



## Dual Narratives: A Push and Pull Literary Tool :

### A Study of Elif Shafak's *The Forty Rules of Love*

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#### Abstract

Due to various reasons including scarcity, dual narratives are given little critical attention within the realm of literature compared to other orthodox genres. Juxtaposing different narratives whose plots have no apparent intersecting points may render readers puzzled and eventually uninterested. However, when written effectively, double narrative works are suggested to offer a more rational account of the world's multiplicity. In light of these conflicting views, this paper endeavours to explore this mode of narration and the murkiness that surrounds it by casting light on Elif Shafak's *The Forty Rules of Love* (2010). Often labelled as a novel about mysticism, Shafak's novel complexly fuses a narrative inside another: one set in 13<sup>th</sup> century Turkey, whereas the second in modern day America. To fulfil the aforementioned endeavour, narrative levels and narration techniques ought to be analysed through the lenses of narratology. Moreover, this paper also seeks to examine to what extent Shafak's circular form, diversity of narrators and constant shift between the two worlds affected her quest of advocating love and Sufism among other thematic concerns.

**Keywords:** Elif Shafak; dual narrative; mysticism; narrative levels; narratology.

#### ملخص

نظرا لأسباب عدة من بينها الندرة، لا تحظى الروايات ذات السرد المزدوج بحيز كبير من الاهتمام في مجال النقد الأدبي مقارنة بالأنماط الأرثوذكسية الأخرى. إذ أن وضع نصوص سردية لا تحتوي حكاياتها على نقاط تقاطع ظاهرة من شأنه جعل مهمة الاستيعاب أصعب لدى القراء. ومع ذلك، يمكن لهذه الأعمال إضفاء وصف أكثر عقلانية للعالم و تعدد أبعاده إذا ما تمت كتابتها بعناية. في ظل هذه الآراء المتضاربة، يسعى هذا المقال إلى استكشاف هذا النمط من السرد من خلال تسليط الضوء على رواية قواعد العشق الأربعون لألف شفق (2010) التي غالبا ما يقترن ذكرها بموضوع التصوف. حيث يدمج هذا العمل بشكل معقد روايتين داخل رواية واحدة: الأولى تدور أحداثها في تركي

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## Introduction

Originally published in 2009, *The Forty Rules of Love* is Elif Shafak's eighth novel and the fifth penned in English. Despite being described on its cover as 'A Novel for Rumi', the book comprises a dual narrative that has the form of a story within a story. The first which is the main narrative is set in 21<sup>st</sup> century America; whereas the second subnarrative which is in itself a novel read by the first narrative protagonist is mainly set in 13<sup>th</sup> century Anatolia, and offers a fictionalised biography of the prominent poet *Maulana Jalal-Ud-Din*, known as Rumi. As a consequence, the multiplicity of temporal and spatial settings grants Shafak a fitting ground for the advocacy of her thematic concerns. In addition, the constant temporospatial shifting throughout the novel renders it inevitable for the author to bounce between different narrators and narrative levels.

In terms of structure, the novel is divided into five parts in which the two different narratives continually intersect. Within these parts, Shafak gives voice to a total of seventeen distinct narrators. In the main narrative, the story of the American housewife *Ella Rubinstein* is told through third person level. However, in the subplot novel 'Sweet Blasphemy' multiple voices and perspectives are found as each character narrates his part of the story through first person narration. This complex fluctuation of diegetic levels makes it worthwhile to analyse the relation between both the main and sub narrative as entities as well as the relation between the narrators themselves through the lenses of narratology.

