
LANGUAGE IN INDIA

Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

Volume 14:7 July 2014

ISSN 1930-2940

Managing Editor: M. S. Thirumalai, Ph.D.

Editors: B. Mallikarjun, Ph.D.

Sam Mohanlal, Ph.D.

B. A. Sharada, Ph.D.

A. R. Fatihi, Ph.D.

Lakhan Gusain, Ph.D.

Jennifer Marie Bayer, Ph.D.

S. M. Ravichandran, Ph.D.

G. Baskaran, Ph.D.

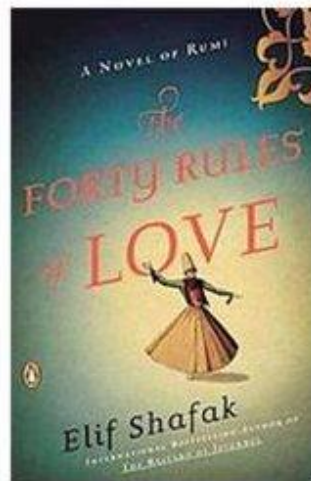
L. Ramamoorthy, Ph.D.

C. Subburaman, Ph.D. (Economics)

Assistant Managing Editor: Swarna Thirumalai, M.A.

Forty Rules of Love as a Bildungsroman

Sumaya Firdous, Ph.D. Scholar



Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 14:7 July 2014

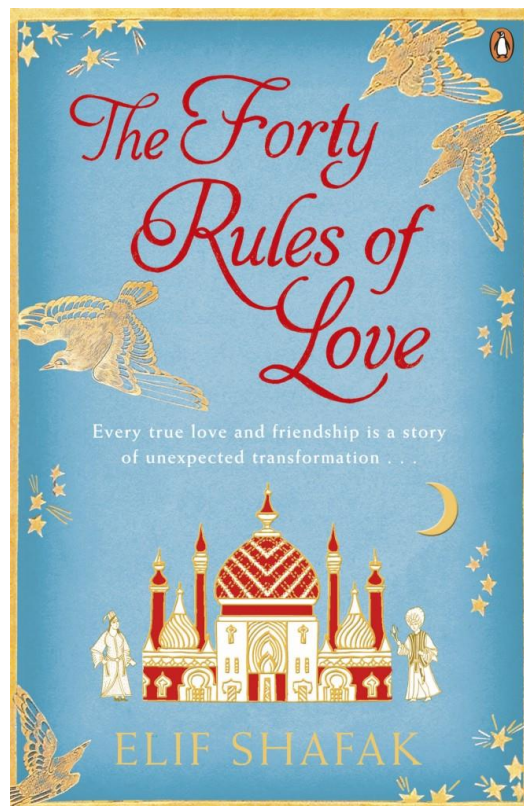
Sumaya Firdous, Ph.D.

Forty Rules of Love as a Bildungsroman

Abstract

A particularly impressive ‘novel of formation’ by Turkish writer Elif Shafak, *The Forty Rules of Love* follows the parallel life paths of Rumi and Shams Tabrez, a famous pair in the thirteenth century vis-à-vis Ella - a Massachusetts house wife with her first editing job and Aziz Zahara, whose globe-trotting book she is reading. The novel tells the story of Rumi and Shams through the eyes of the characters around.

The novel is a perfect Bildungsroman as also a complete study in opposites—discipline versus spontaneity, reason versus love, perspective versus acceptance, wisdom versus youth, foundation versus risk and brain versus heart. While the novel argues strongly in favour of heart, love, acceptance and spontaneity, it also favours a balance between the two extremes and that is what matters the most. However, this balance could be achieved only by adhering to the basic Sufi principles.



Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 14:7 July 2014

Sumaya Firdous, Ph.D.

Forty Rules of Love as a Bildungsroman

The novel clearly gives a frank treatment of the dangers of the spiritual path. One can hardly ignore appreciating this ‘novel of education’ in its honest and direct treatment of that place, people, era and the deep confusion and pain it can bring to the seeker and those close to them and of course that beauty and wisdom that come from that difficult experience. The novel displays an elegant language to intercept the effect that these parallel soul mates - Rumi and Shams, Ella and Aziz—had on each other and that is what forms the essence of this novel.

