

# Rumi, Sufi spirituality and the teacher-disciple relationship in Eli Shafak's *The Forty Rules of Love*

<https://doi.org/10.30674/scripta.84280>

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In William Patrick Patterson's *Struggle of the Magicians*, a detailed study of the relationship between the prominent figures of Western esotericism, G. I. Gurdjieff and P. D. Ouspensky, he writes 'Only in a time as confused as ours could one think that the teacher-student relationship - an archetypal and sacred form - exists as an option, rather than a necessary requirement, a station on the way' (1997: 92). My paper examines the numerous ways in which the famous teacher-disciple relationship that existed between Muhammad Jalal ad-Din, known to the anglophone world as Rumi, and his spiritual guide and mentor, Shams of Tabriz, is represented in Elif Shafak's novel *The Forty Rules of Love* (2010) and how her depiction of this relationship is predicated upon her knowledge of, and belief in, the general principles of what can be termed 'Western Sufism'. Although she had previously thematised elements of Sufi dialectics in her earlier fiction and clear, if minor, references to Sufi philosophy permeated novels such as *The Bastard of Istanbul* (2007), Shafak's fascination with the teachings of Rumi and Shams of Tabriz reaches its culmination and most significant artistic expression in *The Forty Rules of Love*. Published in 2010, the novel situates a fictionalised representation of the relationship between Rumi and Shams at the centre of the narrative and provides an overt depiction of the emanationalist, perennialist and universalist ethics contained within Sufi dialectics. In addition, given that Shafak's text represents one of the more prominent and commercially successful contributions to what Amira El-Zein (2010: 71-85) has called 'the Rumi phenomenon' my paper examines how, in privileging the aesthetics and the interests of American readers over conveying a more complete and more nuanced image of Sufism, Shafak succumbs to the oversimplification and decontextualisation of Rumi's teachings perpetrated by the Western popularisers of his work.

Only in a time as confused as ours could one think that the teacher-student relationship - an archetypal and sacred form - exists as an option, rather than a necessary requirement, a station on the way. (William Patrick Patterson 1997: 92, quoted in Caplan 2011: 44)

Three short phrases tell the story of my life: I was raw, I got cooked, I burned. (Jalaluddin Rumi, quoted in Shah 1964: 69)

Given the increasing public prominence accorded to discourses relating to complex global trends such as migration, cosmopolitanism and transnationalism, it is unsurprising that within literary studies, increasing critical attention has been focused upon writers whose work engages with the political, cultural and human consequences of these momentous, at times overwhelming, global developments. One such writer is the Turkish novelist Elif Shafak,<sup>1</sup> who in texts such as *The Gaze* (2006), *Honour* (2012) and *Three Daughters of Eve* (2016) depicts Muslim, predominantly female protagonists who, caught in the maelstrom of globalisation, cultural upheaval, and the pervasive attractions of Western secularism, face numerous familial, generational and gender demands upon their emerging personal identities.

What is particularly noteworthy in relation to Shafak's writing is the extent to which its rejection of religious and cultural fundamentalism and the concurrent promotion of a more fluid, cosmopolitan response to the dilemmas confronting contemporary society is predicated upon her knowledge of, and belief in, the general principles of what can be loosely termed 'Western Sufism'. Shafak has on several occasions openly acknowledged her interest in Sufism, most noticeably in an essay entitled 'The Celestial Eye', contained in her collection of non-fiction articles *Black Milk* (2007). This specific autobiographical essay recounts how Shafak gravitated from a position of aggressive atheism based on her proclivity to 'wrap several shawls of "isms" around my shoulders', to one where a spiritual guide, euphemistically referred to as 'Dame Dervish', entered her life. Shafak reveals how 'motivated by her, I started to read about Sufism. One book led to another. The more I read the more I unlearned. Because that is what Sufism does to you, it makes you erase what you know and what you are sure of' (Shafak

1 Shafak, who writes in both Turkish and English, is the daughter of a Turkish diplomat. She was born in Strasbourg and spent her formative years in Madrid, before moving for a short period to the United States. She currently resides in Oxford, England. Shafak's writing has an unusual status within the English and Turkish literary worlds. While she was a well-established writer in Turkey (who was particularly popular among university students), in 2004 she took the deliberate decision to start writing in English and translate her novels back into Turkish in collaboration with professional translators. As regards the Turkish edition of *The Forty Rules of Love* Shafak has stressed that the Turkish version was not simply a translation, but was the product of an arduous process of rewriting the novel with her co-translator Kadir Yigit Us. The Turkish version was actually published one year before the publication of the original work in English.

2007: 4). She confesses that, of all the Sufi poets and philosophers she read about during those formative years:

There were two that moved me deeply: Rumi and his legendary spiritual companion, Shams of Tabriz. Living in thirteenth-century Anatolia, in an age of deeply embedded bigotries and clashes, they had stood for a universal spirituality, opening the doors to people of all backgrounds equally. They spoke of love as the essence of life, the universal philosophy connecting all humanity across centuries, cultures and cities. As I kept reading . . . Rumi's words began to tenderly remove the shawls I had always wrapped around myself, layer upon layer.  
(Shafak 2007: 219)

