he maintains his composure and continues to communicate his message of Love. This rule can be related to one of the hadiths said by Prophet Muhammad (sm) and narrated by Abu Huraira (ra) on understanding the concept of Allah's mercy:

'I am just as My slave thinks I am, (i.e. I am able to do for him what he thinks I can do for him) and I am with him if he remembers Me. If he remembers Me in himself, I too, remember him in Myself; and if he remembers Me in a group of people, I remember him in a group that is better than they; and if he comes one span nearer to Me, I go one cubit nearer to him; and if he comes one cubit nearer to Me, I go a distance of two outstretched arms nearer to him; and if he comes to Me walking, I go to him running' (Bukhari 7405).

Although the style of storytelling varies in terms of language, the overall approach stays the same throughout. To be sure, it is reasonable that the Sufis convey the same idea in a somewhat different manner. Tabrizi's laws are very detailed and they may lift even the darkest of souls out of their gloom. Opening our emotions is like exposing the clouds and letting the torrential raindrops wash away the filth that has accumulated inside us. Tabrizi and Baba Zaman are talking, Tabrizi explains how he became a dream interpreter by giving up his dreams and learning to interpret dreams. We also notice, Tabrizi declares himself to be a wondering dervish of forty years (58). He continues his universal axiom: "You can study God through everything and everyone in the universe, because God is not confined in a mosque, synagogue, or church. But if you are still in need of knowing where exactly His abode is, there is only one place to look for Him: in the heart of a true lover" (58).

This guideline shows the strength of a genuine lover's affections. The real lover in this context refers to the one who yearns for God's Love, and they are the true companions in the faith. Consider the inscription inscribed on the tomb of Rumi, which may be used as an example to illustrate this point: "When we are gone, do not look for our tomb in earth, but find it in the hearts of people" (Hayat, n.p.). Sufis put a great deal of emphasis on the heart, and their primary goal is to enter the hearts of their real beloveds in order to achieve salvation. God has a response for them as well. In *Quran* God replies, "[a]nd when My servants question thee concerning Me—I am near to answer the call of the caller, when he calls to Me; so, let them respond to Me, and let them believe in Me; haply so they will go aright" (*Quran* 2:186). God shows His infinite Love for His true lovers. He lets His lover feel profound and sound with a declaration that He is near, that much nearer than theirs "jugular vein" (*Quran* 50:16). Shams dazzles us with another insightful rule as he anticipates his first meeting with Mewlana Rumi:

Whatever happens in your life, no matter how troubling things might seem, do not enter the neighborhood of despair. Even when all doors remain closed, God will open up a new path only for you. Be thankful! It is easy to be thankful when all is well. A Sufi is thankful not only for what he has been given but also for all that he has been denied. (73)

Sufis strive to keep despair at bay in order to stay persistent and resilient in their beliefs and practices. They have discovered the solution to their difficulties and challenges. They are eternally thankful to their God for everything, whether they do or do not have much of it. According to the *Dictionary of Psychology*, the word

despair means “an emotional feeling of hopelessness”¹. Therefore, Sufis keep themselves vigilant and aware of not indulging themselves in the ocean of despair. We can draw a similar reference from Quran, where Allah says, “[W]e have not sent down to you the Qur’an that you be distressed” (*Quran* 20:2). For example, the opposite interpretation of this verse is that the Quran has been revealed in order to bring us contentment. Sufis draw courage and enthusiasm from the divine reservoir of God and channel it into their lives. They understand that even the most egregious of perpetrators are slaves of the Most Merciful. “Say, O My servants who have transgressed against themselves [by sinning], do not despair of the mercy of Allah. Indeed, Allah forgives all sins. Indeed, it is He who is the Forgiving, the Merciful” (*Quran* 39:53). An intriguing truth is that Sufis were able to comprehend the most profound meaning of Quranic verses which is an interesting fact. They have a better knowledge of life and they flourish from their perseverance and patience in exchange for all of their sacrifices. They believe that patience is the key to unlocking all of life’s gems. As one of the rules say:

Patience does not mean to passively endure; it means to be farsighted enough to trust the end result of a process. What does patience mean? It means to look at the thorn and see the rose, to look at the night and see the dawn. Impatience means to be so shortsighted as to not be able to see the outcome. The lovers of God never run out of patience, for they know that time is needed for the crescent moon to become full (74).

Human beings, whether they do contemplate or not, the treasure of the success of life lies in patience. God, the Exalted also reveals, “I am with those who are patient” (*Quran* 2:153). Rumi speaks in reverent tones, remaining in sync with his master. Rumi extols the virtue of patience, but he does it with more substance. He speaks in subdued tones:

To practice patience is the soul of praise:
have patience
for that is true glorification.
No glorification is worth as much.
Have patience:
Patience is the remedy for pain. (*Daylight* 68)

Hardship is what makes us the strongest as human beings. It acts as the best teacher. It always serves a lesson that creates the roadmap of our lives. Shams, now prepares himself for the hardship pondering on one of the rules: “The midwife knows that when there is no pain, the way for the baby cannot be opened and the mother cannot give birth. Likewise, for a new self to be born, hardship is necessary. Just as clay needs to go through intense heat to become strong, Love can only be perfected in pain” (86).

