

## A Meta-Critical Study of Narrative, Cultural, and Spiritual Hybridity in Elif Shafak's *The Forty Rules of Love*



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**Abstract:** *This study explores the narrative, cultural, and spiritual hybridity in Elif Shafak's The Forty Rules of Love, positioning the novel as a significant contemporary text that bridges Eastern Sufi tradition with modern Western contexts. The study applies a meta-critical approach that combines close textual analysis with theoretical perspectives drawn from postcolonial and cultural studies, particularly Homi K. Bhabha's concept of hybridity and Edward Said's critique of cultural boundaries. Through detailed narrative examination, the paper analyses how Shafak's use of multiple timelines, layered perspectives, and intersecting character arcs constructs a hybrid literary space where past and present, East and West, and reason and spirituality coexist. The methodology integrates thematic analysis of key scenes and character developments with inter-textual references to Rumi's historical writings and Shams of Tabriz's spiritual influence. It also situates the novel within broader discussions of transnational literature and the ongoing relevance of Sufi wisdom in secular modern life. The study finds that Shafak's novel demonstrates that hybridity is not confined to cultural identity alone but extends to narrative form and spiritual meaning. Ella Rubinstein's transformation illustrates how a modern Western individual can internalize Eastern mystical teachings, while the narrative's plural voices reflect a deliberate refusal to privilege any single perspective. The analysis concludes that The Forty Rules of Love reimagines literature as a dynamic meeting ground for ideas, identities, and histories that are often treated as separate. This hybrid vision offers a valuable model for negotiating cultural difference in an increasingly globalized literary and social landscape.*

**Keywords:** Shafak's writings; hybridity; Sufism; Postcolonial theory; Rumi, Shams of Tabriz; Transnational literature

### 1. Introduction

Elif Shafak, born in 1971, stands among the most influential voices in contemporary Turkish literature. She is not only an award-winning novelist but also an unwavering activist who foregrounds the struggles of women, minorities, and the marginalized voices silenced by political and social constraints. Her writing fearlessly engages with some of Turkey's most sensitive and often contested subjects, including the fraught relationship between religion and politics, as well as the persistent violence inflicted upon women and children. Shafak's

body of work, produced in both Turkish and English, is a testament to her commitment to linguistic and cultural bridges. Her novels draw deeply from history, philosophy, and the mystical teachings of Sufism, creating spaces where the silenced and displaced can find their stories articulated and validated. *The Forty Rules of Love*, first published in 2009, exemplifies this commitment to narrative multiplicity and cross-cultural dialogue. The novel's enduring appeal lies in its bold celebration of spirituality and its open embrace of eclectic narrative forms. It transcends borders

of time, geography, and tradition, speaking to readers across thirty-eight languages and countless cultural contexts.

In *The Forty Rules of Love*, Shafak mobilizes narrative, cultural, and spiritual hybridity not as mere stylistic flourishes but as deliberate strategies to question the idea of a fixed literary or cultural 'center.' By entwining together the lives of immigrants, women, mystics, and seekers, she destabilizes hierarchical models that privilege the dominant over the marginal. The novel's structure is itself a gesture toward hybridity: its dual timelines—one unfolding in the thirteenth century around the transformative encounter between Rumi and Shams of Tabriz, the other set in contemporary suburban America to invite readers to see how spiritual quests echo across centuries and continents. Critically, this hybrid form does more than interlace disparate stories; it challenges readers to acknowledge the vitality of the so-called 'periphery.' By honoring the plural and the layered nature of human identity and spiritual longing, Shafak's work resists the flattening tendencies of mainstream literary discourse. Scholars have noted that this narrative hybridity, as Translation & Literary Studies (2022) affirms, pushes back against reductive binaries and replaces them with a mosaic that better reflects the complexities of modern existence. A meta-critical approach is essential in appreciating this dimension of Shafak's work. Rather than simply analyzing the text in isolation, meta-criticism situates the novel within broader intellectual currents, tracing how Shafak's practice evolves alongside contemporary thought. This perspective highlights her role not just as a storyteller but also as a cultural mediator who synthesizes inherited wisdom with the urgency of the present moment.

The origin of *The Forty Rules of Love* itself illustrates this creative synthesis. Commissioned initially to design a novella inspired by the forty rules attributed to the Persian poet and mystic Rumi, Shafak transformed that seed into a rich narrative tapestry that merges historical reality with imaginative reinvention. The motif of 'forty' anchors the novel's progression, each rule acting as both a spiritual principle and a

narrative hinge that connects the lives of Rumi's disciples to that of Ella Rubenstein, a middle-aged woman in Boston whose encounter with Sufi philosophy compels her to question the certainties that have defined her life. In doing so, Shafak invites her readers to recognize that spiritual illumination is not the privilege of a distant past or an exotic other but is instead a possibility always present within the mundane fabric of daily life. Her work demonstrates that literature can function as a meeting ground for diverse cultural inheritances, philosophical inquiry, and the deeply personal quest for meaning. Through this intricate interplay of narrative, cultural, and spiritual threads, Shafak's *The Forty Rules of Love* stands as a vital testament to the potential of hybridity as both a literary strategy and a vision for coexisting with difference in an increasingly fragmented world.