Sufism and Elif Shafak



Elif Shafak

Courtesy: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elif_%C5%9Eafak

Elif Shafak, the famous Turkish writer has always been greatly influenced by the tenets of Sufism and as such, it is natural that Sufi thoughts and principles should figure directly in her novels. This bond with Sufism has further intensified over the years. Be it her first novel in Turkish, *Pinhan* or *The Bastard of Istanbul* or *The Forty Rules of Love*—all stand a testimony to the author’s deep penchant for the Sufi way of life. Sufism is close to the author’s heart. The novel discusses the ancient philosophy at length which becomes instrumental in changing the life of Ella, a contemporary American housewife. And yet, it is one of the best seller books throughout, equally popular among the young and the old alike.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 14:7 July 2014

Sumaya Firdous, Ph.D.

Forty Rules of Love as a Bildungsroman

Main Character Ella

The apparent reason for this seeming dichotomy is that the main character passes through the spiritual growth. The author portrays the character of Ella as an immature and emotionally lost woman who goes out into the world to seek knowledge. It is not the knowledge which can be gained by senses, reason, logic or even books. Logic never goes beyond the philosophy and book learner fosters self-conceit of empty words. This knowledge comes by illumination, revelation and inspiration. Ordinary knowledge is denoted by the term *ilm* and the mystic knowledge peculiar to Sufis is called *ma'rifat* or *irfan*. *Ma'rifat* is different from *ilm*, and a different word must be used to translate it. The *ma'rifat* of the Sufis is the “gnosis” of Hellenistic theosophy that is direct knowledge of God based on revelation or apocalyptic vision. It is not the result of any mental process, but depends entirely on the will and favour of God, who bestows it as a gift from Himself upon those whom He has created with the capacity of receiving it. It is a light of divine grace that flashes into the heart and overwhelms every human faculty with its dazzling beams. (Nicholson, 1914. 51)

***The Forty Rules of Love* – Focus on Mystic Subjects**

The Forty Rules of Love (2010) is one of the famous and most read novels by Shafak. Relying upon mystic subjects, the writer tells the stories of Rumi and Shams Tabrez of 13th century on the one hand; and Ella and Aziz of contemporary times, on the other, thus highlighting the relevance of medieval philosophy and values in the present times. The way Shafak uses the historical characters of Rumi and Shams Tabrez to make Ella draw some really positive conclusions, form the core of the novel. Both sets of characters share some striking parallels even if they belong to two different centuries. Thus, in analyzing this novel as a Bildungsroman, it is important to note how Ella, a middle-aged housewife from Massachusetts changes and develops, having been impressed by the thirteenth century philosophy, which somehow seems to be unlikely in the modern century; and how she meets with her own self by opening up to love.

Focus on the Maturity of the Protagonist

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 14:7 July 2014

Sumaya Firdous, Ph.D.

Forty Rules of Love as a Bildungsroman

In a Bildungsroman, the main motive is the maturity of the protagonist; it can be a psychological growth of the protagonist in which he/she goes through internal journey and tries to find the meaning of life. It provides an opportunity to the protagonist to rediscover equality in the society which is based on love.

The growth of Ella's character is largely based on her reading the novel *Sweet Blasphemy*. Ella, an unhappy married woman, finds herself caught in the rut of dull household routine. Her teenage children are now growing away from her, in their own paths. She feels that they do not need her as much as they once did. Her husband, a successful dentist, is unfaithful to her. He deceives her by spending nights with other women. Ella is aware of her husband's mistresses, but finding no way out, she has become compromised to her life. As a result, both of them live under the same roof as strangers and are uncomfortable in each other's presence. Throughout her married life, Ella has longed for love – something with which she could hold on to the relationship; and something which has been conspicuously missing in their conjugal life. Ironically, the relationship is based on just a physical need and to beget children for their family. While arguing with her daughter, Jeannette, who claims to be in love with a guy, Scott, and wants to marry him, Ella perhaps gives vent to the frustration in her own life: "... which century are you living in? Just get it in your head, women do not marry the men they fall in love with. They choose a guy who will be a good father and reliable husband. Love is only a sweet feeling bound to come and quickly to go away." (Shafak, 2010. 14)