Shams is very eloquent and gifted with Love and mercy. He turns the hardships of life into the gifts of life. Shams gets an answer from his God too: “Indeed, there is ease in hardship” (*Quran* 94:6). Prophet Muhammad (sm) says: “Never a believer is stricken with discomfort, hardship or illness, grief or even with mental worry that his sins are not expiated for him” (Muslim 2573). Rumi, the disciple follows his master Shams by tuning in:

Where there is pain, the remedy follows:
Wherever the lowlands are, the water goes.
If you want the water of mercy, make yourself low;
Then drink the wine of mercy and be drunk (*Daylight* 150).

¹ See: <<https://dictionary.apa.org/despair>>.

Incredibly, the Sufis have transformed adversity into pleasure, and they are illuminating the people with their calming balm of serenity and tranquillity. There is no other way to accept God's compassion and devotion but to humbling a person in order to receive it.

Ella from Nausea to Madhab-i-Ishq to Eudaimonia

Jean Paul Sartre, the existentialist philosopher, is the writer of the novella *Nausea*. Ella's life is in the same stage which can be referred as state of Nausea. She knows this state can be exceeded for what she needs a push. When it comes to the trajectory of one's life, nothing is foreseeable. We never know what is going to happen next. It is a novella about spiritual and personal growth and development. When Ella approaches the age of forty, she finds herself in the midst of a transformation from a state of Nausea to a state of Madhab-i-Ishq and then to Eudaimonism. Shafak pens, Ella's state of Nausea as such: "For forty years Ella Rubinstein's life had consisted of still waters—a predictable sequence of habits, needs, and preferences" (prologue). As human beings, we do not want a boring existence, soulless emotions, or a heart that is devoid of Love. As time goes on, scientific and technological development progresses, but we become devoid of feelings. The emotion of postmodern human beings can be summed from the poem "The Hollow Man" by Eliot:

We are the hollow men
 We are the stuffed men
 Leaning together
 Headpiece filled with straw. Alas!
 [...]
 Shape without form, shade without colour,
 Paralysed force, gesture without motion (1-4, 11-2)

Ella sees her life in the same way. A heart that simply beats mechanically, devoid of passion and spirituality. She reflects about her limits: "Building her whole life around her husband and children, Ella lacked any survival techniques to help her cope with life's hardships on her own. She was not the type to throw caution to the wind. Even changing her daily coffee brand was a major effort" (Shafak 3).

We are already informed that the age of forty is mysterious and full of unpredictability. As Ella proceeds reading *Sweet Blasphemy* she starts to rediscover herself. She understands that "[t]here are surely more important things in life for a married woman about to be forty" (44) She seeks for inspiration and wants to try writing, "The Forty Rules of the Sedentary, Suburban, Earthy Housewife" (43). Her first letter to A. Aziz explains how she throws herself to a stranger for whom she feels a strange affection. She writes, "I am sorry to pour my personal problems out to you" (45). As Aziz receives the letter he has not delayed to enlighten Ella with solution and comfort. He comforts her with Rumi's saying, "love is the water of life" (54).

Resoundingly this saying enthralled Ella and the seed of Love starts to grow from there. Her day to day communication with Aziz has started to fill up the emptiness of her heart. Aziz becomes the most significant thing in her life. She starts getting a feeling of belongingness and her meaning of existence. She contemplates: "Aziz was a gushing waterfall. Where she feared to step, he surged full blast. Where she hesitated and worried before acting, he acted first and worried later, if he ever worried at all. He had an animated personality, too much idealism and passion for one body. He wore many hats and wore them all" (159). Ella begins comparing herself to Aziz. She thinks if he is west, then she is east. The argument goes on and she yearns to get a resolution.

David, Ella's husband has come to know about her communication with Aziz. He knows she is looking for compassion elsewhere. After a battle of arguments, she reveals the truth. She unlocks her secret and feelings which has caused David a shock for what he is not ready at all. "I love Aziz" (250). Ella exhales. Her journey to Madhab-i-Ishq begins. The phrase means the path of Love or the way of Sufism. In Islam there are many Madhabs starting from Hanafi and ending with Shafee. Now she shifts from the state of Nausea to the way of

Love. She confesses her Love: “I first loved your imagination and your stories, and then I realized I love the man behind the stories” (264). It is worth of mentioning that the transformation has made her strong and powerful. She dares to express her Love without any hesitation and confusion. A certain form of stability is noticeable in her character. Rumi writes:

The truth walked in, and Love fell all around.
 Love found us.
 [...]

 He came from nowhere. He called me. I came.
 Lover! Saviour! My Path! My Elixir! (*Love is My Saviour* 17)

Let’s rephrase the quotation above: He (Aziz) came from nowhere. I (Ella) came. Lover (Aziz), Saviour (Aziz), My path (Madhab-i- ishq-sufism). She finds a way to rescue herself from the prejudice she has carried throughout her life.

