

Narrative Technique in Elif Shafak's *The Forty Rules of Love*

Raad S. Rauf

Department of Translation, Cihan University-Erbil,
Kurdistan Region, Iraq

Abstract—The significance of the technique used Elif Shafak's *The Forty Rules of Love* is that it narrates two distinct stories: One within the other. Despite its vast difference in time and place, they go in parallel sequence about two geographical and spiritual journeys separated by many centuries. The first one is about Ella Rubinstein, a married lady who lives in the recent time England; whereas the second story that of the wanderer dervish Shams of Tabriz with the reverend scholar, Jalaluddin Rumi of 13th-century Asia Minor. This research paper explores the narrative techniques employed by Shafak to weave these parallel stories into a cohesive and spiritually enriching tale. For the purpose of elaborating the narrative technique used in *The Forty Rules of Love* by Elif Shafak, the present study applies a qualitative research approach. The major source of the study is the textual analysis of the novel. The paper traces the use of a two-fold narrative, multiple narrators, and tropology that contribute to the novel's thematic depth and attracts the readers' interest. All these state-of-the-art methods are manipulated by Shafak to serve a certain thematic purpose: the rules of divine love prevail over all the religious norms against hatred and Phanatic interpretations of religion.

Keywords—Dual narrative, Ella, Narrative technique, Rumi, Shams of Tabriz.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Forty Rules of Love serves as a cross between the past and present culture, blending historical fiction with post-modernist aspects of the novel. The narrative structure is pivotal in creating this connection in the sense that it allows the readers to connect Ella's journey of self-discovery and that of Rumi's spiritual transformation through his friendship with Shams of Tabriz. By analyzing the narrative techniques, this paper clarifies how Shafak's storytelling not only charms the reader but also deepens the novel's philosophical and spiritual dimensions. It is a book within a book. Each one narrates the theme of love, but in two different places and two different times. Ella Rubinstein's story starts on May 17, 2005, a recent story of Ella who lives in Northampton, England, and a 13th-century story of Shams of Tabriz in Asia Minor and Middle East, more specifically in Konya, Turkey.

The thematic function of this method is meant to track Ella's social and ethical journey towards maturity through reading Aziz Zahara's draft named "Sweet Blasphemy" about Tabrizi's forty rules of love which he teaches Jalaluddin Rumi. The two stories go together in a parallel sequence. Eventually, Ella gets mature enough to quit her old ideas and norms to follow Shams's rules of love and dedication. Yet, both stories end in the premature death of Zahara and Shams (Shafak, 2008).

Despite the vast distances of place and time, both stories have one theme and that is how to overcome self-involvement and self-indulgence in hatred of mankind whether on social, ethnic, financial, and sectarian realms of fanaticism (Wahlang, 2019). Generally speaking, in a world full of universal anxiety, theological, ethnic, and sectarian conflicts of the 21st-century, which is quite similar to the one in Asia Minor in the 13th-century, and despite the place and time distances, Shafak juxtaposes the two worlds together to come up with this novel. Besides its rich thematic aspects that draw the readers' attention, she delivers the story in a distinct innovative narrative technique and moves among these distinct spheres smoothly in order to say something about infinite divine love, which is the sole solution against all the sins committed or being committed among mankind.

This article has the following objectives:

1. To discuss the narrative technique used by Elif Shafak in the novel *The Forty Rules of Love*
2. To analyze the subjective narratives delivered by the characters: their experiences that reflect the corruptive atmospheres they experienced before meeting Shams of Tabriz
3. To examine the role of love in the context of Sufiism as opposed to Sharia in the novel.

The importance of this paper lies in the artistic mastery of the narrative technique deployed by Elif Shafak in her novel *The Forty Rules of Love*. She uses multiple techniques in delivering two distinct streams of narrative: the first stream is that of Ella Rubinstein, the present time English housewife of Jewish background; whereas, the second stream goes back to the 13th-century Anatolia to tell the story of Mevlana Jalaluddin Rumi with the wanderer dervish Shams of Tabriz. The first story is narrated in the third person voice, while almost all the other narrations are expressed in the first person. These two streams of narrative go side by side in a parallel sequence.