## 2. Background of the Study

Elif Shafak is a well-known Turkish-British novelist, essayist, and public intellectual who wrote the book *The Forty Rules of Love* (Shafak, 2020). Her literature has gained international recognition for addressing issues such as spirituality, gender, identity, and freedom of expression (Gill et al., 2024). After its 2009 release, *The Forty Rules of Love* immediately became a global sensation (Shafak, 2009). Through these two tales, Shafak presents readers with the teachings of Sufism, emphasizing the transformative power of divine love and spiritual awakening (Raza & Hussain, 2023). She is a fervent supporter of free speech even though she faced political and legal consequences in Turkey for talking about forbidden subjects (Ahmed, 2023). Incorporating spirituality into mental health treatment is another priority for McLean Hospital (2025). While some critics contend Shafak minimizes theological issues, others counter that she makes Sufi teachings understandable to audiences from the secular world (Naeem et al., 2024). According to Thundil (2024), the dual story produces a literary and spiritual metamorphosis. Shafak brings Sufism back to life and offers it to readers, both Muslim and non-Muslim, as a

means of openness, love, and change (Gill, Ishtiaq & Gul, 2024).

### 3. Review of the Related Literature

Two parallel plotlines form the basis of Elif Shafak's novel *The Forty Rules of Love*: one is set in the 13th century and focuses on the spiritual bond between the great Sufi poet Rumi and the traveling dervish Shams of Tabriz, while the other is set in the present and follows middle-aged American housewife Ella Rubinstein (Shafak, 2009). These two storylines are closely intertwined with the past and present, the holy and the material, and the spiritual journey with the existential search for meaning (Gill et al., 2024). The book's protagonist, Ella Rubinstein, leads a dreary life constrained by familial traditions and emotional distance. Living with her spouse and three children in Massachusetts, Ella feels a deep sense of emptiness (Raza & Hussain, 2023). Her life takes a significant turn when she begins reading *Sweet Blasphemy*, a book by Turkish Sufi novelist Aziz Zahara. The story of Rumi and Shams is told in the book, and as Ella reads it, she has a profound personal awakening. She learns how similar these historical persons' spiritual quests are to her own spiritual and emotional journey (Naeem et. al., 2024). Rumi is presented as a traditional scholar and speaker at first, but after meeting Shams Tabriz, she has a significant spiritual transformation (Thundil, 2024).

#### 3.1 Conceptual understanding of Shafak's writings

According to Gill, Ishtiaq, and Gul (2024), Rumi learns via Shams that genuine love is love for God and that attaining this knowledge requires letting go of pride, intellectual arrogance, and worldly position. Rumi, who was formerly solely involved in religious doctrine, becomes a poet of heavenly love and a well-known Sufi master whose poetry continues to inspire millions of people worldwide (Raza & Hussain, 2023). At the same time, Ella and Aziz Zahara's contact develops into a spiritual connection that mirrors Shams and Rumi's friendship. As Aziz guides her toward self-awareness and spiritual tranquility, Ella begins to question her conventional life, defies societal conventions,

and sets out on her own journey to inner truth (Gill et al., 2024). She learns that true love connects a person to God, their inner self, and life's higher purpose; it is more than just romance (Thundil, 2024). Throughout the book, Shams articulates forty spiritual commandments, which is one of its unique aspects. "Every true love and friendship is a story of unexpected transformation" and "You can study God through everything and everyone in the universe" are only two examples of the precepts that provide instruction on self-realization, inner transformation, and spiritual connection, much like a modern Sufi manual (Shafak, 2009). The transformational bond and spiritual connection between Shams and Rumi are reflected in the relationship between Ella and Aziz. Ella awakens to Aziz's teachings, just as Rumi alters after meeting Shams (Haider et al., 2025). As Ella adopts a road of honesty and spiritual freedom, she eventually learns that genuine love is divine and eternal, guiding one into the heart of their soul and transcending the individual (Younas et al., 2025). Character development, metaphorical depth, Sufi philosophy, and the concept of spiritual change are just a few of the many scholarly analyses that have looked at this book from a range of angles (Ahmad, 2024; Gill et al., 2024; Thundil, 2024).

