

Polyphonic Mysticism: Bakhtinian Dialogism and The Spiritual Voice in Elif Shafak's *The Forty Rules of Love*

Amina Arshad

MPhil Scholar, Kinnaird College for Women, University, Lahore, Pakistan

Corresponding author: Amina Arshad (Email: arshadamina111@gmail.com)

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines Elif Shafak's *The Forty Rules of Love* through a Bakhtinian framework to highlight the novel's polyphonic construction of mysticism. While the existing literature largely focuses on the Sufi sentiment and intertextual layering of the text, it often overlooks the dialogic structure which shapes the spiritual meaning. By employing Bakhtin's concepts of heteroglossia, chronotope and dialogism, this study aims to explore how Shafak subverts the notion of a single, overwhelming mystical truth by emphasizing plurality, narrative tension and temporal shift. The objective of this research is to interrogate the novel's intertwined structure, connecting historical space with contemporary world, to disclose the profound coexistence of competing ethical, emotional and cultural voices that overall shape the spiritual understanding of the text. By situating mysticism as emergent, relational and inherently contested, the study demonstrates how narrative form itself enacts spiritual inquiry, thus inviting readers to actively participate in meaning-making process. This analysis extends the literary and Sufi studies by presenting the novel's role in conceptualizing mysticism as dialogic and polyphonic.

Keywords: Mysticism, Dialogism, Chronotope, Heteroglossia, Polyphony

1. Introduction

Elif Shafak's *The Forty Rules of Love* was published in 2009 and within a short time span, it received profound appreciation from prestigious scholars for its modern reinterpretation of Sufi mysticism. *The Forty Rules of Love* bridges Ella Rubinstein's pursuit for emotional credibility in the modern world with the spiritual quest of Sufi poet and lover-mystic Rumi in the thirteenth-century Anatolia. As Ella gradually absorbed into Aziz Zahara's manuscript *Sweet Blasphemy*, his biographical account of Rumi's life became a stimulus for Ella's own emotional and spiritual change. Hence, the novel is acclaimed for its heartfelt portrayal of Sufi mysticism blending with modern existential awakening. However, the text is not a monologic assertion of Sufi spirituality instead, it constructs a dialogically rich space where diverse competing voices shape the spiritual and emotional meaning.

Therefore, this study aims to explore the polyphonic construction of mysticism in *The Forty Rules of Love*, where truth is achieved through active contestation rather than passive submission. By relocating the narrative within Bakhtin's dialogic framework, this research aims to examine how Shafak presents plurality, contradictions and temporal complexity as essential components of spiritual and emotional revelation. The objectives of this research include examining the chronotopic interplay between 13th-century Anatolia and 21st-century America that challenges the conventional assumptions about the linear and authoritative spiritual narrative, as well as exploring the convergence of competing voices within the text, which collectively participate in forming the Sufi and modern spirituality.

The existing critical material focuses on the Eastern Sufi themes, intertextuality and symbolic dimensions of the text, yet there remains a notable research gap regarding the novel's dialogic architecture. Almost no serious research has been done by scholars to investigate the structural significance of the text in shaping its spiritual discourse, which this study explores by employing Bakhtin's concepts of "Heteroglossia", "Chronotope" and "Dialogism". The problem/gap this paper addresses arises from the lack of analysis on the narrative tension and temporal layering which,



instead of dissolving the text into one unified spiritual stance, yield a kaleidoscopic framework of mystical spirituality, making it relevant to both medieval Anatolia and contemporary America.

This study follows a qualitative and textual-discursive approach grounded in critical evaluation of the primary text and Bakhtin's theory of dialogism to examine the temporal shifts and multi-voiced structure that characterize the novel's depiction of radical mysticism. Secondary sources include online available articles and critical essays on Bakhtin's work and primary texts that are relevant to the search. The findings of this research make interdisciplinary conversations possible between literary studies, comparative religion and cultural philosophy. It encourages future researchers to discover how dialogic negotiation in contemporary works not only undermines the fixed interpretation of orthodox religious authorities but also offers space for interfaith, multicultural and trans-historical narratives to exchange ideas on spirituality.

1.1 Research Questions

1. How does the novel's oscillation between medieval Anatolia and contemporary America destabilize linear spiritual narratives by revealing that meaning shifts when transported across disparate temporal and cultural horizons?
2. How does the convergence of conflicting voices, ranging from mystically inclined figures to rational skeptics intensify the contest over spiritual interpretation and expose the negotiated nature of truth within the narrative?
3. How do the interpersonal exchanges among Rumi, Shams, Ella and Aziz transform spiritual meaning into a collaborative, continuously reworked construct shaped through tension, resonance and mutual disruption?