This fascination with the teachings of Muhammad Jalal ad-Din, known to the anglophone world as Rumi, and his spiritual guide and mentor, Shams of Tabriz, reaches its culmination and most significant artistic expression in Shafak's novel *The Forty Rules of Love*, published in 2010.<sup>2</sup> Although she had previously 'thematized' Sufism in her earlier fiction and clear, if minor, references to Sufi philosophy permeated previous novels, such as *The Bastard of Istanbul* (2007), *The Forty Rules of Love* situates a fictionalised representation of the relationship between Rumi and Shams at the centre of the narrative and provides a more overt depiction of the emanationalist, perennialist and universalist ethics contained within what can be termed Sufi dialectics. The novel contains two parallel but interrelated narratives, the first of which is situated in contemporary Massachusetts, where Ella Rubenstein, an unhappily married forty-year-old Jewish American housewife finds temporary employment working for a literary agency. Her first assignment is to read and produce a detailed report on a work of fiction entitled *Sweet Blasphemy*, written by an unpublished novelist called Aziz Zahara, who claims to have written the book 'purely out of admiration and love for the great philosopher, mystic and poet Rumi and his beloved Shams of Tabriz' (15). The second narrative strand of Shafak's novel consists of the contents of Zahara's text which, situated in thirteenth-century Anatolia, relates how in a period of political instability, fanaticism and impending violence, Shams of Tabriz essentially transformed Rumi – at that particular time a prominent Muslim

2 All further references to this text will be provided in the body of this essay.

cleric and expert in Islamic jurisprudence – into a committed mystic and poet of incomparable ability. In relation to the two narrative strands contained in *The Forty Rules of Love*, a clear connection is drawn between the mystical love that binds Rumi and Shams of Tabriz, and the extramarital affair that arises between Ella and the Sufi adept Aziz, who, the novel suggests, may be the literal reincarnation of Shams himself. Reading *Sweet Blasphemy*, and becoming increasingly captivated by the tale of Rumi and Shams, Ella becomes estranged from her emotionally distant husband and expresses a growing dissatisfaction with her marriage, the restrictive gender roles she had previously embraced and the confines of her prosperous middle-class lifestyle. Ella's encounter with Aziz's manuscript, her exposure to Rumi's poetry and, ultimately, the personality of Aziz himself help her to recognise her need for a more spiritual lifestyle and an attachment to a form of Sufism which emphasises the essential unity of all faiths and the paramount importance of love.

### 'The Rumi phenomenon' in popular culture

*The Forty Rules of Love* is undoubtedly one of the more prominent and commercially successful<sup>3</sup> contributions to what Amira El-Zein has called 'the Rumi phenomenon' (El-Zein 2010; Barks 1995; Lewis 2007). While he has long been a renowned figure in the Persian and Turkish speaking worlds, as well as the Indo-Pakistan subcontinent, in the last few decades Rumi has become a recognised poet in the West, particularly in the United States. Triggered by Coleman Barks's 1995 volume of translations (or more accurately 'renderings') entitled *The Essential Rumi*, and UNESCO's declaration in 2006 that the year 2007 would be the international 'Rumi year', the thirteenth-century Islamic mystic has recently achieved a remarkable public visibility, to the extent that in 1996 he became the bestselling poet in North America, selling in excess of several hundred thousand copies in a country where Pulitzer prize-winning poets struggle to sell more than 10,000 books. Rumi's posthumous literary success has been accompanied by a number of fictionalised biographies relating to his life and work, including not only *The Forty Rules of Love*, but also Nigel Watt's *The Way of Love* (1999), Muriel Maufroy's *Rumi's Daughter* (2005), Connie Zweig's *A Moth to the Flame*

3 The novel became an international bestseller and has sold more than 700,000 copies in Turkey alone.

(2006), Nahal Tajadod's *Rumi: The Fire of Love* (2008, originally published in French as *Roumi le Brule* in 2004) Ahmet Umet's *The Dervish Gate* (2012, originally published in Turkish as *Bab-I Esrar* in 2008) and Rabi Samkara Bala's *A Mirrored Life: the Rumi novel* (2015). Moreover, as Franklin Lewis has pointed out in his magisterial biography *Rumi: Past and Present, East and West* (2007), interest in Rumi has recently transcended the printed word and moved into various multimedia formats, inspiring musicians, choreographers, film-makers, video-artists and others, with a concurrent visibility in the outer reaches of cyberspace (Lewis 2007: 2). For example, the American minimalist composer Philip Glass has created a huge multimedia piece entitled *Masters of Grace*, complete with 3D glasses and featuring a libretto of 114 poems by Rumi (*ibid.*). In 1998, the celebrity New Age guru Deepak Chopra produced a CD entitled *A Gift of Love*, which included none other than Madonna, Martin Sheen and Goldie Hawn reciting some of Rumi's verses, and in the same year the same popular singer wrote and recorded a song entitled 'Frozen', included in her *Ray of Light* album (1998), which she claimed is based on a poem (unspecified) originally penned by the Sufi poet. These are just some of the more prominent examples of how the contemporary American hunger for metaphysical knowledge appears to have found in Rumi the ultimate source of inspiration and make it possible to argue, as Amira El-Zein has done, that 'more than any other past or contemporary poet ... [h]e is considered by many Americans today as a spiritual guide' (El-Zein 2010: 71).

Rumi's success as a pop-culture icon in the United States can partly be explained by the various and gradual processes of domestication, appropriation and Americanisation of the Rumi narrative, as well as a result of the considerable effort that has been expended in presenting Sufism as an important counterpoint to the religious extremism which dominated the Islamophobic discourses following 9/11. It can also be fruitfully contextualised within what Georg Feuerstein has defined as the secular world's 'widespread revival of interest in the experimental, mystical dimensions of religion' (Feuerstein 2006: 14). According to Elena Furlanetto, this interest should not be viewed as a new or even isolated phenomenon but rather as a culmination of a much older cultural dialogue between American literature and Sufi poetry (Furlanetto 2013: 202). This is a perspective endorsed by Saeed Zarrabi-Zadeh, who has charted the various ways in which readers in the West began to discover the work of Rumi approximately two hundred years ago, when the pioneers Orientalists and Romanticists of the late eighteenth