Haider et al. (2025) made a compelling argument about Shafak's narrative dexterity by foregrounding her use of a dialogic structure that fluidly connects two distant timelines. By weaving Ella's contemporary narrative with the historical journey of Rumi and Shams, Shafak constructs what Haider and colleagues term an inter-textual framework, dissolving temporal and cultural barriers. Their analysis underscores how the "Forty Rules" act not merely as thematic signposts but as dynamic nodes around which the novel's spiritual and philosophical reflections revolve. They argue persuasively that Shafak's poetic prose, layered metaphors, and subtle voice shifts are not ornamental but essential instruments that translate dense Sufi concepts into accessible, emotionally resonant moments for the reader. The thematic argument finds a strong counterpart in the study by Gill et. al. (2024), who engage with the novel's mystical

core through a textual analysis that situates Ella's personal evolution alongside Rumi's spiritual odyssey. Their exploration demonstrates how Shafak fuses Sufi philosophical motifs such as *ishq*, *fana*, and *wahdat al-wujud* with the anxieties of modern existence, particularly the restlessness of a woman confronting the voids in her life. By aligning Ella's transformative longing with Rumi's timeless search for divine love, the authors illustrate Shafak's nuanced reimagining of Islamic mysticism for a contemporary audience.

Naeem et al. (2024) extends the interpretive net by examining how Shafak inscribes Islamic ideology within her narrative fabric, complement this thematic excavation. Their essay pays close attention to the ways in which mystical thought permeates everyday life, especially through the gendered lens that reframes Rumi and Shams' spiritual camaraderie in light of Ella's modern struggles. The authors suggest that Shafak's narrative blurs the sacred and the mundane, inviting readers to perceive the transcendent not as an abstract realm but as an attainable reality within ordinary human relations. Whereas these studies primarily emphasize thematic and ideological currents, Abel Johnson Thundil's mid-2024 inquiry ventures into the paradoxical terrain of characterization. Thundil probes how Shafak constructs her central figures as embodiments of Sufi paradoxes: characters simultaneously grounded and otherworldly, human and allegorical. His analysis of symbolic imagery such as fire and water reveals the novel's intricate layering of opposites, which mirrors the characters' internal transformations. He convincingly argues that Aziz and Ella's evolution is best understood through this prism of Sufi paradox, which unsettles rigid binaries and foregrounds spiritual becoming as a dialectical process.

The study expands further in Ahmad's (2024) aesthetic and intertextual analysis, which adopts Fairclough's discourse model alongside Tolstoyan aesthetic theory to probe the novel's complex textual relationships. Ahmad contends that Shafak's narrative does not exist in isolation

but converses with multiple literary and mystical traditions, enriching its philosophical resonance. By situating the novel within a broader intertextual web, he highlights Shafak's capacity to weave fragments from Rumi's poetry, Sufi treatises, and modern existential thought into a cohesive narrative that both unsettles and enlightens. Younas et al. (2025) narrow this stylistic inquiry by turning their attention to a micro-textual reading of the "Water" section of the text. Their study exposes the rhetorical and poetic devices through which Shafak conjures an atmosphere of mysticism and spiritual intoxication. By deconstructing the chapter's figurative language, they argue that the author's stylistic choices are calibrated to evoke the ineffable dimensions of divine love, ensuring that abstract mysticism attains tangible emotional immediacy for the reader.

Finally, Akbar et al. (2020) ground Shafak's entire oeuvre within the parameters of postmodern literary discourse. Their argument pivots on the idea that Shafak's narrative form itself is symptomatic of postmodernity's fractured condition. They contend that the novel's engagement with hypocrisy, dualism, and the quest for meaning reflects the dilemmas of a world unmoored from absolute truths. By underscoring how the narrative architecture mirrors the epistemological uncertainties of the postmodern condition, they invite readers to view Shafak's spiritual narrative not as escapist nostalgia but as a critical commentary on contemporary disillusionment. Taken together, these critical perspectives demonstrate that Shafak's *The Forty Rules of Love* is far more than a retelling of Rumi's spiritual teachings. A rich, layered narrative mobilizes stylistic innovation, intertextual dialogue, and thematic hybridity to address profound questions of identity, faith, and modernity. These analyses reveal that Shafak's genius lies in her ability to bridge the mystical and the mundane, the ancient and the modern, the personal and the universal through challenging her readers to find spiritual clarity within the fragmented realities of contemporary life.

### 3.2 Thematic Interpretation of Shafak's writings

Across multiple critical readings, there is a shared understanding that Shafak's novel functions as more than mere historical or romantic fiction; rather, it is fundamentally a spiritual narrative clothed in the form of a modern novel. Scholars like Gill et al. (2024) and Naeem et al. (2024) converge on the idea that the text's true purpose lies in its reimagining of classical Sufi concepts, such as divine love, self-effacement, and spiritual unity, for a contemporary readership. This spiritual undercurrent finds a concrete manifestation in Abel Johnson Thundil's (2024) exploration of character paradoxes. Thundil demonstrates that Aziz and Ella's inner journeys are articulated through symbolic oppositions like fire and water, which echo core Sufi metaphors for purification, transformation, and the annihilation of the ego. By decoding these symbols, Thundil reveals how Shafak dramatizes mystical processes within the ordinary lives of her characters, turning fiction into a vehicle for spiritual instruction.

