Book review:

The Forty Rules of Love

Review of Shafak, Elif's *The Forty Rules of Love* (Penguin Books, 2015.) (234 pages)

By Soumia Ben Rochd[1]

The Forty Rules of Love is one of Elif Shafak's international bestseller novels, first published in 2010 in English, and later translated into Turkish and other languages. With an effect of magic, it slowly and smoothly creeps into the reader's soul, moving the intellect and the heart away from their comfort zone. Once you open the book, Shams of Tabriz – the protagonist – tells you: "When I was a child, I saw God, I saw angels, I watched the mysteries of the higher and lower worlds." Yes, it is teasing. Actually, everything revolves around questioning our short-sighted prejudices and quick and shallow interpretations.

The profound transformation that Ella Rubinstein – the contemporary protagonist – undergoes within a year (2008-09) is implicitly inspired by the still-living soul of Shams (sun in Arabic), as she reads *Sweet Blasphemy* – the novel within the novel, and corresponds with its author Aziz A. Zahara (born Craig Richardson in Scotland and converted to Sufism during a professional journey in Morocco).

In the prologue, the narrator starts by drawing a beautifully subtle image: a comparison between the effect of throwing a stone into a river and that of throwing it into a lake. The lake stands for all that is stagnant: mainly our inner universe shaped by our habits of thought and conduct. A space that gets easily upset and troubled because closed to otherness, difference and change, overprotecting itself. It is the reason why "if a stone hits a lake (…) the lake will never be the same again." (1) The river, on the other hand, draws its strength from its continuous flow, its permanent renewal, and that is why the stone thrown into it is "Nothing unusual. Nothing unmanageable." (1)

Ella's life was a lake. A forty-year-old housewife, who had a college degree in literature and had been married for twenty years to a wealthy dentist constantly cheating on her, and was the mother of three children. "Every wish she had, every person she befriended and every decision she made was filtered

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through her marriage." (1) Yet, she did not consider love, or any deep emotional bond as a priority in that same marriage. Throughout the story, life throws pebble after pebble into her "quiet" inner lake, leading her to eventually question her condition, her values and the meaning of life as such.

Sweet Blasphemy, this first manuscript that she is to review for a literary agency, is about the mysterious and strong emotional and spiritual bond which had tied together, once and forever, the souls of Jalal ad Din Rumi, "the best poet and most revered spiritual leader in the history of Islam" (14) and Shams of Tabriz, a uniquely controversial wandering dervish, back in the 13th century. In the beginning, she has no interest in reviewing an old Sufi story which seems "irrelevant to her life" (12). But she is struck twice as soon as she starts reading it.

As her elder daughter Jeanette announces that she and her boyfriend have decided to get married because they love each other, she overreacts, discovering thus – to her own surprise and at her own expense – that her life is devoid of love, that she is *unhappy*. As if reading her mind and feelings, *Sweet Blasphemy* challenges in the very first page the conception of love she has just thrown in the face of Jeanette to dissuade her from her project: "*despite what some people say, love is not only a sweet feeling bound to come and quickly go away.*" (15)

Then she reads:

"*In many ways, the twenty-first century is not that different from the thirteenth century. Both will be recorded in history as times of unprecedented religious clashes, cultural misunderstandings, and a general sense of insecurity and fear of the Other. At times like these, the need for love is greater than ever.*" (15)

She is already shaken, both by the family events and this strange coincidence.

Back to Shams of Tabriz, we are startled throughout the novel by his spiritual power, even before we start viewing the world from his lenses. His own murderer – a professional killer – reveals the unprecedented heavy torment he has been experiencing for four years, ever since the night in which he murdered him. No sound came when he threw him in that well! Then, Shams tells the story of his own murder, which he saw in one of his conscious visions. "It was always like this. (…) The more you talked about love, the more they hated you." (33)

Actually, there is nothing usual about Shams' concept and practice of love. Nurtured and inspired by his eternal quest for God, by long years of wandering, meeting and speaking to all imaginable sorts of people – especially society's outcasts, his spiritual power penetrates the novel's characters deeply, only to

last forever after he has departed. So many amended hearts has he left behind. So many, broken.

He reinterprets Samarkand's innkeeper's apparent violence and dark skepticism as he reads his palm. The latter's wife and unborn baby did not suffer when their home was burned by the Mongols, and they are now "traveling in infinity, as free as a speck of light. (…) You can become a lamb again." (33) Shams assures him.