Ella's Life

Ella realizes that she has enough spare time and there is no good company that could take away the boredom of her life. In order to remain busy and divert her attention from the sordid realities of her life, she seeks a job. As she has been a voracious reader, she finally manages to get the job through one of her husband's relations. Ella's job as a reader for a literary agent introduces her to Sufism through a manuscript *Sweet Blasphemy* written by some unknown writer, Aziz Zahara, living in Turkey. A note of the writer in the novel, that it is his first novel and most probably his last, captures her imagination. She reads that the writer has no intention of becoming a novelist and has

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 14:7 July 2014

Sumaya Firdous, Ph.D.

Forty Rules of Love as a Bildungsroman

written this book purely out of admiration and love for the great philosopher, mystic, and poet Rumi and his beloved sun, Shams Tabrez. (Shafak, 2010. 17) In the beginning, she was not interested in writing the report on *Sweet Blasphemy*. She was not sure whether she could concentrate on a subject that is completely irrelevant to her life and from a time as distant as the thirteenth century. At that time, she could not realize that message of love/ Sufism is beyond the boundaries set by time and space; and therefore, it is acceptable to all times and climes. It has withstood the test of time; it is the religion of love applicable to all types of religions and eras.

***Sweet Blasphemy* – Misinterpretation of Love**

Sweet Blasphemy provides a glimpse of the world of love and it is the blessed rain which drenches Ella to the core and changes her life completely. On the surface, it is a celebration of the radical transformation of Rumi from scholar to poet, from devoted spiritual man to a visionary and a deeply honest portrayal of every difficult step of that evolution. At a deeper level, however, it marks the physical as well as spiritual transformation in Ella's personality and opens up a world, hitherto unknown to her.

Like modern women, Ella too has misinterpreted the meaning and essence of love. The obvious reason is her way of living life with her family, especially with her husband, David. While reading *Sweet Blasphemy*, Ella comes across some interesting lines which read thus: "For despite what some people say, love is not only a sweet feeling bound to come and quickly go away." (Shafak, 2010. 17) There is clearly a contradiction between what she has experienced and what she has just read. It marks a fundamental change in her life, as if these words were written for her. She shivers with the thought that some mysterious force in this universe, or else this writer, whosoever he might be, was spying on her. Perhaps he had written this book knowing beforehand what kind of person was going to read it first. This writer had her in mind as his reader. For some reason unknown to her, Ella finds the idea both disturbing and exciting.

Old is New, New is Old

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 14:7 July 2014

Sumaya Firdous, Ph.D.

Forty Rules of Love as a Bildungsroman

In many ways, the twenty-first century is not that different from the thirteenth century. Both will be recorded in history as times of unprecedented religious clashes, cultural misunderstandings, and a general sense of insecurity and fear of the other. At times like these, the need for love is greater than ever, because love is the very essence and purpose of life. As Rumi reminds us, “It hits everybody, including those who shun love- even those who use the word “romantic” as a sign of disapproval.” Ella was as bowled over as if she had read there, “Love hits everybody, even a middle-aged house wife in Northampton named Ella Rubinstein.” (Shafak, 2010. 17-18) Now, she gets engaged in this novel. Elif Shafak has successfully taken this difficult path of transforming her main character, Ella, through an amazing evolution with craft and skill.