The structural and stylistic sophistication of *The Forty Rules of Love* is a recurring focal point in recent scholarship. Haider et al. (2025) and Younas et al. (2025) emphasize that Shafak's innovative use of alternating timelines and shifting narrative voices is not a stylistic indulgence but a deliberate technique to enact the novel's mystical ideas. The interplay of Ella's present-day crisis with Rumi and Shams' thirteenth-century encounter creates a dialogic narrative that dissolves historical distance and

situates ancient spiritual wisdom within modern dilemmas. Metaphors, voice modulations, and layered intertextual references function as textual bridges that connect these parallel storylines, allowing readers to navigate profound philosophical questions through accessible prose. Ahmad (2024) pushes this point further by arguing that Shafak's intertextual strategies transform the novel into a living conversation between canonical texts and contemporary thought. By doing so, he shows how Shafak's narrative mode embodies philosophical inquiry and artistic expression in equal measure.

While the dominant scholarly attention has rightly focused on the novel's spiritual dimensions, Akbar et al. (2020) expand the conversation by situating Shafak's work within the broader framework of postmodern literary critique. Their analysis brings out the novel's subtle confrontation with the fragmented realities of modern existence: the disintegration of identity, the contradictions of consumer society, and the pervasive sense of moral and existential drift. For Akbar and colleagues, Shafak's narrative form itself mirrors the disjointed, questioning spirit of the postmodern condition. In this reading, the novel's oscillation between multiple voices and temporal layers becomes a metaphor for the postmodern self—unsettled, hybrid, and searching for coherence in a world that resists fixed meanings. By engaging with hypocrisy and cultural dualities alongside spiritual renewal, Shafak's work is shown to challenge complacent modernity with a vision that is at once timeless and unsettlingly relevant.

### 3.3 Hybridity in Postcolonial literature

**Table1. Types of Hybridity**

| Type of Hybridity           | Definition                                                    | Key Scholars / Works                                        | Explanation & Example                                                                                                                                                 |
|-----------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Linguistic Hybridity</b> | Mixing of languages, dialects, or local idioms within a text. | Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin (The Empire Writes Back, 1989) | Postcolonial writers use English creatively by fusing it with local words, proverbs, or syntax — creating 'new Englishes'. Ex: Rushdie's <i>Midnight's Children</i> . |
| <b>Cultural Hybridity</b>   | Fusion of cultural practices, symbols,                        | Homi Bhabha (The Location of                                | Characters or settings reflect syncretic traditions — e.g.,                                                                                                           |

|                                    |                                                                                 |                                                                                                                                                      |
|------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                                    | rituals.                                                                        | Culture, 1994); Caribbean creole cultures, or (Colonial Desire, mixed religious practices. 1995)                                                     |
| <b>Political Hybridity</b>         | Hybrid political or legal systems combining colonial and indigenous structures. | Jan Nederveen Pieterse (Hybridity, So What?, 2001) Many postcolonial states retain elements of colonial law mixed with local governance.             |
| <b>Narrative/Formal Hybridity</b>  | Blending of literary genres, oral and written forms, myth and realism.          | Graham Huggan (The Postcolonial Exotic, 2001) Western novel forms combined with indigenous storytelling — e.g., Achebe's <i>Things Fall Apart</i> .  |
| <b>Racial/Biological Hybridity</b> | Historical discourse on racial mixing, reinterpreted to challenge purity myths. | Robert Young (Colonial Desire, 1995); Paul Gilroy (The Black Atlantic, 1993) Examines race mixing and reclaims it to show vibrant hybrid identities. |
| <b>Spatial Hybridity</b>           | Hybrid or liminal spaces where cultures intersect.                              | Homi Bhabha (Third Space, 1994) Diasporic spaces or migration zones in literature, e.g., immigrant neighborhoods.                                    |
| <b>Performative Hybridity</b>      | Hybridity enacted through performance, ritual, or mimicry.                      | Bhabha (1994); Rutherford (A Place Called Home, 1990) Festivals or identity plays that blend cultural signs in unexpected ways.                      |
| <b>Discursive Hybridity</b>        | Mixing multiple discourses — religious, secular, political.                     | Bill Ashcroft (Post-Colonial Transformation, 2001) Texts blending sacred and secular language — e.g., Shafak's <i>The Forty Rules of Love</i> .      |

