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SOCIETY AND SPIRITUALITY IN ELIF SHAFAK'S THE FORTY RULES OF LOVE

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Abstract
This article examines the relationship between society and spirituality in Elif Shafak's The Forty Rules of Love. The novel presents two parallel narratives: the modern life of Ella Rubinstein and the thirteenth-century spiritual companionship of Rumi and Shams Tabrizi. Through these narratives, Shafak explores the social, emotional, and spiritual crises of human existence. Ella represents the modern individual who, despite having family, social stability, and material comfort, suffers from inner emptiness, loneliness, and a lack of spiritual fulfilment. In contrast, the relationship between Rumi and Shams reflects a deeper journey from outward knowledge to inward wisdom, from religious formality to spiritual awakening, and from social identity to divine love. The article argues that Shafak does not present spirituality as an escape from society; rather, she presents it as a transformative force that reforms human consciousness, social relations, and moral understanding. The novel challenges religious rigidity, social conventions, emotional isolation, and spiritual emptiness by emphasizing love, tolerance, self-purification, and human unity. In this way, The Forty Rules of Love becomes a significant literary text that connects Sufi spirituality with the social concerns of the modern world.

Keywords:
Elif Shafak, The Forty Rules of Love, Society, Spirituality, Sufism, Rumi, Shams Tabrizi, Divine Love, Spiritual Awakening, Human Unity.

Introduction

Elif Shafak's The Forty Rules of Love is a significant contemporary novel that brings together the themes of society, spirituality, Sufism, love, and inner transformation. The novel, translated into Urdu by Huma Anwar as Chalees Chiragh-e-Ishq, presents a meaningful dialogue between the modern world and the spiritual tradition of the thirteenth century. It does not merely narrate a romantic or mystical story; rather, it explores the deeper crisis of human existence in both social and spiritual terms.

The novel is structured around two parallel narratives. The first narrative revolves around Ella Rubinstein, a modern American woman who appears to have a stable family life, social security, and material comfort, yet suffers from emotional loneliness and spiritual emptiness. Her character represents the modern individual who lives within an organized social structure but remains internally restless and unfulfilled. The second narrative focuses on the spiritual companionship of Maulana Jalaluddin Rumi and Shams Tabrizi in the thirteenth-century Islamic world. Through their relationship, Shafak presents the journey from formal religious knowledge to inner wisdom, from social respectability to spiritual awakening, and from external identity to divine love.

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The central concern of the novel lies in the relationship between society and spirituality. Shafak shows that social structures, religious conventions, family expectations, and cultural identities often shape human life, but they do not always provide inner peace. In this context, spirituality emerges as a transformative force that enables individuals to recognize their inner emptiness, overcome social limitations, and move towards love, tolerance, self-purification, and human unity.

Through the characters of Ella, Rumi, and Shams, the novel suggests that true spiritual awakening is not a rejection of society but a deeper reform of human consciousness and social relations. Shams challenges rigid religious attitudes and conventional social thinking, while Rumi's transformation reflects the power of divine love to reshape both the individual and the community. Similarly, Ella's journey reveals the spiritual crisis of modern society, where material stability and family structure cannot fully satisfy the human soul.

This article examines how The Forty Rules of Love presents spirituality as a response to social alienation, emotional emptiness, religious rigidity, and the crisis of meaning in modern life. It argues that Shafak connects Sufi spirituality with social concerns by presenting love as a bridge between the individual, society, and the Divine.

Problem Statement

Elif Shafak's *The Forty Rules of Love* has often been read as a novel of Sufi love, mystical transformation, and the spiritual relationship between Rumi and Shams Tabrizi. However, the novel is not limited to the theme of mysticism alone. It also presents significant social concerns, particularly modern alienation, family pressure, emotional emptiness, religious rigidity, and the search for meaning in contemporary life. The character of Ella Rubinstein reflects the condition of the modern individual who appears socially stable but remains spiritually dissatisfied.

The problem addressed in this article is that the connection between society and spirituality in *The Forty Rules of Love* requires closer critical attention. The novel shows that spiritual awakening is not an escape from social life; rather, it becomes a means of understanding and transforming social relationships, moral consciousness, and human identity. Therefore, this study investigates how Elif Shafak connects Sufi spirituality with social experience and presents love, self-purification, tolerance, and inner transformation as responses to the crises of modern society.

Research Questions

How does Elif Shafak present the relationship between society and spirituality in The Forty Rules of Love?

How does Ella Rubinstein's character reflect modern social alienation and spiritual emptiness?

In what ways do Rumi and Shams Tabrizi represent spiritual awakening and inner transformation?