and nineteenth centuries – who perceived Rumi as part of the mystical and visionary Orient – paved the way for his impact on Western spiritual discourse (Zarrabi-Zadeh 2015: 287). Zarrabi-Zadeh charts the manner in which Rumi's teachings subsequently impinged upon Western consciousness and how he was considered a spiritual saint *par excellence* by advocates of New Age spirituality in the second half of the twentieth century, a position he has retained ever since (*ibid.*). Interestingly, Zarrabi-Zadeh also contends that the contemporary Western tendency to wrench Rumi from his Islamic context and reduce his sacred message to a bland commercial and consumerist product is, in historical terms, simply the most recent manifestation of a long tradition and he laments how the popular (as opposed to the scholarly) perception of Rumi's spirituality does not fully reflect the perennial philosophy to which the poet belongs and merely encourages 'a form of vague spirituality entangled in relativity and temporality' (*ibid.* 301), Zarrabi-Zadeh expresses concern with the manner in which 'the interpretation of Rumi's ideas through a circular hermeneutical process has been coupled with the imposition upon his Sufi system of foreign mystical philosophical and religious frameworks that are not necessarily congruous with his own mystical principles' (*ibid.* 288). Accordingly, this tendency has led to the decontextualisation of Rumi's mysticism from the epistemological context to which it belongs and represents an essential violation of the constituent parts of his Sufi system. This viewpoint is shared by Franklin Lewis, who has criticised those contemporary spiritual practitioners who have taken extensive liberties with the content of Rumi's poems and whose representations of his teachings consequently appear 'blurred and bland' (Lewis 2007: 8). Pointing out how 'when it came to differences of creed, we should not be deceived by his [Rumi's] tolerance into imagining that all beliefs were equal to him' (*ibid.* 12) Lewis states:

It will simply not do to extract quotations out of context and present Rumi as a prophet of the presumptions of an unchurched and syncretic spirituality – while Rumi does indeed demonstrate a tolerant and inclusive understanding of religion ... [He] did not come to his theology of tolerance and inclusive spirituality by turning away from traditional Islam or organised religion, but through an immersion in it; his spiritual yearning stemmed from a radical desire to follow the example of the Prophet Mohammad and actualise his potential as a perfect Muslim. (Lewis 2007: 20)

It has been argued – most notably by Elena Furlanetto, who has produced a noteworthy scholarly study on *The Forty Rules of Love* – that in her presentation of the Rumi narrative, Shafak ‘succumbs to the oversimplification and decontextualisation of his work perpetrated by the Western popularisers of the Rumi phenomenon’ and that she ‘privileges the aesthetics and the interests of the American readers over conveying a more complete image of Sufism’ (Furlanetto 2013: 204). It is my contention that the reality is somewhat more complex: while Shafak is certainly culpable of expunging essential references to Islamic doctrine in her depiction of Rumi’s teachings and is undoubtedly complicit in presenting the Rumi’s narrative as emblematic of a ‘brand’ of universal Sufism that is of increasingly global importance, this is, I believe, an inevitable consequence of her adherence to a form of Sufism which has been identified as essentially Western in orientation rather than traditionally Islamic.<sup>4</sup> While it is important to avoid essentialist or normative stances regarding what can be said to constitute ‘Sufism’, which is best understood as an umbrella term for a diversity of often competing religious traditions and spiritual activities, Mark Sedgwick has pointed out the various ways in which Sufism as popularised in the West has developed distinct characteristics related to important historical developments and the specificities of cultural reception (Sedgwick 2016; van Bruinessen and Howell 2012; Green 2012; Sorgenfrei 2013; Raudvere and Stenberg 2009). Limited space prohibits a thorough and detailed explication of the various ways in which so-called Western or ‘neo-Sufism’ can be said to differ from Sufism in its classical form; in general terms the former often – but not always – propagates a psychological system rather than a faith-based theological exegesis, and privileges the universalist strand embedded in Sufi philosophy.<sup>5</sup> Traditional Sufism, however, is often inextricably linked to the Islamic world, does not reject the world of conventional religious observance

- 4 In the list of ‘sources’ reproduced at the end of the novel, Shafak cites Coleman Barks, Idris Shah, Kabir Helmundski, Camille Hetminski, William Chitwick, Ann Marie Schiminell and R. A. Nicolson, all of whom would be considered figures of seminal importance within Western Sufism.
- 5 In the twentieth century, Western Sufism was propagated by figures such as the Greek Armenian George Gurdjieff (1866–1947), the Russian mathematician and philosopher Pytor Ouspensky (1878–1947), Alfred Richard Orage (1873–1934), editor of the influential *New Age* magazine, J. G. Bennett (1897–1974), a British scientist and reputed British spy, and most recently Idris Shah (1924–96), believed to have been the foremost exponent of Sufi ideas in the West.

and recognises Islam in both its exoteric and esoteric dimensions. This article argues therefore, that far from misrepresenting Sufism as such, Shafak's novel incorporates within its narrative design important elements of disembodied Sufism as they are generally perceived and promoted globally, not least her detailed depiction of the teacher–disciple relationship, which is such an essential aspect of Sufism in its various manifestations.

### Jallaluddin Rumi and the Mevlevi Sufi Order

Who then was Jallaluddin Rumi and in what was his relationship to Sufism? Moreover, in what ways are important elements of his spiritual philosophy reflected in *The Forty Rules of Love*? As Franklin Lewis has emphasised, although there currently exists a bewildering array of materials on Rumi, both popular and scholarly (as well as devotional), 'we remain some way off from reconstructing an exhaustive biography detailing all that can be known about him' (Lewis 2007: 4). This difficulty is compounded by the indisputable fact that a hagiographical tradition, which uncritically perpetuated a legendary image of the poet, emerged immediately after his death in 1273. As regards reliable biographical information, it is accepted as fact that Rumi was born in 1207 in Balkh, Persia (today Afghanistan). When he was twelve years old, Balkh was invaded by Tatars and his father fled the province with his family and gravitated towards Rum (Asiatic Turkey). They eventually settled in Konya, where the future poet and Sufi scholar acquired the name 'al-Rumi', taken from the name of the area. Upon his father's death Rumi assumed the position of Shaykh in the religious community in Konya, where he taught and preached for several years. He met and became a disciple of the controversial Shams of Tabriz in 1244,<sup>6</sup> and is believed to have died in