Data shown in table 1 explicates different types of hybridity normally used in literary texts. Linguistic Hybridity captures how postcolonial writers seize the colonizer's language and reshape it into something local, playful, and subversive. Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, in their foundational *The Empire Writes Back* (1989), showed how writers like Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o break the rules of Standard English by weaving in native idioms, untranslatable words, and local rhythms. Quite similarly, Cultural Hybridity, as explored by thinkers like Homi Bhabha and Robert Young, pushes this idea further. It is about the everyday mixing of customs, beliefs, and practices that happens wherever cultures meet, often violently, sometimes creatively. In literature, you see this when characters inhabit blended identities: Caribbean creole traditions, African Christian rituals tinged with animist echoes, or South Asian weddings where East and West collide

under a single tent. Here, hybridity is a living archive of survival and invention.

Political Hybridity, highlighted by Jan Nederveen Pieterse, turns our attention to institutions and governance. Many postcolonial nations carry colonial-era laws in their legal systems while also honoring local customary laws and indigenous structures of authority. This hybridity is often messy and contested, but it is also a practical negotiation. The idea of Narrative or Formal Hybridity invites us to see how postcolonial writers bend genres to match the complexity of their worlds. Graham Huggan points out how authors like Chinua Achebe or Ngũgĩ mix the Western novel form with oral storytelling, folktales, and myth. Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* does not read like a British novel — its narrative voice is rooted in Igbo proverbs and collective memory. In this sense, the form itself becomes hybrid, reflecting the

cultural and epistemic mixing it narrates.

Meanwhile, Racial or Biological Hybridity uncovers how colonial discourse once weaponized the notion of “mixed blood” to justify hierarchies of purity and pollution. Robert Young and Paul Gilroy, in *Colonial Desire* and *The Black Atlantic*, remind us that the same racial mixing once seen as contamination is now often embraced as a metaphor for fluid, resilient identities. Gilroy’s concept of the Black Atlantic, for example, imagines the Atlantic Ocean as a space where African, European, and American histories converge and transform each other. Spatial Hybridity brings this mixing down to earth — or, more accurately, to the city, the border, or the street. Bhabha’s celebrated notion of the *Third Space* explains how cultural meaning is not fixed but negotiated in these liminal zones. Think of the immigrant neighborhood in diasporic fiction, part homeland, part hostland, entirely new. Such hybrid spaces become sites where old identities are reassembled and new ones imagined.

Table also shows that Performative Hybridity reveals that hybridity is not just something people *are* it’s something they *do*. Through festivals, rituals, mimicry, or even dress, communities perform their hybrid identities, sometimes playfully, sometimes subversively. Rutherford’s work on diaspora highlights how people “stage” belonging and difference at the same time, unsettling neat categories of culture and nation. Lastly, Discursive Hybridity reminds us that language is not neutral terrain. Bill Ashcroft shows how postcolonial texts blur lines between sacred and secular, mythic and rational, religious and political. In Elif Shafak’s *The Forty Rules of Love*, for example, the novel freely weaves Sufi philosophy with modern self-help psychology, Rumi’s mystical poetry with contemporary relationship advice — unsettling rigid boundaries between past and present, East and West, faith and doubt.

#### **4. Analysis and Discussions**

##### **4.1 Summary of the novel “The Forty Rules of love”**

There are two different cultures portrayed by

Shafak. The first part elaborates the story of a Jewish woman named Ella. It begins with a prologue and divided into small sections. Ella Rubinstein, a mother of three kids in her thirties is spending a perfect life. Somehow, she feels empty inside her but she was unknown of the feeling that what is actually missing. Sometimes she feels that she is stuck in a troubled marriage. She wanted to do the job and later she found a job as an editor in a literary agency. The first novel for her work was *Sweet Blasphemy* which is all about the love between Sufi and the mystical poet Rumi. She had to write a report on the novel *Sweet Blasphemy*. As she started working on the novel, she realized that there is a lack of love in her married life. She discovered her inner personality during this project. She was inspired to read the love story. She delves deeper into the philosophy of love and became fascinated by his teachings. During her work, she realized that she has a soft corner for the author Aziz.

The second part of the story is all about the love and companionship of Sufi dervish and Rumi. Sufi dervish found his true companion, a famous Islamic scholar Rumi. They spend much time together in a closed room. They always discuss more about the spirituality love and more. In addition, he also shares the wisdom and his teachings with Rumi. He emphasized the importance of the self-discovery which is essential to spend a healthy life. At the end Ella tried to find the author Aziz Zahra. She continued to email Aziz and they both connected in a strong way. Gradually she realized the fact that she is in love with Aziz. She experienced the loss of love and her own life in a form of Aziz. During her journey, she found the forty rules of love. These were the spiritual rules which guided her to confront her fears, insecurities, limitations, compassion, self-awareness. Because of this transformation in her life, she found a new sense of the purpose and belonging. She implemented and integrated the lessons which she has learned from the Rumi and Shams. She was happy to understand herself and the world around her because her perspective towards life have been changed.