Role of Minor Characters

In *The Forty Rules of Love*, some minor characters such as Desert Rose, Kimya, Husam the student, Sultan Walad, and others also get transformed by the wondrous touch of love. Some characters however, remain the same; they are flat characters. Baybars the warrior, Alladin, Sheikh Yasin could be listed in this category. Here it is interesting to note that the characters that show development and evolvment harbour a spot of love in their heart. They just need some stimulus with which they will react and that stimulus comes in the form of Shams Tabrez. Shams Tabrez, a wandering dervish, challenges the society by his wisdom which has the source of love. He is a full-fledged Sufi and a mature one. Shams said: “Since I was a boy, I had received visions and heard voices. I always talked to God, and He always responded.” (Shafak, 2010. 32) Shams passed through all those stages of Sufism which are rarely faced by a common man. As it is mentioned in the novel, “one becomes a lantern to humanity, radiating energy to everyone who asks for it, teaching and illuminating like a true master. Sometimes such a person has a healing power, wherever he goes, he will make a big difference in their lives. In everything he does and aspires to do, his main goal is to serve God through serving others.” (Shafak, 2010. 110) Shams Tabrez was the embodiment of all these qualities. He lost himself in the love and knowledge of God and disagreed with his father who was insisting that he become a carpenter like himself, because the son follows the

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 14:7 July 2014

Sumaya Firdous, Ph.D.

Forty Rules of Love as a Bildungsroman

profession of his father. But Shams Tabrez had mystic-like visions. He said, “I have been a wandering dervish ever since, not sleeping in the same place more than once, not eating out of the same bowl twice in a row... I have seen the worst and best in humanity. Nothing surprises me anymore.” (Shafak, 2010. 32-33) While going through all these experiences, he compiled a list that was not written down in any book, only inscribed in his soul. Together they constituted “The Forty Rules of the Religion of Love” which can be attained always and only through love. He said:

It had taken me years to finish working on these rules, all forty of them. And now that I was done, I knew I was nearing the final stage of my time in this world. There were many words piled up inside my chest, stories waiting to be told. I wanted to hand all this knowledge to one other person, neither a master nor a disciple. I sought an equal – a companion. “God,” I whispered into the dark ...”

“Go to Baghdad,” fluted my guardian angel in a singsong voice.

“What is awaiting me in Baghdad?” I asked.

“You prayed for a companion, and a companion you will be given. In Baghdad you will find a master who will point you to the right direction.” (Shafak, 2010. 33)

In Baghdad – Transformation of Rumi

At Baghdad, he realized that the man in his visions was no other than his spiritual companion (Rumi). In 1244, Rumi met Shams - a wandering dervish with unconventional ways and heretical proclamations. Their encounter altered the lives of both of them. At the same time, it marked the beginning of a solid, unique friendship that Sufis in the centuries to follow likened to the union of two oceans. The whole Sufi community forms one indivisible brotherhood, so that the meanest famulus feels himself to be joined in spirit with the most exalted hierophant (Nicholson, 1992. 71). By meeting this exceptional companion, Rumi was transformed from a mainstream cleric to a committed mystic, passionate poet, advocate of love, and originator of the ecstatic dance of the

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 14:7 July 2014

Sumaya Firdous, Ph.D.

Forty Rules of Love as a Bildungsroman

whirling dervishes, daring to break free of all conventional rules. The powerful spiritual bond between Shams and Rumi became the target of rumor, slander, and attack. They were misunderstood, envied, vilified, and ultimately betrayed by those closest to them. Three years after they met, they were tragically separated. But the story did not end there. In truth, there never was an end. Almost eight hundred years later, the spirits of Shams and Rumi are still alive today, whirling amid us somewhere. (Shafak, 2010. 21)

Significance of *Forty*

The number 'forty' too has a significance which we get through the e-mail of Aziz when Ella told him about her birthday and has reached a milestone; she was now at the age of forty. Aziz gave the importance of 'forty'; "In mysticism, forty symbolizes the ascent from one lower level to a higher one and spiritual awakening? When a baby is born it takes forty days for him to start a new life on earth. And when we are in love we need to wait for forty days to be sure of our feelings..." (Shafak, 2010. 77)

These forty rules of love inspired Ella and she conceived that her life would be rewritten. These rules were injecting a new flavour of love in her veins. She becomes the incarnation of love at the end of the novel. Eventually, these forty rules were guiding minor characters, whom Shams Tabrez met in one way or the other in the novel. These are the guiding principles for the reader and all of mankind as well.