6 As Franklin Lewis (2007: 135) points out, we know considerably less about Shams of Tabriz than we know about Rumi. It is believed that he came from a family of spiritual practitioners and there are suggestions that his forebears were connected to various fringe sects of Sufism whose affiliates experimented with highly unorthodox practices. While legend portrayed Shams as an untutored wandering dervish possessed of miraculous powers, it appears that Shams was fully apprised of the learning of his day, had studied Islamic law, and possessed extensive knowledge of mathematics and astronomy. As regards the remarkable influence that Shams was to wield over Rumi, Inyat Khan has written: 'The impact of Shams ... upon the erstwhile scholar Rumi was so overwhelming that he became practically overnight one of the great Murshids (teachers) the Sufis

1273. The disciples and descendants of Rumi subsequently formed a confraternity, or Sufi Order, committed to following the mystical practices, spiritual discipline and teachings which they traced back to Rumi himself. This Brotherhood (which also includes female members) is officially called the Mevlevi Order, although the adherents of the Order are best known to the general populace as ‘the whirling dervishes’, after their distinctive practice of meditative turning. As Zarrabi-Zadeh has outlined, Rumi’s significant contribution to the intellectual and spiritual development of Sufism was facilitated by the Mevlevi Order’s amicable relations with their Ottoman rulers and Rumi’s fame was spread, not only throughout Anatolia, but also in territories occupied by the Ottoman Empire (Zarrabi-Zadeh 2015: 287).

In relation to what Rumi actually taught, his doctrinal system was essentially based around his conviction that the entire path of mystical perfection is centred around Man’s desire to return to his divine origin, thereby returning to the ontological unity he had once enjoyed. For Rumi, the all-consuming problem of human existence stems from the painful existence of imperfection caused by alienation from our essential source. His metaphysics depict the beginning of creation as a unified realm, where Man’s inward reality and the virtual existence of all created things were present with God in a state of harmonious unity. In order to once again experience this original state of spiritual perfection, Rumi emphasises its gradual and progressive nature and insists that the mystical path involves passing through limitless successive spiritual ‘stations’ (Zarrabi-Zadeh 2015: 290). He characterises the starting point of Man’s mystical journey as a purging of what are known amongst Sufis as the *nafs*, defined as the bestial aspect of Man’s nature, an adversary that hinders each individual from achieving mystical advancement. It is, therefore, essential to struggle against the deceitful nature of the *nafs* and eradicate the deluding power of the partial intellect. If the appellant is successful in these attempts, the mystical journey can ultimately reach a stage where neither the *nafs* nor the intellect govern the soul; instead it is the soul’s ‘pure untarnished essence’, or what Zarrabi-Zadeh refers to as the ‘unrestricted and ineffable heart’ (*ibid.* 291), which dominates the disciple’s existence.

have ever known’ (Feuerstein 2006: 25). Will Johnson, in his short but fascinating biography of Rumi’s life and teachings, simply claims that ‘Shams was the key to Rumi’s lock’ (see Johnson 2007: 12).

## The Forty Rules of Love

Perhaps the most singular element of Rumi's spiritual doctrine and one which has significantly contributed to his current status as a precursor of modern, unchurched and syncretic spirituality is the emphasis he places upon the role of love as the major component of the entire mystical journey. A great deal of Rumi's poetry refers to the state where, through love, 'the seer becometh the eye, the eye, the seer', and when Man begins traveling on his spiritual journey it is the reciprocal love between the aspirant and God that plays the pivotal role in this gradual and arduous practice. Rumi attributes the motion of all particles through the cycle of forms to the powerful attraction of love and perceives all creation within both the physical and metaphysical worlds as a great upward spiral of transmutation (Zarrabi-Zadeh 2015: 296). If the individual soul frees itself from the taint which it has contracted in the material world, it can escape those subjective values which function as the veils of truth. When this occurs, it is possible to live in the realm of the Beloved and practise the art of love which resides in the depth of the psyche. In other words, whether its immediate object be human or divine, real or phenomenal, love ultimately leads to a knowledge of God. As Will Johnson attests: 'Become a lover. This is Rumi's message to us' (Johnson 2007: 42).

As the title of Shafak's novel suggests, *The Forty Rules of Love* engages with Rumi's philosophy of love on a number of seemingly unrelated but ultimately interconnected levels. This is partly due to the ideological positioning of the text; Rumi's advocacy of love and tolerance is presented by Shafak as evidence of an 'Other' Islam, far removed from the rhetorics of fundamentalism frequently associated with Muslim fanatics and equally the poet's religious message is used in the text to highlight the incompatibility of genuine spirituality and institutionalised religion, the latter being depicted as dogmatic, reified and essentially divisive. This viewpoint is frequently voiced by the character of Aziz, who, in a letter to Ella dated 2008, writes: 'I am spiritual ... religiosity and spirituality are not the same thing and I believe that the gap between the two has never been greater' (145). More significantly, Shafak's literary agenda and belief in the timeless relevance of Rumi's teachings is primarily embodied in the character of Ella Rubenstein.

A rigidly disciplined personality, living a comfortable, bourgeois existence with no margin for unpredictability or surprise, Ella's life 'consisted of still waters – a predictable sequence of habits, needs and preference' (1).