### 1. Narrative Levels in Context

According to Jose Angel Garcia Landa, "an intradiegetic story can contain another story which is intradiegetic with respect to it" (2016, 17). Therefore, since *Sweet Blasphemy* is embedded within the main narrative, it can be said that the former is *intradiegetic* with regard to the latter. The fact that the protagonist *Ella* herself is the reader of the sub-narrative leaves us with two main narrative levels in the novel: an *extradiegetic* and an *intradiegetic* one. What makes our division more evident is the fact that looking into and commenting on characters' minds is possible only in the extradiegetic level (Fludernik 2009, 49). This ability is granted to the omniscient-like narrator in *Ella's* narrative as observations on *Sweet Blasphemy's* characters are constantly provided. However, such characteristic is absent from the sub narrative for its narrators are limited in knowledge due to their inability to transcend their narrowed point of view. This is a natural deficiency in first-person narrators excluding prophetic and supernaturally gifted narrators, although a figure of this sort is partially represented in the character of *Shams of Tabriz* which will be discussed in an upcoming section. Nonetheless, Shafak's double narrative structure -in broad terms- unfolds in two levels of narration.

From the above, it can be concluded that *The Forty Rules of Love* incorporates a vertical relation between the narrating levels since ascending and descending from the intradiegetic to the extradiegetic level presents a recurring phenomenon throughout the novel's five parts. While this deduction seems satisfactory at face value, the multitude of

narrators spoken of previously hints at a relation deeper than this. As reported by Didier Coste and John Pier, “narrative levels also include horizontal relations between narrating instances situated at the same diegetic level, as when a story is told by several narrators” (2010, 1). This exact notion is embodied in the sub narrative *Sweet Blasphemy* for two reasons: Firstly, it has already been stated that the second narrative belongs to the intradiegetic level. Secondly, all characters from that narrative are of homodiegetic nature ‘first-person narrators’. Hence, the elimination of the possibility of a change of diegetic level highlights the horizontal relation between the narrating instances even further. By selecting characters from an identical level, Shafak attempts to provide an equal multi-faceted insight into her themes of concern from several perspectives. Yet, that consistency is not respected outside ‘*Sweet Blasphemy*’ because the narrator of the main narrative is heterodiegetic ‘absent from the narrated world’.

In that respect, Fudernik argues that:

First-person narrators are both inherently limited in their perspective and potentially untrustworthy: they have an agenda when telling their stories, which could come into conflict with true representation of what happened. For example, such narrator will seek to justify his/her own behaviour or attitude. In contrast, the heterodiegetic narrator (third person narrator) is trustworthy almost by definition. (2009, 153).

As Shafak created sixteen of her narrators as homodiegetic and left a sole one to be heterodiegetic, it could be argued that the author maintained distance and made scepticism the dominant mood surrounding sensitive issues. In contrast, the singular third person narrator offers a sense of liberty in commenting on thematic matters, mainly *the Rumi phenomenon* as “heterodiegetic narration can adopt, with or without irony, the idioms, worldviews, and assumptions of characters” (Dwivedi et al, 2018, 20).

## 2. The Neglected Domestication of Shams of Tabriz

In her article about *the Rumi phenomenon*, El-Zein discusses the project of creating an undoubtedly different Rumi designated for the American market (2000, 81), and *The Forty Rules of Love*, in this respect, represents no exception whatsoever. Shafak participates in what Elena Furlanetto calls “[the] domestication of the figure of Rumi for an American audience” (2013, 201). If we were to summarise that process of domestication in one quote, this passage narrated by Rumi in the novel is the most fitting:

*“Not Christian or Jew or Muslim, not Hindu, Buddhist, Sufi or Zen. Not any religion or cultural system. I am not of the East, nor of the West....*

*My place is placeless, a trace of the traceless.”*(in Italics in the original, Shafak 2010).

However, our aim here is not to shed light on the domestication of Rumi as this have already been written about feverishly. Instead, the focus will be on the domestication of another historical figure in the novel: Shams of Tabriz, which we believe has undergone more appropriation than Rumi himself for several reasons. For instance, Shams of Tabriz has been given more ‘screen time’ than Rumi. Out of the novel’s ninety sections, Shams is the narrator of 14 sections compared to only 7 narrated by Rumi. Furthermore, every single character, ranging from the first in appearance to the last, has come in direct contact with Shams one

way or another; an element absent from Rumi's figure to some extent whose circle of influence is smaller in comparison. Moreover, the reader accompanies Shams in his journey across various temporal and spatial settings such as Damascus, Samarkand, Konya and Baghdad; whereas Rumi remains based in Anatolia the entire time.