**Table 2: Plot Structure**

| Novel                          | Conflict                                                                                                                                                                                             | Exposition                                                                                                                                               | Rising Action                                                                                                  | Climax                                                                                          | Falling Action                                                                     | Dénouement                                                                                                                                                            |
|--------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>The Forty Rules of Love</b> | <p>1.Inner conflict (shams and Ella found doubts, fears with themselves)</p> <p>2. spiritual conflict</p> <p>The novel highlights the conflict between the spiritual growth and material desires</p> | <p>Introduction of Ella who is in 30s and spending her unsatisfied life.</p> <p>2. the introduction of the 13<sup>th</sup> century poet Rumi's story</p> | <p>Ella started implementing forty rules of love and tried to understand herself and the world around her.</p> | <p>Ellas spiritual awakening and learned to let go off attachments, fears and insecurities.</p> | <p>Ellas departure from the materialistic world and she embraced her true self</p> | <p>Ella is feeling happy and complete after completing her spiritual journey and finds inner peace. She maintained her life according to the forty rules of love.</p> |

In *The Forty Rules of Love*, Elif Shafak tells a story that crosses cultures, centuries, and inner worlds. The novel brings together two distant lives: Ella Rubinstein, a modern American housewife stuck in an empty routine, and Rumi, the 13th-century Persian poet who finds new meaning through Shams of Tabriz. This blend of East and West, past and present, becomes the heart of the novel's structure and its conflicts. The story starts with Ella's ordinary life when she is in her late thirties, in a marriage that feels lifeless, searching for something she cannot quite name. At the same time, the novel introduces Rumi's world, a time when poetry and faith blurred lines and when people like Shams could turn settled lives upside down. Right from the beginning, Shafak mixes two worlds that seem unrelated, yet grow closer as Ella reads about Rumi's journey.

As Ella haunts into the manuscript, her quiet life slowly changes. The *Forty Rules of Love* start to seep into her everyday thoughts. She begins to question her fears, her marriage, and her safe suburban life. Here, hybridity is not just cultural rather it is personal: she stands at the meeting point between her old self and the new version she's becoming. She carries within her both the Western skepticism she grew up with and the Eastern mysticism she is now absorbing.

The turning point comes when Ella realizes she can no longer live half-awake. Inspired by Shams's fearless faith and Rumi's

transformation, she finds the courage to break away from her fear of judgment and comfort zones. The climax is not dramatic in a worldly sense, but deeply powerful: she chooses a spiritual path that mixes what she has learned from the East with the freedom she seeks in the West. In the falling action, Ella walks away from her old life. This step is her final crossing of borders leaving behind the secure but empty shell of a life, stepping into the unknown guided by love, faith, and self-trust. By the end, she is no longer only the Ella who baked dinner for her family and worried about gossip; she has become someone who holds the wisdom of Shams and Rumi within her own heart.

The resolution shows that hybridity, for Ella, means wholeness. She does not have to choose between East and West, faith and reason, past and present. She becomes a living bridge between all these worlds. Through her story, Shafak suggests that real love and truth grow in the spaces where different ways of thinking, living, and believing meet and transform each other. In this way, *The Forty Rules of Love* is more than just a spiritual tale; it is a story about the power of hybrid lives and ideas and about how mixing different worlds can help us find who we really are.

**Table 3: Setting of the novel**

| Novel                          | Time                                     | Atmosphere                                                                                    | Place                                                                                                                                |
|--------------------------------|------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>The Forty Rules of love</b> | 13th century<br>21 <sup>st</sup> century | modern, materialistic, orderly; a middle-class American household<br>Eastern vs Western world | There are various places in the novel. Mainly in Northampton, Massachusetts, USA. It includes Turkey, (Konya), London, Dervish lodge |

Elif Shafak's *The Forty Rules of Love* unfolds across two distinctly contrasting time periods and geographical settings, which together form a rich tapestry of hybridity, blending different historical moments with diverse cultural and spiritual atmospheres. The novel's timeline extends from the thirteenth century to the twenty-first century, uniting medieval Anatolia with contemporary suburban America. This temporal hybridity is not merely a historical contrast for narrative variety; rather, it demonstrates how spiritual wisdom and human longing endure across centuries. By intertwining the lives of Rumi and Shams of Tabriz with that of Ella Rubinstein, Shafak fuses the mystical past with the secular present, suggesting that spiritual truths are living forces that transcend temporal confines.