Despite the distance of place and time, the two streams pour into one major theme which is love; more precisely, the divine love that supersedes all the religious doctrines that call to ethnic and religious distinctions among mankind. Using all these methods in the narrative is metafiction peculiar to Elif Shafak's *The Forty Rules of Love*. This technique gives significance to the present study.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Except for a handful of papers and reviews, most of the critiques have tackled *The Forty Rules of Love* from a Sufi perspective (Yavuz, 2006), namely the forty rules of divine love set by Shams of Tabriz to Jalal Aladdin Rumi (Mevlana). Some of these are no more than reviews. Among these are Lewis (2008). *Rumi: Past and Present, East and West*. Geoffroy (2010). *Introduction to Sufism: The Inner Path of Islam*. In his "Sufism and Modernity in the Contemporary World," Yavuz (2006), as evident in the title, does not deal with the novel as a story, and Naeem et al. "Analyzing Islamic Philosophy in Elif Shafak's Forty Rules of Love" (2024), all these from a thematic prospect only. Shankar (2023) also tackles sophist culture. In her essay on "The Story Behind the Forty Rules of Love," An introduction to *The Forty Rules of Love*. Shafak herself did not touch upon the narrative method she used in this novel.

In an essay by Dayekh, Rasha (Dayekh, 2016) named "Structure and Narrative Technique in *The Forty Rules of Love*," Ms. Dayekh goes through the structural aspects of the novel in a rather detailed perspective.

Yet, in her TV program "The Art of Storytelling," an Interview made by *The Other Tour*, Shafak tackled this technique in a very simple way. On the other hand, the critics who dealt with *The Forty Rules of Love* as a fictional masterpiece are few. Among these is Pandya and Toor (2019), goes through the stylistic aspects of this novel.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

For the purpose of elaborating the narrative technique used in *The Forty Rules of Love* by Elif Shafak, the present study applies a qualitative research approach. The major source of the study is the textual analysis of the novel. According to Massoudi (2023) A qualitative research approach explores "why" and "how" questions using non-numerical

data (text, audio, video) to understand complex human experiences, behaviors, and meanings in depth, focusing on context rather than statistics. The other references such as critical books, journals, and reviews constitute sources of this paper. The study focuses on the narrative technique as a means to reach the major themes of the novel.

4. DISCUSSION

A. Structure

The Forty Rules of Love is a blend of two stories, a novel within another novel. Despite the vast barriers of time and space, the two stories proceed in a parallel way; the first story is a present time Elle's one, whereas the second one is that of Shams of Tabriz and Mevlana Jalaluddin al-Rumi. Ella Rubinstein (Shafak, 2008, p. 1) is a Jewish housewife in her forties, living in a secured life with Northampton, England during the present time. She is a mother of three kids: Jannette, the elder daughter; the twins Avi and Orly together with her husband, David, is a successful dentist. Economically speaking, she is enjoying a secured, well-sheltered life, and almost needs nothing. On daily life, her kids go to school, and her husband goes to work. She has BA in English language and literature, yet she never sought work seriously. In brief, she is a complacent housewife who is accustomed to do house work as well as sharing some social activities with her neighborhood. The second story is delivered to us through Aziz Zahara's presumable manuscript *Sweet Blasphemy*, a Sufi story of Shams of Tabriz and Mevlana Jalaluddin Al-Rumi that takes place during the 13th-century Anatolia, more precisely in Konya (Shafak, 2008, pp. 1-7).