How does the novel present love as a force that connects social life with spiritual consciousness?

How does Sufi spirituality challenge religious rigidity and social conventions in the novel?

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative textual analysis method. The primary text for this research is Elif Shafak's *The Forty Rules of Love*, with special focus on its themes of society, spirituality, Sufism, divine love, social alienation, and inner transformation. Selected quotations from the novel are examined to understand how Shafak represents the spiritual journeys of Rumi, Shams Tabrizi, and Ella Rubinstein.

The analysis is interpretive and thematic in nature. It focuses on major themes such as social pressure, emotional emptiness, religious rigidity, spiritual companionship, self-purification, and human unity. The study also uses relevant secondary sources on Rumi, Sufism, and

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spirituality to support the discussion. Through close reading of the text, the article explores how Shafak presents spirituality as a transformative force that connects the individual, society, and the Divine.

Literature Review

Elif Shafak's *The Forty Rules of Love* has been critically studied from different perspectives, including Sufism, intertextuality, postmodernism, psychology, Orientalism, and spiritual transformation. Existing scholarship mainly highlights the novel's engagement with Rumi, Shams Tabrizi, divine love, and the transformative power of spirituality.

Saeed and Fatima (2018) examine the novel through intertextuality and postmodern historiographic metafiction. They argue that Shafak blends history, fiction, and socio-cultural discourses to create a multi-layered text that promotes tolerance, peaceful Islam, and spiritual openness. Similarly, Furlanetto (2013) studies the novel in relation to the "Rumi phenomenon" and argues that Shafak's representation of Rumi reflects both cosmopolitanism and Orientalist tendencies. Her study is useful because it highlights the cultural and social dimensions of Shafak's spiritual narrative.

Shahzad and Altaf (2019) analyze the novel through Derridean deconstruction and identify binaries such as past/present, East/West, materialism/spiritualism, and love/worldly reality. They conclude that the novel privileges spirituality, love, and the East over materialistic and conventional social life. Imran, Nazakat, and Khan (2020), from a psychological perspective, argue that mystical experience in the novel should not be confused with psychological disorder; rather, it reflects emotional development, inner growth, and personality integration.

Gulraiz and Rizwan (2026) read the novel from a Sufi perspective and emphasize divine love as a source of self-realization, spiritual awakening, and peace. Mohamad, Ahmed, and Majeed (2025) study the novel through Sufism and bibliotherapy, arguing that Ella Rubinstein's reading of *Sweet Blasphemy* becomes a source of personal healing and spiritual transformation. Their work is particularly relevant because it connects Ella's domestic dissatisfaction with literature, love, and spiritual recovery.

These studies provide valuable insights into the novel's mystical, psychological, postmodern, and cultural dimensions. However, most of them focus mainly on Sufism, divine love, intertextuality, or Rumi's spiritual appeal. The present article extends this discussion by examining how Shafak connects spirituality with social life, especially through social alienation, family pressure, religious rigidity, emotional emptiness, and the modern crisis of meaning.

Discussion

Elif Shafak's *The Forty Rules of Love* presents society and spirituality as two connected dimensions of human experience. The novel moves between two worlds: the modern social world of Ella Rubinstein and the thirteenth-century spiritual world of Rumi and Shams Tabrizi. Through these parallel narratives, Shafak discusses the human search for love, meaning, inner peace, and spiritual fulfilment. The novel shows that spiritual questions do not belong only to religious history; they also remain important in modern social life.

"When Sheikh Bahauddin reached Nishapur, he met Fariduddin Attar there. It is said that when Sheikh Attar saw Maulana Jalaluddin Rumi, he predicted his glorious future and presented him his book Asrar Nama as a gift. Maulana Rumi held this book very dear."

"The second phase of his life actually begins with his meeting with Shams Tabrizi. It is strange that the event of Shams Tabrizi's meeting with Maulana is the greatest event of Maulana's life. In biographical accounts and histories, it has been narrated in such different and contradictory ways that it is difficult to know the original event."

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These quotations introduce Rumi as a figure whose personality is deeply connected with the Sufi tradition. The reference to Fariduddin Attar and *Asrar Nama* places Rumi within a spiritual lineage. His meeting with Shams Tabrizi then becomes the central event that changes the direction of his life. Shafak uses this background to connect Rumi's public identity as a scholar with his deeper spiritual journey.

"The definition and real essence of Sufism is the purification of the self and the illumination of the inner being, so that a person becomes pure, spiritually refined, morally elevated, and the heart becomes the cradle of divine love."