Atmospherically, the novel juxtaposes a modern, materialistic, and orderly American household with the fluid, unpredictable world of medieval Sufism. Ella's middle-class home in Northampton, Massachusetts represents Western ideals of stability, routine, and material comfort, yet beneath this apparent order lies her profound emotional dissatisfaction. In contrast, the atmosphere of the Eastern narrative is restless, mystical, and open to spiritual upheaval, with caravanserais, madrasas, and dervish lodges filled with debate, poetry, and transformative encounters. This atmospheric tension highlights the novel's hybrid dynamic: the static security of Western modernity opposed to the dynamic uncertainty of Eastern spirituality.

Geographically, Shafak constructs a map of hybridity that traverses multiple borders.

Northampton, Massachusetts symbolizes the insulated Western domestic sphere, while Konya in present-day Turkey, alongside glimpses of Damascus, Baghdad, and London, opens a wider cultural landscape populated by wandering mystics and spiritual seekers. London appears in the modern narrative through the figure of Aziz Zahara, the author whose manuscript connects Eastern mysticism with a Western reader. The dervish lodge, an important spiritual site in the novel, functions as a liminal space that is neither entirely public nor private, neither fully sacred nor purely worldly, and becomes a site where the mixing of ideas, identities, and traditions occurs.

Collectively, these settings demonstrate that hybridity in *The Forty Rules of Love* is not an abstract notion but is made tangible through the novel's interplay of time, atmosphere, and place. Ella's quiet domestic space becomes a portal into medieval Konya; her ordinary life is reawakened by Sufi teachings that travel from Rumi's thirteenth-century world to her twenty-first-century reality. The narrative thus asserts that true transformation often unfolds within these threshold spaces, where the boundaries of East and West, past and present, reason and faith intersect and inform one another. Through this multi-layered setting, Shafak turns the concept of place into a powerful narrative device that dramatizes how hybrid worlds i.e. historical, geographical, and spiritual can communicate across time and reshape individual lives.

**Table 4: Theme, Narration and Point of View**

| Novel                          | Theme                                                                                                                     | Point of View                             | Narrative Technique |
|--------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|---------------------|
| <b>The forty Rules of Love</b> | Love and spirituality, role of mentorship and guidance, importance of self-discovery, importance of wisdom in modern life | First person because Ella tells her story | Multiple narratives |

Shafak's *The Forty Rules of Love* is a complex narrative that weaves its thematic concerns, point of view, and narrative technique into a unified exploration of hybridity and spiritual transformation. The central themes of the novel include love and spirituality, the transformative role of mentorship and guidance, the necessity of self-discovery, and the enduring value of wisdom within modern life. These themes are not treated in isolation; rather, they interconnect to suggest that true personal fulfillment requires a synthesis of ancient spiritual insights with contemporary realities. The novel argues that the timeless teachings of figures such as Shams of Tabriz and Rumi remain relevant as a counterpoint to the emptiness and fragmentation of modern existence. Through Ella Rubinstein's journey, the narrative demonstrates that love, when understood in its deepest mystical sense, becomes the force that dissolves fear, doubt, and narrow self-interest.

The novel employs a first-person point of view primarily through Ella, who serves not only as the reader's guide into the story but also as a mirror for the modern reader's own conflicts and questions. Through Ella's intimate reflections, Shafak invites readers to witness an inner struggle that echoes the spiritual crises faced by Rumi and Shams centuries earlier. This personal perspective grounds the narrative's larger spiritual questions within the daily life of an ordinary individual, emphasizing that the search

for truth is not confined to saints or scholars but remains available to anyone willing to listen deeply and change. Furthermore, Shafak's use of multiple narratives enriches the novel's hybrid structure. The text shifts fluidly among the voices of Ella, Shams, Rumi, and various secondary characters, allowing multiple viewpoints to coexist within a single story. This technique breaks the limitations of a single, dominant perspective and embodies the very hybridity the novel celebrates: a meeting of East and West, past and present, mystic and skeptic. By presenting diverse voices and layered experiences, Shafak resists a singular, linear narrative and instead offers a pluralistic vision where multiple truths, cultures, and emotional journeys intersect.

In this way, the novel's themes, point of view, and narrative technique work together to argue that human understanding is reflected when different voices and traditions are allowed to converse freely. *The Forty Rules of Love* does not merely tell a story of individual transformation; it demonstrates that spiritual wisdom, when translated into multiple forms and perspectives, can speak powerfully to modern dilemmas and bridge the gap between distant worlds. The result is a text that stands as both a celebration of hybridity and a subtle invitation for readers to embrace the same openness and curiosity that its characters represent.