Apart from the voluminous presence in the narrative, Shams is the main advocate of Sufism. In fact, he is responsible of transforming the scholar and prominent preacher Rumi into a Sufi poet. Shafak's domestication efforts are best seen through Shams' detachment from fundamental religion. Even though Shams is a Muslim supposedly, he often regards himself as spiritual rather than religious. At times, he dissociates his path from mainstream religions altogether "Christians, Jews, and Muslims are like those travellers. While they quarrel about the outer form, the Sufi is after the essence" (Shafak, 2010, ch86). Not only that, but Shams is constantly seen in direct conflict and heated confrontations with Islamic scholars and their traditional interpretation of Islam. Thus, with the American enlarging hunger for spirituality, Shams' views are undoubtedly entrancing. In addition to that, Shafak establishes Sufism through Shams' deeds as the symbol of tolerance, cosmopolitanism and righteousness. In order to achieve that, she grants the character of Shams some supernatural prophetic traits; a point we referred to in a previous section. For example, Shams appears as a Christ figure when he performs miracles such as pulling dry books out of water and sensing people's presence behind closed doors. Also, he often recites stories from the three Abrahamic religions which turns him into a cosmopolitan figure with worldly appeal. Lastly, Shams stresses upon the possibility of peaceful coexistence between Christians and Muslims as long as dogmatism is transcended. Though, these arguments sound more like a discourse of a 21<sup>st</sup> century character rather than a mystic from the 13<sup>th</sup> century.

Through all these domestication devices and cosmopolitan nature, Shafak renders it easier for readers to identify with Shams' Sufi ideology. Yet, it is in this area that her double narrative comes into play again. As the main narrative unfolds, she gives voice to a Shams-like character called Aziz Zahara. Aziz is the author of the sub narrative novel "*Sweet Blasphemy*"; a modern day Dutch man whose life had nothing to do with Sufism before experiencing some major traumatic events. Parallel to the influence Shams has on Rumi, Aziz completely turns Ella's life in an unexpected way; the common factor between both influences however is nothing else but unconditional love and Sufism. Shafak crafts the character of Aziz after the image of Shams, drawing many similarities between the two. These affinities are voiced by Ella in one of the embedded letters, "there is something I've been meaning to ask you: Are you Shams? Or is the other way around? Is Shams you?" (Shafak, 2010, ch32). From Fludernik's standpoint, "a frame and its inset can be called a mise-en-abyme structure if the framed element shows points of similarity to the frame" (2009, 156). Coste and Pier with regard to the same argument state that "the defining characteristic of mise en abyme is the relation of repetition and reflection the second-level narrative entertains with the quantitatively greater narrative within which it is contained" (2010, 5). Hence, it can be said that Shafak resorted through her dual narrative to mise-en-abyme in order to create a character from modern life identical to another that lived eight centuries ago. Subsequently, this intriguing technique sets *The Forty Rules of Love* apart from other novels that attempt to

fictionalise Rumi's life in its way of promoting Sufism ideas as timeless, spaceless and possible for embracing in contemporary world.

### **Conclusion**

On the whole, Elif Shafak's *The Forty Rules of Love* offers a worthy material for narratological analysis. Its multiplicity of narrative and narrators and recurring level-shifting both enriches its stylistic content and strengthens the echoing of its thematic concerns. On another account, Shafak's choice of dual narrative proved beneficial as her work received international praise for its theme-universality; a feat that would not have been achieved had it contained a sole 13<sup>th</sup> century plot. All the same, this very endeavour could be criticised for causing a partial distortion of Rumi and Shams' figures. However, "the land of storytelling is a land of compelling truths told in the form of little lies" as the author has put it herself.

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