"Bastami's vessel was comparatively small, and his thirst was quenched after a single sip. He was content with the stage at which he stood. It was a magnificent thing that he recognized God within himself, yet some distinction between God and the self still remained. Union was not achieved. As for the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, he was the chosen one, and his cup was far greater. For this reason, God asks him in the Holy Qur'an: 'Have We not expanded your breast for you?' Thus, his heart was opened, his cup was limitless, and for him there was thirst after thirst."

These quotations present Sufism as an inward process rather than a merely external religious practice. The focus is on purification, moral elevation, and divine love. The metaphor of the vessel further explains that spiritual experience differs according to the capacity of the individual. In the novel, this idea helps to frame spirituality as a matter of inner depth, not outward status.

"We have been in seclusion here for forty days. Each day we discussed one of the forty rules of the religion of love. Now that we have completed them, I think we should go outside. Your absence may be troubling your family."

"Neither Christian nor Jew nor Muslim, neither Hindu, Buddhist, Sufi, nor Zen. No religion or cultural system. I am neither from the East nor from the West. My place is placeless, a sign that is signless."

These quotations show that spiritual retreat is an important part of the novel, but it is not presented as permanent withdrawal from society. The forty-day seclusion of Rumi and Shams is connected with learning and spiritual discipline. At the same time, the return to the outside world shows that spiritual growth has social relevance. The second quotation broadens this idea by presenting a vision of human unity beyond religious and cultural labels.

"Go to Baghdad," my guardian angel said in a melodious, humming voice. "What awaits me in Baghdad?" I asked.

"You prayed for a companion, and a companion shall be granted to you."

"Then why do I feel this emptiness, this void within me, which grows deeper and wider with every passing day? It gnaws at my soul like an illness and follows me wherever I go."

These quotations bring together two important concerns of the novel: companionship and emptiness. Shams' journey toward a spiritual companion shows the importance of meaningful connection in the spiritual path. The second quotation presents the feeling of inner emptiness that remains with the individual despite external circumstances. Shafak places this emptiness at the centre of the human search for meaning.

"Are you leaving your husband for a man who has no future?" her friends and neighbours repeatedly asked her. "And what about your children? Do you think they will ever be able to forgive you?"

"Then Ella wondered what Shams Tabrizi would see if he read the lines of her palm. Would he be able to tell why her mind, from time to time, became a haunted place of dark thoughts? Or why, despite having such a full and loving family, she felt so lonely?"

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These quotations present Ella Rubinstein as a modern woman surrounded by family, social expectations, and emotional conflict. The first quotation shows the pressure placed on her by friends, neighbours, and conventional social values. The second quotation reveals her loneliness despite having a full family life. Through Ella, Shafak discusses the gap between social completeness and inner satisfaction.

The selected quotations show that *The Forty Rules of Love* discusses spirituality through both historical and modern contexts. Rumi and Shams represent the world of Sufi learning, divine love, and inner transformation. Ella represents the modern social world, where family, respectability, and routine life do not always produce spiritual peace. By bringing these narratives together, Shafak presents society and spirituality as connected realities.

The novel suggests that human beings need more than external stability. Social life gives identity, family, and structure, but spirituality gives meaning, depth, and inner direction. In this way, *The Forty Rules of Love* becomes a discussion of how love, companionship, self-purification, and spiritual awareness respond to the emotional and social emptiness of human life.

Analysis

The discussion of the selected quotations shows that Elif Shafak's *The Forty Rules of Love* presents spirituality not as an isolated mystical experience but as a force that interacts deeply with social life. The novel connects two different worlds: the medieval Sufi world of Rumi and Shams Tabrizi and the modern social world of Ella Rubinstein. These two narratives may belong to different historical periods, but both reveal the same human need for love, meaning, and spiritual fulfilment.

The first major point that emerges from the text is that Rumi's transformation cannot be understood only as a personal spiritual event. Before meeting Shams, Rumi already possesses knowledge, honour, and religious authority. He is socially respected and intellectually established. However, the arrival of Shams reveals the limitation of external knowledge and social reputation. Shafak suggests that a person may be admired by society but still remain incomplete without inner awakening. Therefore, Rumi's transformation becomes a movement from social identity to spiritual truth.

The novel also presents Sufism as a process of inner purification. It is not reduced to rituals, labels, or outward religious practice. Rather, it is connected with cleansing the self, refining the heart, and developing divine love. This is important because Shafak contrasts the outer structures of society with the inner demands of spirituality. Society often values position, reputation, family role, and public respect, but spirituality requires humility, self-examination, and moral growth. In this way, the novel presents Sufism as a corrective force against superficial social and religious attitudes.