She acknowledges how 'It was a pity that, at almost forty, she hadn't been able to make more of her life' (36). The fact that Ella is soon to turn forty is highly significant on a number of levels; firstly, Rumi is said to have deepened his spiritual search at this particular age (as did other prominent figures within the Islamic spiritual tradition, such as the Prophet Muhammad who received his first revelations while in the fourth decade of his life and Al-Ghazali was of a similar age when he, in a similar way to Rumi, turned from *fiqh* to *tasawwufas*). More mundanely, she is evidently suffering from the symptoms of a classic 'mid-life' crisis. As her birthday approaches, she commits to paper a list of resolutions aimed at providing a form of emotional ballast against an increasing sense of existential atrophy and stagnation. Confessing that 'I feel like I have reached a milestone in my life' (113), she blames herself for 'not ageing well', and feels 'particularly insecure about her body, her hips and thighs and the shape of her breasts, which were far from perfect after three kids and all these years' (304). Ella's crisis is compounded by her oldest daughter Jeanette's unexpected decision to inform the family of her impending marriage. When faced with her mother's outspoken disapproval, Jeanette responds by telling Ella, 'I love him, Mom. Does that not mean anything to you? Do you remember that word from somewhere?' (9). Her daughter's outburst forces Ella to confront her dispassionate and rational views on love, encapsulated by her banal protestation that 'women don't marry the men they fall in love with' (10), as 'love is only a sweet feeling bound to come and quickly go away' (10). For Ella love is simply for those 'looking for some rhyme or reason in this widely spinning world' (78). Nevertheless, Jeanette's pointed comments have clearly touched upon a troubling issue for Ella as, in a moment of contemplation, she confronts her true feelings on the subject of love, and asks herself: 'But what about those who had long given up the quest?' (78).

Ella's increasing awareness of the emotional and spiritual vacuum at the centre of her life is directly connected to the character of Rumi, as he is represented in Aziz's novel *Sweet Blasphemy*, a text which Ella has been asked to review. Rumi is depicted as suffering from an inexplicable sadness, a situation at odds with his visible wealth and numerous achievements. Described as a prominent scholar of Islam 'who knew everything except the pits of love' (74), Rumi, despite his increasing fame and public prominence, remains inwardly dissatisfied. When pondering upon his enviable litany of achievements he asks himself, 'Why then, do I feel this void inside me, growing

deeper and wider with each passing day? It gnaws at my soul like a disease and accompanies me wherever I go' (99).

At the mid-point of their lives, therefore, both Ella and Rumi find themselves afflicted by an existential emptiness, exemplified by a condition of spiritual and moral exhaustion. It is fortunate, therefore, that their lives are fundamentally transformed by the influence of two remarkable individuals – Aziz Zahara and Shams of Tabriz respectively – who, through their guidance and teaching, impart a more profound understanding of the potential of love in all its manifestations. Moreover, the parallel experiences of Ella and Rumi, separated as they are by gender, history, culture and religious affiliation serves as an important literary device whereby Shafak can investigate the function of the teacher–disciple dynamic within Sufism and the essential role such a relationship plays in the individual's esoteric odyssey.

Before examining the extent to which *The Forty Rules of Love* reproduces classic tropes and strategies of the teacher–disciple discourse ubiquitous to Sufism, it is important at this juncture to outline how, since time immemorial, Sufis of all persuasions have perceived authentic spiritual life as a matter of initiation and discipleship and championed the role that the authoritative spiritual guide performs in relation to the seeker's desire for inner growth.

### Dimensions of the master–disciple relationship

While the concept of spiritual 'transmission' has largely been eradicated from contemporary, New Age discourses, within Sufism – and of course, other religious and spiritual traditions – the 'path' or 'the Way' is constantly renewed by successive teachers who are referred to as Sages (*arif*), Guides (*murshid*), Elders (*pir*) or Sheikhs. In relation to both the history and praxis of Sufism, a system of discipleship to spiritual teachers originated which involved the aspirant developing his/her spiritual proclivities under the supervision of a guide. This guide operates as an indispensable link between the disciple and his/her objective and is ultimately responsible for organising the inherent flexibility of the Sufi work. By practising a variety of structured activities, teachers endeavour to transmit to their pupils the 'Baraka' – essentially, an implacable force imparted to people, situations, places and objects for a specific reason – they receive from their own Masters. As Idris Shah writes: 'To be a Sufi and to study the Way is to have a certain attitude. This attitude is produced by the effect of Sufi teachers who exercise an instrumental function in relation to the Seeker' (Shah 1982: 24). In their

proper application, therefore, these teaching techniques depend upon an interrelation between the Master and the disciple, primarily because one of the major obstacles many seekers face is that they cannot access ‘the real’ without guidance from teachers who have transcended ordinary limitations and embraced the imperatives of esoteric knowledge.

Essentially, the teacher embodies and symbolises ‘the Work’ itself (of which s/he is a product) and also the continuity of the system (the chain of transmission). The Sufi teacher does not simply impart knowledge or expect mere behavioural modification on behalf of the disciple; rather the guru’s principal function is to directly communicate transcendental reality. The ultimate objective of spiritual transmission therefore, is attuned to exploiting unexpected opportunities in which skilful intervention may catalyse a profound ontological shift in the student’s awareness. Lex Hixton, a contemporary teacher of Sufism, has advised ‘every seeker [to] receive traditional initiation and personal guidance from at least one authentic spiritual guide. Then one no longer simply experiments with contemplation but lives contemplative practice’ (quoted in Feuerstein 2006: 223). This perspective is put more succinctly by Georg Feuerstein, who writes: ‘I cannot imagine why one would dare to cross the shark-infested waters of the ego without a boatman’ (quoted in Caplan 2011: 72).