2. Literature Review

Much of the research on the text *The Forty Rules of Love* has underpinned Shafak's rejuvenation of Sufi literature for a global readership yet it tends to concentrate on thematic or artistic foundations while neglecting the structural and dialogic process through which spiritual meaning is generated. A review of existing critical material provides valuable insight but also a research gap that this study addresses through a Bakhtinian, polyphonic lens.

Major critical publication on the text foregrounds the novel's reinterpretation of Sufism within contemporary cultural politics which outline Shafak's excellency in romanticizing Sufi ideals while reconfiguring them for modern Western sensibilities. For instance, in the article **"Reimagining Sufism: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Love and Spiritual Authority in Elif Shafak's *The Forty Rules of Love*"** the author argues that the novel represents Sufism as all-encompassing, therapeutic and universally approachable means of spirituality which value love, tolerance and emotional healing.

Likewise, in the article **"Representing Eastern Spirituality in Elif Shafak's *Forty Rules of Love*: A Critical Discourse Analysis,"** the researcher observe the cross-cultural depiction of Sufism that bridges the East and West by simplifying the Sufi ideas such as divine love, self-sacrifice, human compassion, forgiveness for modern global audience. This body of research centers on ideological and philosophical critique while overlooking the narrative and structural plurality that shapes the spiritual message

Another body of research exists which rely on the aesthetic, metafictional and intertextual analysis of the text such as the articles **"Aesthetic and Intertextual Analysis of *The Forty Rules of Love*"** and **"Texts within Text: An Intertextual Study of Elif Shafak's *The Forty Rules of Love*"** explore how the novel's layered narratives, entrenched manuscripts and references to Rumi's poetic tradition act as intertextual bridges across temporal and cultural shifts. Scholars within this trend largely study intertextuality and stylistic form as a narrative tool which deepens the thematic concerns while ignore the inherent tensions, contradictions and multiplicity which develops a dialogic spirituality rather than doctrinal spirituality.

Furthermore, some critics have also highlighted postmodern features beyond intertextuality and metafiction that constitute in translating spirituality through magical realism lens such as in the article **"A Critical Analysis of Magical Realism in 'Forty Rules of Love' in the Light of Postmodernist Theory"** the critic examines how Shafak

through magical realist technique has created a liminal space where historical fiction conjunct with contemporary realities to deliver spiritual message. Still, these critical views seek a harmonious spiritual unity through extraordinary encounters rather than investigating how the shifting voices intricate this coherence.

Across these various strands, the focus of the existing critical material is on why spirituality is depicted through “intertextuality”, “aestheticism”, “magical realism” or “oversimplification” rather than how it is constructed through dialogic, multi-voiced and dual spatial-temporal narrative. It constitutes a significant gap which this research addresses by exploring the competing voices which continuously unsettles the narrative flow and prevents it from merging into monolithic assertion. This approach enhances the understanding of the text, shifting the attention from thematic concerns to the structural fundamentality that generates the meaning.

3. Methodology

This study employs qualitative methodology grounded in a deep analysis of the primary text, Elif Shafak’s *The Forty Rules of Love* through the theoretical framework of Mikhail Bakhtin proposed in his work *The Dialogic Imagination*. Shafak’s novel is scrutinised through the lens of polyphonic and dialogic expression of spiritual and emotional truth by utilising the key terms of Bakhtin’s theory such as heteroglossia, polyphony, dialogism and chronotope, thus provides a peculiar insight into the novel’s structural plurality and narrative tension.

Apart from the primary texts, this research also draws on an ample body of secondary sources, including articles, critical essays and scholarly papers from recognised academic platforms such as ResearchGate, Academia, Google Scholar and reference websites like Britannica. These sources provide a critical understanding of the primary texts, authors’ background and the contemporary take on Sufism such as the cross-cultural Sufi literature, Shafak’s narrative techniques, Bakhtinian theoretical study and modern depiction of mysticism in fiction. Secondary sources are not only used to collect existing data on Shafak’s novel within a broader literary and cultural framework, but also to highlight a significant scholarly gap in terms of evaluating the dialogic structure of the text that frames its spiritual essence, which this research study explores.