The forty-day seclusion of Rumi and Shams is also significant. At first, it appears to be a withdrawal from society, but the text shows that this withdrawal is temporary and purposeful. Its purpose is not to reject society permanently but to prepare the self for a more meaningful return to life. This means that spirituality in the novel is not escapist. It does not separate the individual from human relations; rather, it reforms the individual so that he may return to society with love, tolerance, and deeper understanding. Shafak therefore connects spiritual retreat with social responsibility.

Another important aspect of the novel is its emphasis on human unity. Rumi's movement beyond religious, cultural, and geographical identities shows that true spirituality rises above narrow divisions. This does not mean that religion is denied; rather, the inner essence of religion is emphasized. Shafak presents religion as love, compassion, and openness rather than as

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exclusion, rigidity, or superiority. In this sense, the novel criticizes social divisions created in the name of religion and promotes a broader spiritual vision based on human equality.

Ella Rubinstein's character gives the novel its modern social relevance. She represents a person who appears socially complete but remains inwardly dissatisfied. She has a family, home, and stable life, but she suffers from loneliness and emotional emptiness. Through Ella, Shafak presents the crisis of modern society, where external success does not always produce inner peace. Ella's life shows that social structures may provide security, but they cannot necessarily answer the deeper questions of the soul.

The pressure placed on Ella by society is also meaningful. Her friends and neighbours judge her choices through conventional ideas of marriage, family, future security, and social responsibility. Their response shows how society often resists individual spiritual awakening when it disturbs accepted norms. Ella's crisis is therefore not only personal; it is social. Her journey reveals the tension between inner truth and external expectations. Shafak uses this tension to show that spiritual transformation often requires courage and resistance against social judgment.

Love functions as the central bridge between society and spirituality in the novel. For Rumi and Shams, love becomes a path to divine truth. For Ella, love becomes a means of self-discovery and inner awakening. Shafak does not present love merely as romantic emotion; she presents it as a spiritual and ethical principle. Love challenges ego, fear, social pressure, and religious narrowness. It enables the individual to move beyond the self and discover a deeper connection with others and with the Divine.

The novel's treatment of inner emptiness is also central to its analysis of modern life. The feeling of emptiness appears both in the spiritual world of Rumi and in the modern world of Ella. This shows that spiritual hunger is not limited to one time, place, or culture. Human beings may live in different societies, but they share the same need for meaning and inner fulfilment. Shafak uses this shared emptiness to connect past and present, East and West, mysticism and modernity.

Overall, *The Forty Rules of Love* presents society and spirituality as interdependent realities. Society gives human beings identity and structure, but spirituality gives life meaning and depth. Without spirituality, society becomes mechanical, judgmental, and emotionally empty. Without social relevance, spirituality becomes incomplete. Shafak brings these two dimensions together to argue that true transformation must begin within the human self but should also influence human relationships and social attitudes.

Thus, the novel may be read both as a Sufi narrative and as a social commentary. It shows that the crises of modern society—alienation, emotional emptiness, religious rigidity, and loss of meaning—cannot be solved only through external systems. They require inner reform, love, self-purification, and spiritual consciousness. Through Rumi, Shams, and Ella, Shafak presents spirituality as a healing power that transforms the individual and makes society more humane, tolerant, and compassionate.

Conclusion

Elif Shafak's The Forty Rules of Love presents a meaningful relationship between society and spirituality. The novel shows that human life cannot be understood only through social roles, family structures, religious identities, or material comfort. True fulfilment requires inner peace, love, self-awareness, and spiritual awakening. Through the parallel narratives of Ella Rubinstein and the spiritual companionship of Rumi and Shams Tabrizi, Shafak connects the problems of modern society with the healing power of Sufi spirituality.

Ella Rubinstein represents the modern individual who lives within a stable social structure but suffers from emotional loneliness and spiritual emptiness. Her character reveals that family,

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social respectability, and material security do not always provide inner satisfaction. On the other hand, Rumi's transformation through Shams Tabrizi shows that formal knowledge and social honour remain incomplete without divine love, self-purification, and inner wisdom.

The novel also criticizes religious rigidity and social conventions that limit human freedom and spiritual growth. Shams Tabrizi's teachings emphasize love, tolerance, humility, and human unity. In this way, spirituality is presented not as an escape from society but as a force that reforms both the individual and the social world. Shafak suggests that a spiritually awakened person becomes more compassionate, tolerant, and morally refined.

Thus, The Forty Rules of Love is not merely a mystical or romantic novel. It is a social and spiritual narrative that addresses the crisis of meaning in modern life. The novel's central message is that society can become more humane only when individuals transform themselves inwardly. Love, self-purification, tolerance, and spiritual consciousness are presented as essential sources of personal fulfilment and social harmony.

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