At the dervish lodge in Baghdad, both the Master and the Novice are 'trapped.' The Master is profoundly saddened to have to let Shams join his promised companion Rumi in Konya, after having delayed his departure for nine months altogether. As to the Novice, he always feels penetrated by Sham's stare, and is always bewitched by his thoughts, intrepidity, and weird manners. He decides to join him in the journey to Konya, but fortunately or unfortunately for him, he fails from the very first test.

Instead of throwing a coin in his bowl, or simply avoiding him like everybody else because of his visible sickness, Shams approaches Hasan the Beggar, kneels down to his eye level, and asks his name. "I laughed. 'What does a man like me need a name for?'" (122) He then offers him a mirror and says: "It will remind you that you bear God within you." (123)

Shams also saves Desert Rose the Harlot from the rage-driven crowd chasing her, and showering her with insults, for having entered a mosque disguised as a man, to listen to Rumi's sermon. Shams addresses the boiling crowd thus: "But why did you notice her in the first place? You go to a mosque but pay more attention to the people around you than to God? If you were the good believers that you claim to be, you would not have noticed this woman even if she were naked. Now, go back to the sermon and do a better job this time." (125)

After the incident, he has a quiet conversation with her. She realizes that she has been seeing herself through society's eye and believing she was *dirty*. There is no 'self' and no 'other' as long as the whole cosmos is one unity chanting God's. Time is an illusion that may swallow a person if they let their past define them forever. Eventually, Desert Rose fulfills her eternal dream by running away from the brothel. She finds refuge in Rumi's house, where she vows herself to God's service.

As to Rumi, he keeps seeing the night of Shams' murder in his sleep-dreams for some time before even meeting him. The grief that this premature separation causes him, nobody can describe or understand thoroughly. One day, Shams finally comes to Rumi's house, only to turn his life upside down! As soon as he comes in, they shut themselves up in Rumi's library for forty days,

discussing the *Forty Rules of Love* which Shams has been working on throughout his life-long spiritual journey. It is the legacy he wants to pass on to such a special companion.

Rumi is famous and revered by the masses, his sermons followed by hundreds of people. Yet, he has never directly dealt with society's outcasts. He has never tried to put himself into their skin. It is true that Shams has a great influence – considered by all as a curse which has befallen Rumi, but no less true that Rumi is most thirsty to embrace it. So much he is absorbed in Shams that he starts neglecting his wife and family. His vision of people and the world is modified forever. Moreover, he survives many of Shams' tests, because he just trusts him, loves him and believes in him profoundly and spontaneously.

No wonder then that Rumi accepts to throw his dearest books into his garden's fountain at the request of Shams. A symbolic manner to undo all previous knowledge, beliefs and opinions. Later on, he consents to go to the tavern where Suleiman the Drunk is used to spend time. He sits for a while, talks to the people there and brings two bottles of wine back home, again at the request of Shams. This is the very test in which the novice in Baghdad had failed in, because "he cared too much about his reputation to take the plunge. His concern for the opinions of the others had held him back." (236)

Rumi ends up forsaking his sermons, writing poetry (which is a devaluing art for a scholar at the time), learning the dervish whirling dance created by Shams and performing it in front of the crowds. He loses his reputation, the respect of people, and the love of his family, but feels so fulfilled, so inwardly satisfied to love a person in the company of which God's love is more meaningful. Yet, his apprehension of their inevitable separation is equally strong. It seems that everything and everyone is sacrificed to the triumph of this extraordinary bond, which is one of the story's bewildering aspects for the reader.

Another one is the interesting and hot debates between Shams and representatives of the religious authority on the *sharia*, understanding and interpreting the Qur'an, unity and universality… Many divergent opinions in this sense are put forward throughout the story, and everyone is offered plain space to make their point, to lend their lenses to the reader. Then, one is left face to face with their own inner truth, away from all sorts of disturbing "noises." It is up to everyone to decide how they would want to interpret the overall purpose of the novel and how they would want it to enlighten them.

Now, Ella and Aziz, these totally contrasting characters, end up falling for each other. In one of their email exchanges, Aziz reveals: "I meditated and tried to visualize your aura. Before long, three colors came to me: warm yellow, timid

orange, and reserved metallic purple. I had a feeling these were your colors. (…) I asked a granny to choose a tapestry (…) she pulled a tapestry from a huge pile behind her. I swear to God (…) the one she chose for you was composed of only three tones: yellow, orange and purple." (92) About a year after having left everything in Northampton behind: her family, her home, her life, it is in Konya that Ella buries her beloved Aziz, together with her old self. This brings us back to the opening of the book: "I watched the mysteries of the higher and lower worlds. I thought all men saw the same. At last I realized that they did not see…."