Structurally speaking, *The Forty Rules of Love* is a novel within novel; both of the novels constitute the mainstream of our narrative structure, besides minor episodes. The first narrative is a present time Ella Rubinstein, a Jewish housewife having a secured life with her family husband David, and her three children: Jeanette Rubinstein, The second narrative goes back to the 13th-century Asia Minor through Aziz Zahara's manuscript *Sweet Blasphemy*. The author uses many narrative techniques in delivering her theme of boundless, infinite divine love as a sole remedy for all human evils (Dayekh, 2016, p. 1718).

The novel starts with a prologue, and then, it provides the settings of both stories. It introduces Elle and her family, then goes back in history to shed light on Tabrizi's eventual assassination through a section titled "The Killer." Afterward, the Shafak divides the preceding events into separate chapters.

The novel falls into five parts bearing the four elements of the cosmos. These books are distributed as:

Book One: The Earth

Book Two: Water

Book Three: Wind

Book Four: Fire

Book Five: The Void

Shafak added the last book to the four cosmos elements for a thematic purpose; all will leave this world empty-handed.

B. Mono-Perspective and Poly-Perspective (or Multi-Perspective) Technique

Except for Ella's story which is told in the third person, most of the other characters' stories are told in the first person. The episodes of Ella's family members are told in the third person, but from Ella's eyes, we know about her children's growing up and getting more independent and careless about their mother's personal life. The readers' understanding of the infidelity and oblivion of Ella's husband comes through Ella's suspicion and awareness.

The term "poly-perspective narrative" or "multi-perspective narrative" (Feistner and Holl, 2006) is a literary technique. "This technique is peculiar to literary theory, narratology, and applied linguistics. In this frame, a "poly-perspective narrative" is applied to a story that is told from different view-points." The purpose of using this technique is to apply "multiple narrators/viewpoints." The same incidents are usually delivered by the observations and voices of multiple characters, either in the first person with "I" or in a third-person restricted emphasis that moves among these characters. It is also used for diverse interpretations (Feistner and Holl, 2006).

Like many of her predecessors such as Scott Fitzgerald in *Tender is the Night* and *The Great Gatsby*, Emily Bronte in her *Wuthering Heights*, and Joseph Conrad in his *Heart of Darkness* (Rauf and Daniel, 2020), Shafak uses multiple narrators in *The Forty Rules of Love*, a technique which can best outline a good novel's multi-narrative structure. The present stream of the novel follows Ella, being introduced to Aziz Zahara's manuscript *The Sweet Blasphemy*, which in turn contains the historical narrative of Rumi and Shams. Shafak skillfully moves between these streams, creating an interchange between the characters and their diverse worlds. This structure underlines the eternal relevance of Rumi's experiences, focusing on the infiniteness of love and devoutness. Hence, the narrative moves between the 21st-century England and 13th-century Anatolia in a rather parallel way (Lewis, 2008).

In *The Forty Rules of Love*, Shafak tells the same story from two (or multiple) different angles using different perspectives made by two or more different character-narrators. Sometimes, these stories belong to different places and times. According to Pandya (Pandya and Toor, November 2019), some authors use this narrative method to help readers have a clearer perception of the main characters' attitudes against the upcoming events.

The dual narrative also facilitates the development of characters. Ella's alteration reflects Rumi's, the distinction between the two eras allows readers to escalate the lasting power of love and piety. The interaction between these narratives nurtures an insightful reading involvement, as contemporary strives are compared to historical insight.

Shafak employs a metatextual narrative to blur the lines between fiction and reality. Aziz's manuscript, titled *Sweet Blasphemy*, serves as a story within a story, providing insights into Rumi's spiritual journey while catalyzing Ella's self-discovery. This layering of narratives invites readers

to question the boundaries of storytelling and to see the interconnectedness of all human experiences.

In her method of narration of *The Forty Rules of Love*, Elif Shafak narrates in the third person voice whenever she tells Ella (in present times), whereas she uses the first person voice when it comes to all the other characters such as the Master, the killer, Shams, Rumi, the Novice, Hassan the Begger, Desert Rose the Harlot, Suleiman the Drunk, The Zealot, Aladdin, Kimya, Kerra, Baybars the Warrior, Sultan Walad, Hussam the Student, and others. Among these minor characters, the study may introduce a few slices of some of these characters.