As she goes on reading it, she realizes that Rumi's story mirrors her own and that Aziz Zahara, like Shams Tabrez, has come to set her free, and guide her to the principles of life. In one of her e-mails, having seen his snap, she asks Aziz, "Are you Shams? Or is it the other way round? Is Shams you?" In reply, Aziz tells her, "Shams is the person who was responsible for the transformation of Rumi from a local cleric to a famous mystic poet. Master Sameed used to say to me, "Even if there might be a Shams equivalent in some people, what matters is, where are the Rumis to see it?" (Shafak, 2010. 126)

Rumi and Shams Meet

In *Sweet Blasphemy*, Rumi and Shams meet at Konya and get closer to one another; similarly Ella and Aziz start sharing their ideas, something that Ella needed desperately. Shams' greatest gift to Rumi, the friend of his life, was the power of intuition and masculinity of language. By forcing Rumi to step outside the confines of learning, he encouraged the poet to experience life as it is, raw and untamed, a rich ferment of desire and anguish needing to be consumed by the purifying fires of love. Similarly, Aziz, through his e-mails, puts the raw and untamed love of Ella into the ferment of love. The relationship proves to be fulfilling for both. While Ella has been looking for a man who could receive and imbibe her emotional set up, Aziz too is lucky to find a woman whom he could shake, destroy, build, regenerate and elevate.

Elements of Sufism

Rumi had a stature, respectable and admirable personality through the whole community and Shams led him beyond the comforts of his respectable way of life, beyond the shallow satisfactions of ego, which is necessary in Sufism. At the end of the part three of the novel, Shams asked Rumi to quench his thirst by fetching the two bottles of wine from the tavern. Shams recalled the face of a novice in Baghdad, who had wanted to accompany him, but cared too much about his reputation to take the plunge. His concern for the opinion of others had held him back.

Now Shams wondered if his reputation was going to hold Rumi back, too. But to Shams's great relief, Rumi got up and nodded, and said to Shams, "I have never been to a tavern before and have never consumed wine. I don't think drinking is a right thing to do. But I trust you fully, because I trust the love between us. There must be a reason you have asked me to do such a thing. I need to find out what that reason is. I will go and buy us wine." (Shafak, 2010. 154)

When Rumi and Shams were in a snow-covered courtyard, Shams asked Rumi to drink the glass of wine. He was about to take the glass to his lips, Shams snatched it back and flung it to the ground. Rumi asked him then why he sent him to the tavern?

Shams replied, “Nothing should stand between yourself and God. Not *imams*, priests, rabbis, or any other custodians of moral or religious leadership. Not spiritual masters, not even your faith. Believe in your values and your rules, but never lord them over others. If you keep breaking other people’s hearts, whatever religious duty you perform is no good.”

Further Shams said that this world is full of people obsessed with wealth, recognition, or power. The more signs of success they earned, the more they seemed to be in need of them. Greedy and covetous, they rendered worldly possessions their *qibla*, always looking in that direction; unaware of becoming the servants of the things they hungered after. That was a common pattern. It happened all the time. But it was rare, as rare as rubies, for a man who had already made his way up, a man who had plenty of gold, fame and authority, to renounce his position all of a sudden one day and endanger his reputation for an inner journey, one that nobody could tell where or how it would end. Rumi was that rare ruby. (Shafak, 2010. 160-161) He had the motto to develop the character of Rumi by the language of love and Rumi being a faithful and responding student followed him, despite the prejudices of society and family. Exchanging e-mails with Aziz made Ella feel that she was somehow breaking away from her staid and tranquil life. From a woman with lots of dull grays and browns in her life’s canvas, she was turning into a woman with a secret colour- a bright, tantalizing red. And she loved it. (Shafak, 2010. 95)

Meanings of Bildungsroman

According to Suzzane Hader, “The term Bildungsroman denotes a novel of all round self-development...A Bildungsroman is, generally, the story of a single individual’s growth and development within the context of a defined social order.” (The Bildungsroman Genre).