In *The Forty Rules of Love*, Rumi’s ‘boatman’, Shams of Tabriz, informs a young villager how ‘people everywhere are struggling on their own for fulfilment, but without any guidance as to how to achieve it’ (207). For Ella and Rumi, who are the fortunate recipients of such guidance, the aim of their respective teachers is to act as a transmitter of grounded spirituality by facilitating their disciples’ latent transformative capacities. This involves the deployment of a specific pedagogical methodology which is aimed at disarming the manifestations of the ego and facilitating the emergence of a more fully developed, intuitive approach to life. Ella and Rumi are taught that objective spiritual practice resides in the ego-transcendence, as opposed to the chimera of ego-fulfilment. This realisation leads to a fundamental shift in their inner perception and is accompanied by a recognition that authentic spiritual life is essentially deconstructive in nature. This perspective is evident in Rumi’s disclosure that Shams ‘has taught me to unlearn everything I knew’ (192). Shams’s specific teaching principles are designed to fundamentally challenge Rumi’s reliance of the subjective phenomena of social conditioning and conventional morality. This approach is evident at their very first public meeting; when confronted by an unexpected query



The first meeting between Rumi and Shams of Tabriz. stillnessspeaks.com.

from Shams, Rumi recognises how ‘when Shams asked me that question ... there was a second question hidden within the first question (165). His curiosity aroused, Rumi’s response is significant: ‘I felt as if a veil had been lifted and what awaited me was an intriguing puzzle’ (154). What ‘awaits’ Rumi is nothing less than a fundamental spiritual realignment. After each subsequent meeting with Shams, he feels ‘intoxicated by a substance I can neither taste nor see’, and is brought to an awareness that his normal condition of spiritual insentience could only have been overcome through the extraneous guidance of a fully-fledged Sufi teacher: ‘Until he forced me to look deep into the crannies of my soul, I had not faced the fundamental truth about myself’ (192).

Ella undergoes a remarkably similar transformation under the tutelage of Aziz Zahara, a man who defines himself as ‘a Sufi, a child of the present moment’ (160). When tasked with reading about the lives of Rumi and Shams in Aziz’s novel *Sweet Blasphemy*, Ella initially expresses doubts about whether ‘she could concentrate on a subject as irrelevant to her life as Sufism,

and a time as distant as the thirteenth century' (12). Her midlife crisis has left her 'beleaguered by questions and lacking answers', yet she finds herself becoming increasingly intrigued by the character of Shams, and soon realises that 'she was enjoying the story, and with every new rule of Shams, she mulled her life over' (129). Her growing interest in Aziz's depiction of the teacher–disciple component inherent in the relationship between the two prominent Sufis, is accompanied by an increasing awareness that her friendship with Aziz is essentially replicating the dynamic that existed between Rumi and Shams, with Aziz as the symbolic reincarnation of Rumi's great teacher. She is forced to confront Aziz's influence on her life and acknowledge his pivotal role in her spiritual growth: '... you meet someone ... who sees everything in a different light and forces you to shift, change your angle of vision [and] observe everything anew, within and without' (263).

On a closer reading, it is evident that Shafak's interest in the teacher–student dynamic within Sufism is not limited to a broad understanding of the general principles governing such relationships; in fact, her depiction of the two main teacher–student relationships in *The Forty Rules of Love* reveals a detailed knowledge of how, in their proper application, Sufi teaching techniques are dependent upon a specific and individualised interrelation between the Master and his/her disciple. To the Sufis, the teacher's adoption of specific pedagogical approaches which are, of necessity, specifically tailored to the needs of each individual student, is an essential part of Sufi philosophy and a sign of flexibility rather than evidence of inconsistency. In relation to Ella, her predominant character flaw is a deeply engrained inability to relinquish control over her immediate surroundings and 'live in the moment', and tellingly, it is precisely this failing which is targeted by Aziz on numerous occasions. When the latter informs Ella that part of his spiritual education involved developing a disposition whereby he could adopt 'a peaceful acceptance of the terms of the universe, including the things we are currently unable to change or comprehend' (54), she responds with 'What a bizarre thing to say ... to a woman who has always put too much thought into the past and even more into the future' (160). In a subsequent email communication Aziz writes 'instead of intrusion or passivity, may I suggest submission?' (54), and suggests that the act of surrender, both to a Higher Power and the possibilities of the present moment are an essential component of the spiritual journey. He instructs Ella to 'go with the flow', an approach to life that she attempts – successfully – to develop and refine: 'she had discovered that once she accepted that she didn't have to stress herself

about things she had no control over, another self emerged from inside – one who was wiser, calmer and far more sensible' (175).

In regards to Rumi, it is made abundantly clear that the main obstacle curtailing his spiritual development is the exceedingly high regard in which he is held by both the civic and religious communities in Konya. His strictly ordered life and unrivalled reputation as an orator of genius have brought him a welcome degree of material comfort and security in a period where the region is beset with political uncertainty. Inevitably, this prosperity has led to a burgeoning sense of self-regard and exponentially reduced the element of struggle viewed by the Sufis as an essential catalyst for spiritual renewal and regeneration. Although he is a relative newcomer to the region, Shams notes the exceptional deference accorded to Rumi by numerous important personages and informs an acquaintance that 'His [Rumi's] ego has not been bruised, not even slightly damaged by other people. But he needs that' (224). It is significant, therefore, that the specific type of teaching that Shams devises in order to 'shock' Rumi out of his spiritual impasse is precisely that form of guidance mostly designed to demolish Rumi's elevated standing within the local community. Interestingly, Shams deliberately exposes Rumi to a radical form of teaching commonly known as 'crazy wisdom' or 'holy madness',<sup>7</sup> so beloved by numerous Sufi practitioners. What 'crazy-wise' adepts have in common is a seemingly deliberate rejection of consensual reality, as well as the ability to instruct others in ways clearly designed to shock the conventional mind.