The Novice

The Novice is another minor character whose episode is delivered in the first person (Shafak, 2008, pp. 57-66). The Novice keeps watching Shams during all the period of the latter's stay in the Master's lounge. The Novice admires Shams's insight and wants to follow him wherever he goes, but Shams refuses his request.

The Master

The debate between the Master (Baba Zaman), the Judge and Shams (Shafak, 2008, pp. 47-55). The episode of the whole chapter is delivered in the third person from Baba Zaman's perspective. This is made by Shafak to apply an objective narration to the debate between Shams and the Judge on the interpretation of the holy Islamic Sharia.

Another significant episode is in the Master's Lodge in Baghdad (Shafak, 2008, pp. 47-55), the first meeting takes place among Baba Zaman (the Master), the Judge, and Shams of Tabriz. The episode of the whole chapter is delivered in the third person from Baba Zaman's perspective. This is made by Shafak to apply an objective narration to the debate between Shams and the Judge on the interpretation of the holy Islamic Sharia. According to the Judge, all the Esotericism beyond the textual script and Hadith believed by the dervishes is sheer blasphemy; whereas Shams explores that there are three conceptional levels of understanding the divine elements in the Holy Koran.

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Hassan the Begger

Hassan the Begger (Shafak, 2008, pp. 104-108) is a minor character who is deployed by Elif Shafak to express a counter opinion of Rumi. Hassan is said to suffer from leprosy for which people used to give him charity, yet they get disgusted from his company. When he attends Rumi's Friday ceremony and sees how diligently Rumi urges the attendants to charity the poor, especially in the holy month of Ramadan, Hassan notices that Rumi was wearing expensive outfits and comes up with the notion that Rumi never suffered poverty. This observation sickens his spirit and leaves the mosque abruptly.

Desert Rose the Harlot

Desert Rose the Harlot (Shafak, 2008, pp. 116-121) undergoes a transformative journey of self-discovery and love, largely attributed to her interactions with Shams of Tabriz. In the 13th-century Konya, she is presented as a victimized female who suffered from social injustice and rape after the death of all her family members. She is forced to prostitution out of need for a shelter to save her soul and body. She starts a new of repentance to be a decent figure out of her spiritual need after she meets Shams of Tabriz. Her story is narrated in several episodes: "Desert Rose the Harlot." She is a prostitute who experiences a transformative journey of self-revelation and love, largely attributed to her connections to Shams. In fact, this story is quite familiar in the Christian and Islamic histories, such as Saint Mary of Egypt (Smith, 2024) and Rābi'a al-'Adawīyah of Basrah, Iraq (Shehab Aldeen, 2023), in the 8th-century CE, who both were harlots who experienced such a divine transcending from vice to virtue.

All these minor characters, many of them belonging to the low class (rather outcasts and vagabonds) serve to shed light on the sort of life these people used to experience in 12th-century Asia Minor and the Middle East and more specifically the present-day Turkish Konya, whether general or particular. Each of these characters is made to speak in the first person about their individual experiences before and after Shams of Tabriz's arrival to Konya and how far has Shams influenced their lives and improved their status quo. All these subplots come to Ella through Aziz Zahara's "Sweet Blasphemy."

Ella moves across all these characters when she reads Aziz Zahara's book "Sweet Blasphemy," and through Ella, Shafak validates how a single theme of love can unite all the people beyond the borders of time and space, beyond religious, sectarian, ethnic, or social injustice. Each of these characters, major or minor, is exposed in a way to negate the prevailing rules of sharia and tribal fanaticism. Ella rebels against the norms that she engaged herself in; she leaves her secured shelter and cozy home behind to seek and pursue the true love which she found in the Sufi Aziz Zahara. Her quest is not that of sensual love, but a spiritual one. She acts the way Rumi acted toward Shams's Sufi teachings when he abandoned his position as judge and number one Islamic scholar to follow and pursue the true love which he found in Shams' rules of love.