4. Discussion and Analysis

Elif Shafak’s *The Forty Rules of Love* is a profoundly polyphonic text in which mysticism is neither established as a claustrophobic orthodox doctrine nor posited by singular spiritual authority instead, it is achieved through dialogic mobility across time, space and characters. The theoretical framework of Mikhail Bakhtin consisting heteroglossia, chronotope and dialogism offers a polyphonic lens through which the novel’s spiritual landscape can be viewed as relational and contested rather than fixed or undisruptive. The novel’s non-linear movement between past (Anatolia) and present (America) destabilizes the idea of steady spiritual progression and demonstrate the inherent diversity of mystical Sufism.

The narrative’s oscillation between 13th century Anatolia and 21st century America offers a chronotopic interplay which illustrates that spiritual meaning unfolds vividly in each temporal and spatial setting. Medieval Anatolia is described as a period of intense theological contradictions where radical Sufi ideals emerge in sharp contrast to orthodox religious beliefs such as Shams presence in Kenya offended the group of strict religious scholars who believed that the principles Shams manifest are exactly opposite to the religious practices thus claimed that “Shams is the devil incarnate” (Shafak 164). On the other hand, contemporary America is marked by spiritual disillusionment, emotional emptiness and dissatisfaction with life and relations in modern world which Shafak depicted through the life of Ella Rubinstein, a forty years old woman who “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” (Shafak 11). Both Rumi and Ella underwent a dynamic transformation through their respective encounter with Shams and Aziz, but each story reveals a different interpretation of Sufi mysticism. In case of Rumi, it is communion with Divine, annihilation of ego (*Nafs*) and kindness towards all God’s creation, symbolic of spiritual enlightenment. However, for Ella it is an emotional stability, acceptance and freedom, emblem of self-discovery and self-awareness.

In Anatolia, after encountering Shams of Tabriz, Rumi experiences a fundamental spiritual rebirth, marked by his transition from a well-reputed and highly knowledgeable scholar to a frenzy lover-mystic. Shams challenges the strictness of his bookish knowledge and propels Rumi to confront the limitations of purely scholastic interpretation of Divine and adopts a radical and affective approach to connect with the transcendental “Self” as Shams asserts that

“Faith is only a word if there is no love at its center” (Shafak 120). Apart from Shams, Rumi’s transformation is also shaped through his interaction with other local deviant voices in society like beggar, prostitute, alcoholic. For instance, his encounter with Suleiman the drunk in the tavern makes Rumi realise that the true scale of purity and innocence does not depend on the external appearance but internal sobriety and kindness. Similarly, the arrival of the prostitute Desert Rose in his house altered Rumi’s perspective about social image vs private virtue as he states that “I have always lived a protected life. I don’t even know how ordinary people live” (Shafak 138). His journey mirrors Shafak’s broader argument that true spirituality emerges through moments of rupture where established identities distort by dialogic interferences, thus creating space for an inclusive self that transcends doctrinal, social and mental constraints.

However, when Shams’ spiritual notions were discovered by Ella through Aziz’s manuscript, they did not retain the same spiritual implications rather they were reframed through modern secular sensibilities. Ella’s journey does not replicate Rumi’s transformation instead it is reshaped by the emotional, cultural and existential conditions of her time. Like in the novel, before Ella started reading the *Sweet Blasphemy* her life mainly revolved around her marital and maternal responsibilities without leaving any space for her to seek personal comfort and happiness “Ella realized that despite her high-flying words denying it, and despite her ability to keep a stiff upper lip, deep inside she longed for love” (Shafak 31). However, when she familiarized herself with Sham’s teaching about spiritual and emotional freedom via Aziz’s manuscript and emails, she realized that her internal emptiness and isolation is the result of her suppression of emotions, passions and desires as Shafak mentioned “As she walked out, she murmured one of Shams’ rules. “It is never too late to ask yourself, ‘Am I ready to change the life I am living? Am I ready to change within?’” (217). This suggests that the Sufi ideals trigger a profound awakening within Ella, not in terms of metaphorical union with Divine instead it evokes an emotional and psychological enlightenment in the form of self-realization, self-affirmation and emotional freedom. Through this temporal and spatial shift, Shafak proposes that spiritual truths are not static rather they are consistently reinterpreted, thus remain applicable across various cultures and time periods.