In the passage above, Ella clearly struggles to define herself by her own terms. As in Hader’s definition, Ella is searching for a “meaningful existence within a society.” After being far away from her family, she starts a battle towards her maturity. She wants

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 14:7 July 2014

Sumaya Firdous, Ph.D.

Forty Rules of Love as a Bildungsroman

to be free from all chains but wants to be entangled in a web of love. She is approaching towards love/ Aziz, who also extends his arms to Ella and the two embrace like Shams and Rumi. Even after knowing about Aziz's life-taking disease, she leaves her family because she is now mature enough and has come to understand what Aziz has been teaching her, 'to live the present moment without fearing future and lamenting past.' Ella finds the independence of which she was craving from a long time.

From the milestone of forty, she again reaches to a zero milestone from where she can start her life's journey afresh and can see the world through the lenses of love. It is that age at which all senses function according to love. When Ella is ready to leave her house, she murmurs one of Shams Tabrez's Forty Rules of Love, "It is never too late to ask yourself, 'Am I ready to change the life I am living? Am I ready to change within?'"

"Even if a single day in your life is same as the day before, it surely is a pity. At every moment with each new breath, one should be renewed and renewed again. There is only one way to be born into a new life: to die before death." (Shafak, 2010. 217)

Prism of Love

The Bildungsroman Ella desires to see the world through the prism of love, and like Eve, the Miltonic archetype of all feminine innocence, she feels greatly curious about life. Francois Jost points out in a study of the Bildungsroman that, "the agent of the bildung is the world," and that the man of the world would therefore appear to be the perfect hero of such a novel." This is precisely the case of the novel *The Forty Rules of Love*. Had Shams not challenged every aspect of the social order Rumi held dear, Rumi would not have learned. Had Rumi not lost Shams, he would not have become a poet. Similarly, had Ella not been able to hold on under pressures and difficulties, she would not have been able to transform herself. Ella as a protagonist of a Bildungsroman leaves the house to make her way independently for the beginning of a new life, at a new place. Earlier, she could not move, surrounded by her children and husband; she now seems to have no difficulty in turning them down just for Aziz, her love. It is true that she has

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 14:7 July 2014

Sumaya Firdous, Ph.D.

Forty Rules of Love as a Bildungsroman

learnt and will learn the meaning of life through her sufferings likely other Sufis (Shams Tabrez). After Aziz's death, she goes back to the hotel before leaving for the airport; Ella takes off her jacket and puts on a fluffy, peach coloured angora sweater - "A colour too meek and docile for a woman who is trying to be neither, she thought." Then she calls Jeannette, her only child who had supported her in her decision to follow her heart. When Jeannette asks her what she is going to do now, Ella Closes her eyes for a moment and prophesies to herself with jubilant conviction and confidence what the days ahead would bring her. She has never been on her own like this before, and yet, hardly enough, she doesn't feel lonely. She reminds herself of the rule number forty, "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. Love is the water of life. And a lover is a soul of fire! The universe turns differently when fire loves water." (Shafak, 2010. 224-225)

Thus, the growth and development of the protagonist is complete in the sense that she has arrived at a stage wherefrom she can diffidently reject the traditional, myopic lens to judge the individual in her. She becomes herself.

References

- Nicholson, Reynold A. *Mystics of Islam*. London: Forgotten Books, 1914. Print.
- Nicholson, Reynold A. *The Idea of Personality in Sufism*. London: Cambridge UP, 1992. 71. Print.
- Shafak, Elif. *The Forty Rules of Love*. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2010. Print.

Sumaya Firdous, Ph.D. Scholar.
B.P.S. Mahila Vishwavidhyalaya, Khanpur Kalan
Sonapat (Haryana)
India
sumaya2050@gmail.com

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 14:7 July 2014

Sumaya Firdous, Ph.D.
Forty Rules of Love as a Bildungsroman