### Crazy wisdom - transformative spirituality

In historical terms, some Sufis addressed the spiritual dangers of a pious reputation by intentionally acting in apparent contradiction to religious law or acceptable social standards. In order not to succumb to the temptation of false piety, they might shear themselves of all outward signs of social respect by exhibiting behaviour which would have clearly appeared bizarre by conventional standards. Such teachers may therefore act in ways that do not fit accepted moralistic ideas of how a teacher may behave. 'Crazy wisdom' practitioners, however, have insisted that despite the unconventionality of their

7 For a detailed overview relating to the role of the 'crazy wisdom' within esoteric traditions, see Georg Feuerstein's *Holy Madness* (2006).

doctrine, the teachings are always designed to serve the disciple's spiritual journey by drawing attention to the insidious rigidity of egoic identification.

In many respects Shams is viewed by the various communities in Konya as the true embodiment of a 'crazy wisdom' teacher. He is described by Jack Head, a minor character in the novel who represents Islamic Orthodoxy and fundamentalism, as 'a maverick of a dervish' and 'a heretic who has nothing to do with Islam. An unruly man full of sacrilege and blasphemy' (22). Even commentators sympathetic to Shams note how he 'fanned the flames of gossip, touched raw nerves and spoke words that sounded like blasphemy to ordinary ears, shocking and provoking people' (289). Shams deliberately fraternizes with social outcasts such as prostitutes, thieves and other criminals in order to provoke the religious authorities of Konya and, by association, expose Rumi to public ridicule and moral outrage. The latter's friendship with the itinerant dervish frequently leaves him open to criticisms and aspersions uttered by the orthodox clergy, resulting in Rumi's increasing social ostracism from the important spheres of political influence. In order to gauge Rumi's response to his increasing isolation, Shams remorselessly exacerbates his disciple's deep-seated fear of derision by setting 'tests', such as instructing him to publicly purchase wine in a tavern of ill-repute. He attempts to free Rumi from his conformity and his fear of opprobrium as well as stimulate a growing detachment from the assumptions and prejudices of conventional Islamic piety. Despite some major reservation amongst men who previously held him in high esteem, Rumi passes the 'test', by embracing social disrepute in the interests of spiritual development. He subsequently advises one of his own students to 'throw away reputation, become disgraced and shameless', and claims that 'Because of him [Shams], I learned the value of madness' (290).

The fact that Rumi is willing to renounce an enviable reputation for moral probity in order to follow the 'crazy wisdom' teachings of his master points both to the essential unconventionality of the Sufi Way as well as the manner in which the path of spiritual transformation is defined by fundamental risk. This is a truism irrespective of the personalised characteristics of each individual 'seeker'. The spiritual 'journey' is an inherently challenging one as the genuine teacher works towards a painful deconstruction of the disciple's personal universe of meaning. Guy Claxton has noted how enlightened teachers 'resemble ... the demolition expert, setting strategically placed charges to blow up the established super-structure of the ego, so that the ground may be exposed' (quoted in Feuerstein 2006: 226). As

the ultimate objective of spiritual transmission is to fundamentally modify the subject's very state of being, the teacher constantly tries to provoke an ontological crisis in the disciple, with the intention of deepening the appellant's commitment to the spiritual process. This strategy is confirmed by Ken Wilber, who claims that what he terms 'transformative spirituality', 'does not legitimate the world, it breaks the world, it does not console the world, it shatters it. And it does not render the self content, it renders it undone' (quoted in Caplan 2011: 8).

The genuine teacher does not seek to remove the disciple's deep-seated aggravation about life; indeed, s/he will, in numerous subtle and not so subtle ways, attempt to augment the pupil's sense of frustration. If spiritual discipleship involves the voluntary acceptance of constraints in order to facilitate one's inner freedom, it also requires a tremendous act of courage, as, in the words of Al-Ghazadi, 'You must prepare yourself for the transition in which there will be none of the things to which you have accustomed yourself' (quoted in Shah 1968: 60). Marina Caplan, in more contemporary language, reiterates this fundamental principle when she writes: 'Ultimately, there is little value in playing it safe. Reality isn't safe and neither are Truth nor God' (Caplan 2011: 135). This is why, in *The Forty Rules of Love*, the narrative emphasises that both Ella and Rumi must embrace an element of risk if they are to make substantial progress on their spiritual journeys. This involves a recognition that values invariably cherished by most people, such as security, comfort and the avoidance of suffering, merely serve to inhibit progressive spirituality. As their relationship deepens, Aziz informs Ella how 'the stages along the path are easy to summarise, difficult to experience' (165) and warns her that 'spirituality is not something we can add to our life without making major changes there' (146). For Ella, these 'major changes' essentially relate to a necessary relinquishing of her obsession with the 'safety' of the domestic sphere, an attachment which serves as a mere subterfuge for her risk-averse personality. Under the guidance of Aziz, she retreats from her obdurate fussing over recipes and health related issues and embraces an inclusive relationship with life itself: 'She understood with chilling clarity and calm ... she would simply walk out into the world where dangerous things happen all the time' (64).

For Rumi, the consequences of Shams's tutelage are perhaps even more radical in nature. At a formative stage in their relationship, Shams admonishes him for his seeming self-regard and instructs him that 'he [Rumi] must learn to practice mysticism, not just read about it' (289). This pointed

criticism of Rumi's reliance on the printed word is followed by a ritual burning of his beloved and coveted scholastic textbooks, many of which he has inherited from his beloved father. It is little wonder that Rumi subsequently confesses that 'Shams cut loose all the moorings that tied me to life as I knew it' (290), and, in reference to the transformation of his spiritual life, admits, 'Of the scholar and teacher, not even the smallest speck remains' (342).