Besides the spatial-temporal interplay, Shafak’s narrative also encapsulates different socio-cultural voices like the mystics, scholars, sceptics, rationalist and outcasts, each representing distinct perspective that destabilizes the notion of singular, unified truth. The conjunction of these conflicting voices represents Bakhtin’s heteroglossia, where meaning is “born between people collectively searching for truth in the process of their dialogic interaction” (12). The mystically inclined figures in the novel like Shams and Rumi articulate a radical and heterodox understanding of spirituality which is opposed by the characters like the Zealot, Baybars the Warrior, the Innkeeper who manifest the rigid religious forces that undermine the principles professed by Sufi Saints. Meanwhile, other characters like the prostitute Desert Rose, Hassan the Beggar, Suleiman the Drunk embodies the voices of outcasts who face social, political and cultural marginalization because of their identity and background. Yet, their perspectives and voices play a significant role in democratizing the idea of spirituality and mystic truth such as Desert Rose’s intense longing for divine love illustrates the porous and permeable nature of Sufi spirituality that is not confined to scholars or saints such as Shams states that “It will remind you that your heart is pure and that you bear God within you” (Shafak 91). Similarly, Suleiman the drunk is depicted as an ordinary alcoholic who ponders over the question of true nobility and virtue particularly when he encounters Baybars who beats him for drinking in the month of Ramadan even though he himself visits brothel frequently yet maintain a clean and pious image. His assertion that “If God’s paradise is reserved for people of your kind, I’d rather burn in hell anyhow” (Shafak 92). is a critique on the religious hypocrisy and moral blindness that favors outward appearances over inner character. Suleiman’s notions of inner purity resonate with Sufi ideals of self-reflection and introspection thus illustrating how a common man can understand and embody Sufi spirituality.

Moreover, the American characters like David and Ella represent modern disillusionment and overt pragmatism. Being part of a successful middle-class society, they measure life through rational and practical concerns, frequently overlooking the emotional values and spiritual depth for instance the moment Jeannette informed her parents about her decision of getting married to her boyfriend, Ella reacted unsympathetically “Love is only a sweet feeling bound to come and quickly go away” (Shafak 14). Her process of transformation and self-realization also highlights the tension between her rational skepticism and emotional desire to unveil inner passions “I constantly vacillate between two opposites: aggressive and passive” (Shafak 97). Moreover, David is also a rationally driven modern man who embodies male chauvinism and modern cynicism. His flawed marriage with Ella influences the emotional and psychological course of her journey as she moves from emotionally drained relationship with David to a caring connection with Aziz. Through these heteroglossic voices, Shafak demonstrates that every character

participates in democratizing and diversifying the essence of mystic spirituality instead of merging and simplifying it. Bakhtin, too reflected in his essay that “There is no such thing as a “general language,” a language that is spoken by a general voice, that may be divorced from a specific saying, which is charged with particular overtones” (290).

Nevertheless, Shafak portrays the interpersonal exchanges among Rumi, Shams, Aziz and Ella as the core engine of dialogic spirituality. Rumi’s transition into a mystic poet is not illustrated as an isolated and benign conversion but as a series of discomfiting experiences triggered by Shams. Through confrontation and trials, Shams disrupts, breaks and finally rebuilds Rumi’s spiritual consciousness such as in the novel, he openly questions Rumi that “As a famous preacher, you have been surrounded by fawning admirers. But how well do you know common people?” (Shafak 138). Their interactions signify that mystical insight is co-produced, emphasizing each and every voice in developing spiritual meaning.

Similarly, Ella’s engagement with Aziz and through him with Shams and Rumi, produce a dialogic cycle where spirituality is constantly challenged and revised. Their communion evokes spiritual awakening not as replica but as reinterpretation shaped by modern perplexity, familial tension and emotional turbulence. Through these uninformed yet startling procession of dialogic exchanges, the novel present spirituality and mysticism as inherently collaborative. No single character represents the final verdict instead, each voice refracts and reshapes the spiritual and emotional insights of the others as Shams also emphasized “Everything and everyone is interconnected through an invisible web of stories. Whether we are aware of it or not, we are all in a silent conversation” (Shafak 134).

5. Conclusion

Elif Shafak’s novel *The Forty Rules of Love* is an amalgamation of Sufi philosophy and modern sensibilities where truth and meaning are not constituted as an absolute and unchanged conviction instead it is created, challenged and revised through discursive dialogue. Through chronotopic shifts, polyphonic conflicts and dialogic interrogation Shafak discard the general framework about easeful spiritual awakening and constructs mysticism as an inherently contested phenomenon. The novel enacts spiritual inquiry through its very structure therefore invites readers to perform a participatory interpretive role rather than passively ingesting doctrinal certainty. Shafak’s contribution therefore lies in reimagining spirituality as a dynamic and dialogic product, the one that shaped through multiplicity, tension and continuous reinterpretation across time and culture.

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