Ella meets Aziz finally. She prepares herself as much as possible and leaving her family behind she starts walking on the path of love: Madhab-i-Ishq. Love makes us forget everything. Time flies by and Love confides us. As Ella recalls, “she would not be able to remember how one cup of coffee became several cups, or how the conversation took on an increasingly intimate tone, [...] he planted a kiss on her fingertip”(301). It is quite evident that she is infatuated by Aziz’s Love and she subjugates herself to him without any fear and hurdles. When they let Love happen hand in hand, shafak writes, “it was the sexiest feeling she had ever experienced” (303).

Ella discovers the mystical life of Aziz and she prepares herself for the worst knowing that Aziz has got cancer. She finds herself happy as she has been able to stay beside Aziz until his last breath: “Aziz was buried in Konya, following in the footsteps of his beloved Rumi” (348).

Now, Ella shifts to the third phase of her life which can be called as Eudaimonia. In Greek philosophy, “Eudaimonia means achieving the best conditions possible for a human being, in every sense—not only happiness, but also virtue, morality, and a meaningful life. It was the ultimate goal of philosophy: to become better people—to fulfill our unique potential as human beings”² (n.p.). The death of Aziz allows Ella to find a new meaning for her life. Now, she finds herself in a dilemma where she has to make a big decision. She takes a drastic decision to move to Amsterdam. She bores confidence and contemplates, “I am going to try living one day at a time. I’ll see what my heart says” (349). Finally, Ella becomes what she has wanted to become. She transforms into something she never has anticipated before. Her transformation brings happiness and achieves the best art of being a human. She becomes a dervish. Shafak writes: “She looked at the sky, which was an amazing indigo in all directions. It swirled with an invisible speed of its own, dissolving into nothingness and encountering therein infinite possibilities, like a whirling dervish” (350).

The novel ends up with the final rule: Forty. The forty becomes the osmosis part of the all rules. It sums up life, sums up what we yearn for. As a human being we want to live a meaningful life and Love inscribes the best possible meaning. Shafak ends by stating that “[a] life without Love is of no account. Don’t ask yourself what kind of Love you should seek, spiritual or material, divine or mundane, eastern or western. [...] Divisions only lead to more divisions. Love has no labels, no definitions. It is what it is, pure and simple” (350).

Conclusion

Shafak has invented a new idea of life with a mixture of Sufism and Islam that can be coined as “Elifism”. Ella finally becomes the person she has aspired to be for the past forty years. In the instant that she drags herself into infinity, the kite of hope soars even higher into the sky. She discovers a sense of purpose in her

² See: <philosophyterms.com/eudaimonia>.

life. Her approach, on the other hand, may appear to be at odds with Sufism and Islam, since she revolutionizes a method of rediscovering the fundamental essence of life. In this paper, I have tried to explain several rules of Tabrizi's from an Islamic Perspective and to show how Sufism, as a philosophy, represents Islam. Furthermore, I have traced Ella's journey from the state of Nausea to Madhab-i- Ishq- to the state of Eudaimonia. This paper aims to open a new window as it covers different aspects of Sufism, Islam and Elifism. Elifism has become a new philosophy of life, giving a new meaning to this concrete life.

Works Cited

- Eliot, T. S. "The Hollow Man." *T.S. Eliot, Collected Poems: 1909-1962*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1963.
- Hayat, Usman. "Finding Rumi in Turkey." *Dawn. Com*. 10 Feb. 2015. <www.dawn.com/news/1162724>.
- Rumi. *Daylight: A Daybook of Spiritual Guidance by Jelaluddin Rumi (1999-11-01)*. Trans. Camille Helminski and Kabir Helminski. London: Shambhala Publications Inc, 2000.
- . *Love Is My Savior: The Arabic Poems of Rumi (Arabic Literature and Language)*. Eds. Trans. Nesreen Akhtarkhavari and Anthony Lee. Michigan: Michigan State UP, 2016.
- Sahih Al-Bukhari. "7405: Oneness, Uniqueness of Allah (Tawheed) - ال توحيد ك تاب". *Sunnah.Com*. <sunnah.com/bukhari:7405>. Accessed on 16 Sept. 2021.
- Sahih Muslim. "2573: The Book of Virtue, Enjoining Good Manners, and Joining of the Ties of Kinship - ك تاب". *Sunnah.Com*. <sunnah.com/muslim:2573>. Accessed on 17 Sept. 2021.
- Shafak, Elif. *The Forty Rules of Love*. London: Penguin, 2015.
- Star, Jonathan. *Rumi: In the Arms of the Beloved*. New York: Penguin, 1997.
- The Bible*. "Exodus 24:18 (NIV)." <www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Exodus%2024%3A18&version=NIV>. Accessed on 1 Sept. 2021.
- The Quran*. "Al-Baqarah-186, Surah The Cow Verse-186 /." Trans. Arthur John Arberry. <en.noblequran.org/quran/surah-al-baqarah/ayat-186>. Accessed on 17 Sept. 2021.
- . "The Quranic Arabic Corpus: Translation." *Corpus.Quran.Com*, <corpus.quran.com/translation.jsp?chapter=50&verse=16>. Accessed on 17 Sept. 2021.