For Shams, the greatest risk of all and one which every spiritual aspirant must, of necessity, take, is to embrace the experience of love in all its multitudinous manifestations. He tells the Novice (a minor character in the novel): 'Intellect risks nothing, but love dissolves all tangles and risks everything. Intellect is always cautious – intellect does not always break down, whereas love can effortlessly reduce itself to rubble' (66). Given Shafak's stated awareness that the doctrine of love formed the focal theme of the historical Rumi's practical teaching and the core of his mystical experiences, together with the centrality of Shams's doctrine of the forty rules of love to the narrative design of the text, it is evident that the Sufi perspective on love constitutes the single most important theme in her novel. As Mariana Caplan (2011: 248) points out, 'Sufi teachers, ... in spite of their realisation of the void, illusion and emptiness, emphasise the role of love' and their efforts of will, discipline and selfless service are enacted, not for the purpose of self-fulfilment, but as expressions of love.

### Conclusion: love as the basic tenet of spiritual life

In *Growth to Selfhood: The Sufi Contribution*, Reza Aresteh notes how in Sufi dialectics 'the psychological laws of the "I"–"Thou" relationship which yield to unitary experience involve basically three elements – the "I" known in Sufism as lover, "thou" or the beloved, and the process known as "love". At the end of the experience these three elements are supposed to become one' (Aresteh 1980: 118). Sufism contends therefore, that whenever the apparent antithesis of 'lover' and 'beloved' is resolved by their transmutation in the universal essence of love, relatedness to time and space is often eradicated and the principle of unity becomes visible. To the Sufis, to perceive oneself as constituting an inimitable self-enclosed entity is to exhibit the classical symptom of spiritual atrophy and even a desultory reading of both classical and contemporary Sufi literature would reveal this precept as being perhaps the single most important component of their religious ontology.

Without the unifying experience of love, human beings appear incapable of understanding the basic tenets of spiritual life and continue to view their individual entities as constituting merely a single entity in the greater whole of humanity. Syaed Ahmed Hatif writes:

If you give all to love, I'll be called a pagan if you suffer a molecule of loss. The soul passed through the soul of love will let you see itself transmuted. If you escape the narrowness of dimensions and will see the "time of what is placeless," you will see what has never been seen, until they deliver you to a place where you see "a world" and "worlds" as one. You shall love Unity with heart and soul; until with a true eye, you will see Unity. (Quoted in Shah 1968: 267)

In *The Forty Rules of Love*, these perspectives are primarily voiced through the 'lessons' and 'teachings' enunciated by Shams. He compiles a list entitled 'The basic principles of the itinerant mystic of Islam', which essentially constitute 'The forty rules of the religion of love', and frequently emphasises how a complete understanding of the 'forty rules' can 'only be attained through love and love only' (40). His teachings embody the centrality of this fact, as he, on numerous occasions, explains to Rumi and numerous others that love is the essential component of true mysticism. He explains to the prostitute Desert Rose how 'there is no wisdom without love' and asks her to 'remember, only in another person's heart can you truly see yourself and the presence of God within you' (221). Rumi's encounter with this aspect of Shams's philosophy triggers the completion of a paradigm shift in his approach to piety and spirituality and he discovers that beyond the safe, dry and socially approved forms of obedience and renunciation there exists a meta-spirituality of love which consists of joyously and creatively celebrating the existence of God. For Ella, her initial scepticism about love is frequently challenged by Aziz, who invariably interposes his letters and emails with injunctions concerning the value of love. In an early communication, he writes 'May love be always with you and may you always be surrounded by love' (14), and adds: 'because love is the very essence and purpose of life' (15). Ella inevitably moves from a position of outright opposition to what she views as the inane pieties of a hopeless romantic, to a subsequent recognition of the role love must play in her newly reconstructed life. While sharing a dinner with her estranged and incredulous husband David, she goes so far as to quote Rumi in an attempt to explain her 'new' philosophy

of love: ‘Rumi says we don’t need to hunt for love outside ourselves. All we need to do is eliminate the barriers inside that keep us away from love’ (250).

It appears irrefutable, therefore, that, through their multifaceted teachings, both Shams and Aziz initiate a profound metamorphosis in the spiritual lives of Rumi and Ella respectively. Moreover, it is made clear in the novel that the profound benefits accrued from such teachings are not dependent upon a long-term, continued interaction with the spiritual guide himself; Rumi’s and Ella’s subsequent separation from their mentors – in Rumi’s case due to Shams’s obsessive need of independence, while for Ella the separation is enforced due to Aziz’s premature death – merely reinforces their spiritual potential and self-reliance. Remarkably, one of the more manifest benefits of their discipleship is a renewed belief in the creative potential of the later life. Ella is particularly stuck by Aziz’s assertion that ‘there is no such thing as early or later in life ... everything happens at the right time’ and is convinced that true spirituality is unrelated to the ageing process: ‘It’s never too late to ask yourself “Am I ready to change the life I am living? Am I ready to change within?”’ (324). For Rumi, his transformation, which is partly manifested in a love of poetry, music and meditative dance, is accompanied by an awareness of the benefits accrued from the ageing process: ‘little by little, one turns forty, fifty, and sixty and, with each passing decade, feels more complete. You need to keep walking though there’s no place to arrive’ (342). For both Rumi and Ella, such a conviction is accompanied by an awareness that, in the words of Will Johnson, ‘Behind this world opens an infinite universe’ (Johnson 2007: 30).

Sufism, in its various manifestations, contends that if we are to glimpse this ‘infinite universe’ a spiritual guide is necessary, a view which *The Forty Rules of Love*, with its vivid depictions of the teacher–disciple dynamic appears to endorse. Shafak’s novel with its erudite and fascinating portrayal of one of the most iconic relationships within the Sufi esoteric tradition, appears intent on convincing the reader that Sufism in its universalist and non-denominational form, is a living, breathing philosophy of life with contemporary relevance to a world beset with factionalism and orthodoxy. At the very least, *The Forty Rules of Love* serves as a literary confirmation of the view expressed by Aziz in *Sweet Blasphemy* when he writes how ‘almost eight hundred years later, the spirits of Shams and Rumi are still alive today, whirling amidst us somewhere’ (20).

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