Shafak's delineation of a variety of angles develops the novel by illustrating assorted viewpoints. Each episode is told in a subjective viewpoint with perspectives of each character, extending from Rumi and Shams to Ella and Aziz, as well as the minor characters such as Desert Rose, Sultan Walad, and Baybars. This polyphonous approach digs depth to the story, allowing readers to understand the motivations and struggles of various characters.

The shifting viewpoints also echo the Sufi conviction in the array of truth. The story allows different voices to many of the characters; Shafak emphasizes the idea that truth is not colossal but multi-layered. This method goes with the story's ethical suggestions, in a way to encourage the readers to hold sympathy and broadmindedness.

All the historical, events, stories, and episodes belonging to the 13th-century are delivered in the first person. Beginning with The Killer (Shafak, 2008, pp. 21-24). Jackal Head is the assassin who was hired by two unknown men to kill Shams of Tabriz. This character speaks in his episode to express two things: his lifelong regret of the crime, and to show his admiration of this dervish's incredible way of dying deep inside the well.

C. Tropology

Elif Shafak uses tropology extensively in *The Forty Rules of Love*. Allegory and symbolism are among the main narrative techniques she deploys in this novel (Geoffroy, 2010). Ella's journey, for example, is symbolic of the quest for authenticity and inner peace in a modern, fragmented world. Desert Rose the Harlot ((Shafak, 2008, pp. 116-121) is another allegorical figure in *The Forty Rules of Love*. The name also appears in the context of Saint Mary of Egypt, also known as Saint Mary the Harlot, a figure in early church history. Another allegorical reference is that of the prostitute episode with Jesus Christ, when a number of Jewish men brought the harlot to Jesus to put him at stake whether He would sentence her according to Moses' law or not; the instance that proved the Divine Mercy is above Moses's rules. A third allegorical reference is that of the Islamist Sufi, Rābi'a al-'Adawīyah (Shehab Aldeen, 2023,) who underwent the same experience as a harlot who experienced transformation from her profession into faith.

D. Parallelism

Parallelism is one of many of the rhetorical devices used in *The Fort Rules of Love*. The 13th-century dervish Shams of Tabriz is parallel to the 21st-century dervish Aziz Zahraa. Both keep journeying here and there to find God's love among people, mostly the suffering. They both die at the end, Aziz dies out of a chronic disease, whereas Shams gets assassinated.

Ella is a parallel character to Mevlana Jalaluddin Rumi. They both undergo a spiritual and ethical journey starting with their abandoning their status quo affiliation to their religious doctrines and rules to end up with finding love and peace out of their domestic commitments for which they consecrated their earlier stages of life. Ella's family members including her husband and three children are paralleled with Rumi's family members who consider their interests regardless of only the parental ones.

4. CONCLUSION

Elif Shafak's *The Forty Rules of Love* is a masterful exploration of love, faith, and self-discovery, brought to life through its innovative narrative techniques. The dual narrative structure, metafictional elements, multiple perspectives, and rich symbolism work in harmony to create a universal, timeless, and resonant story. By bridging the past and present, Shafak invites readers to embark on a spiritual journey that transcends cultural and temporal boundaries.

The writer deploys several literary devices, techniques and methods to attain her thematic purpose that despite the vast remoteness of time and place, evil is inherent in every human being by means of pride, religious fanaticism, social injustice, etc. that are prevalent everywhere and all the times, and that the only means is to abandon ego and seek love, tolerance and peace.

The novel illustrates two geographical and spiritual journeying examples: one is that of Rumi who spiritually transforms from being a scholar to a divine poet and dervish; two is that of Ella who transforms from a fanatic Jewish housewife to love of all mankind regardless of all the religious doctrines.

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