**Table 5: Characters and Roles**

| Novel                          | Major Characters                                   | Minor Characters                                                                | Protagonist     | Antagonist                       |
|--------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------|----------------------------------|
| <b>The Forty Rules of Love</b> | Ella Rubinstein, Rumi, shams of Tabrez, Aziz Zahra | The Guard, Shams disciples, The whirling dervish, Ella's husband, Rumi's family | Ella Rubinstein | Shams inner self, Rumi's critics |

In *The Forty Rules of Love*, Elif Shafak's characters are carefully shaped to show how different worlds can meet within a single story. Each character brings together elements that seem separate at first but gradually show how spiritual and cultural boundaries can blur. Ella Rubinstein is the central figure through whom this idea comes to life. She lives in modern Massachusetts, surrounded by family and daily routines, but she feels empty and restless. When she begins reading a manuscript about Rumi and Shams, her ordinary life starts to connect with a distant world she has never known. Ella changes as she lets ideas from another time and culture shape her thoughts. Through her, the novel shows how a person's identity can grow when they allow other ways of thinking to enter their life.

Rumi, the famous poet, also represents this meeting of different ways of living. He is a respected scholar in his community, devoted to study and teaching. When Shams of Tabriz enters his life, Rumi's understanding of love and faith shifts completely. He becomes more than a scholar; he turns into a poet whose words speak across centuries. Rumi's journey shows how someone can hold onto learning and tradition while also opening up to new spiritual truths. Shams of Tabriz is the figure who stirs this change. He is a travelling dervish who refuses to settle into any one place or role. Shams believes that true faith cannot stay locked in rigid forms. His presence forces others to question what they know and to see the world in a new way. In this sense, Shams represents the heart of the novel's idea of mixing: he stands where the known and unknown meet. Aziz Zahra, the writer whose manuscript Ella reads, connects the past to the present. He brings the wisdom of Rumi and Shams into a modern context. His letters and words cross the distance between Ella's quiet American home and the ancient streets of Konya. Aziz himself is a person who lives between cultures and beliefs, showing how old teachings can still reach people today.

The smaller characters in the story expose what happens when people face ideas that challenge them. Rumi's critics, for example, fear what Shams represents because it threatens the rules

they live by. Ella's husband stands for the comfort and expectations of family life that Ella must question if she wants to change. The guards, disciples, and townspeople around Shams and Rumi show how communities often resist people who break their habits.

In this novel, there is no single villain in the usual sense. Instead, the real struggle is inside the people themselves and in the resistance they face when old ways of living are tested by new truths. For Shams, the struggle is to keep his own faith alive while facing doubt and fear around him. For Ella, the struggle is to listen to her own heart, even when it means letting go of what feels safe. Together, these characters show that *The Forty Rules of Love* is not just about spiritual advice but about what happens when people allow different ideas and times to meet inside their own lives. Each character, whether large or small, plays a part in showing that change is possible when people open themselves to what they do not yet know. In this way, the novel gives life to the idea that blending different worlds can help people find a deeper truth within themselves.

## 5. Conclusion

Elif Shafak's *The Forty Rules of Love* shows that hybridity is not simply a theoretical idea but a creative force that brings together different times, cultures, and spiritual traditions through narrative. By weaving Ella Rubinstein's life in twenty-first-century America with the spiritual bond of Rumi and Shams of Tabriz in the thirteenth century, Shafak demonstrates how Sufi wisdom can continue to cross cultural and historical boundaries (Kumar, 2017). The novel's narrative structure, which shifts between multiple perspectives and timelines, reflects what Bhabha (1994) describes as the hybrid space where cultural meaning is constantly negotiated. Ella's first-person voice draws the reader into a modern Western setting, while the voices of Rumi, Shams, and other figures revive a distant, mystical past. This interplay shows that storytelling itself can be a site of cultural and spiritual mixing (Göknar, 2013).

Culturally, Shafak's work resists rigid separations between East and West by showing

how Sufi ideas can resonate with contemporary readers beyond traditional Islamic contexts (Yavuz, 2013). Ella's transformation demonstrates that identity can expand when it opens itself to wisdom that lies outside familiar boundaries. Shafak's narrative aligns with Said's (1978) broader argument that literature can question static notions of cultural identity by moving ideas across borders. Spiritually, the novel argues that love, in its deepest sense, can break down the walls that fear and convention build. As Rumi and Shams challenge religious orthodoxy in their time, Ella challenges her own settled domestic life. In this way, the story supports what Kermani (2004) shows about Rumi's continuing relevance as a poet whose work connects spiritual longing across cultures and eras. Altogether, *The Forty Rules of Love* proves that narrative, cultural, and spiritual hybridity is not only possible but also necessary for growth in a divided world. Through a story that connects past and present, Western skepticism and Eastern mysticism, Shafak invites readers to see literature as a bridge where different ways of living and thinking can meet. In doing so, she reminds us that transformation often begins when people and ideas are allowed to cross boundaries and shape each other a new.

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