

---

**Mysticism in *The Forty Rules of Love*: A Journey Towards Self-Realization**

---

<sup>1</sup>**R.Pragathi Sri**

II MA English

PSG College of Arts & Science, Coimbatore

[rpragathi2404@gmail.com](mailto:rpragathi2404@gmail.com)

<sup>2</sup>**Dr. Reshmi K**

Assistant Professor

Department of English

PSG College of Arts & Science, Coimbatore

[reshmikarthik@gmail.com](mailto:reshmikarthik@gmail.com)

---

**Article Received:** 25/01/2025

**Article Accepted:** 27/02/2025

**Published Online:** 28/02/2025

**DOI:**10.47311/IJOES.2025.7.02.314

---

**Abstract:**

This paper examines the transformative role of mysticism in *The Forty Rules of Love* by Elif Shafak, emphasizing self-awareness, spiritual balance, and the pursuit of divine love. Mysticism, distinct from rigid religious dogma, advocates for an intimate, personal connection with the divine and encourages individuals to transcend ego-driven concerns. While *The Forty Rules of Love* draws heavily from Sufi philosophy, it presents mysticism as a universal path to self-discovery. The discussion explores five fundamental mystical principles from the novel—following the heart instead of fear (Rule 2), accepting change and uncertainty (Rule 22), embracing adversity as a path to spiritual awakening (Rule 29), treating others with compassion regardless of their actions (Rule 34), and recognizing love as the ultimate purpose of existence (Rule 40). By analyzing these rules alongside perspectives from mystical literature and Sufi philosophy, this study highlights how mysticism serves as a guiding force toward personal and spiritual transformation. Ultimately, Shafak's novel presents a profound framework for navigating life's uncertainties with love, wisdom, and an open heart.

**Keywords** Mysticism, Sufi philosophy, spiritual awakening, self-discovery.

**Introduction**

Elif Shafak's *The Forty Rules of Love* portrays mysticism as an introspective and transformative journey, one that challenges conventional notions of religious practice and societal expectations. Rooted in the teachings of Rumi and Shams of Tabriz, the novel underscores the importance of self-awareness, spiritual surrender, and love as guiding forces in life. While the novel incorporates elements of Sufi philosophy, it moves beyond its religious origins to present mysticism as an inclusive, universal experience accessible to individuals from all walks of life.

---

Unlike formal religious institutions that emphasize external rituals and doctrinal adherence, mysticism prioritizes direct spiritual experience and self-exploration. As noted by Anjum and Ramazan, “Mysticism within the Sufi tradition does not seek to impose religious authority but rather to cultivate an intimate relationship with the divine” (4). This aligns with Shafak’s portrayal of Rumi’s transformation—he moves beyond intellectualism and theological rigidity under Shams’ influence, embracing an experiential approach to divine connection.

At the heart of mystical philosophy lies the dissolution of the ego, often referred to as *nafs* in Sufi thought. Sherwani asserts that “The ego, in mystical traditions, represents attachment to materialistic desires and self-centered illusions, acting as the primary barrier to spiritual enlightenment” (216). Throughout the novel, Shams urges both Rumi and Ella, the contemporary protagonist, to confront their fears, relinquish societal conditioning, and surrender to love’s transformative power. This paper explores how Shafak conveys these mystical insights through key rules, illustrating how they provide a path to self-discovery and spiritual fulfillment.

### **Mysticism and the Path to Self-Discovery**

Mysticism, as depicted in *The Forty Rules of Love*, offers an alternative approach to self-understanding, emphasizing introspection, surrender, and love over rigid religious conformity. It advocates for spiritual liberation by urging individuals to transcend societal expectations and ego-driven fears. Mehdi et al. argue that “Shafak’s novel redefines traditional religious boundaries, portraying mysticism as a force that fosters inner transformation and self-realization” (5).

A crucial aspect of mystical growth is the ability to overcome the ego. Within Sufi philosophy, the *nafs* are seen as the root of pride, fear, and illusion. By confronting and dissolving the ego, individuals create space for divine wisdom to emerge. Shafak encapsulates this idea through Rumi’s words: “You were born with wings, why prefer to crawl through life?” (Shafak 245). This metaphor suggests that limiting oneself to fear-based thinking prevents the realization of true spiritual potential.

### **Following the Heart Over Fear (Rule 2)**

Rule 2 states, “The path to the truth is a labor of the heart, not of the head. Make your heart your primary guide! Not your mind” (Shafak 29). This concept reflects the mystical belief that the heart serves as a conduit for divine knowledge, surpassing rational thought. Sufi teachings often compare the heart to a polished mirror—when cleansed of ego and fear, it reflects divine truth with clarity (Zawil 87).

Fear obstructs this clarity, keeping individuals bound to self-imposed limitations. As Shams advises Rumi, “Don’t let fear block your path. Instead, let love guide you” (Shafak 87). This philosophy aligns with Al-Ghazali’s perspective that “Devotion rooted in fear constrains the soul, while devotion inspired by love liberates it” (qtd. in Mehdi et al. 6). The transformation of Ella, who learns to embrace love despite societal constraints, serves as a testament to this mystical principle.

### **Accepting Change and Uncertainty (Rule 22)**

---

Rule 22 encourages individuals to embrace the unknown: “Try not to resist the changes that come your way. Instead, let life live through you” (Shafak 165). This aligns with the Sufi principle of *tawakkul*, or complete trust in divine will. Anjum and Ramazan explain, “Surrendering to the uncertainties of life does not imply passivity; rather, it signifies a deeper faith in the divine plan” (6).

Throughout the novel, both Rumi and Ella struggle with the unpredictability of life. Initially, Rumi hesitates to accept Shams’ unconventional teachings, while Ella fears stepping beyond the confines of her structured existence. However, their eventual willingness to embrace uncertainty marks a crucial step in their spiritual growth. As Rumi’s poetry suggests, “Don’t grieve. Anything you lose comes in another form” (qtd. in Sherwani 218), reinforcing the mystical belief that loss and transformation are intrinsically linked.

#### **Embracing Adversity as a Path to Growth (Rule 29)**

Rule 29 states: “Genuine faith is not about unquestioning obedience but about embracing difficulties as part of the journey” (Shafak 201). Mysticism teaches that suffering is not merely an obstacle but a catalyst for transformation. Zawil notes, “Trials and hardships are essential elements of the mystical journey, as they strip away illusions and reveal deeper truths” (91).

Shafak illustrates this through Rumi’s experiences—his deep sorrow following Shams’ departure ultimately leads to his greatest poetic and spiritual revelations. Similarly, Ella’s emotional turmoil forces her to reassess her life, leading to profound personal growth.

#### **Practicing Compassion and Non-Judgment (Rule 34)**

Rule 34 emphasizes the importance of unconditional compassion: “Judge people not by their outward appearance, but by the love and light within them” (Shafak 267). This principle echoes Sufi teachings that encourage individuals to recognize the divine in all beings. Mehdi et al. argue that “Mysticism teaches that the greatest barrier to divine love is judgment, as it creates separation between oneself and others” (7).

Throughout the novel, Shams exemplifies this belief by treating outcasts and sinners with the same reverence as he does scholars and mystics. His actions demonstrate that true spirituality transcends societal hierarchies, focusing instead on inner purity.

#### **Love as the Ultimate Purpose of Life (Rule 40)**

Rule 40 states, “A life without love is of no account. Don’t ask yourself what kind of love you should seek... just surrender to love” (Shafak 348). In mystical philosophy, love is not merely an emotion but a divine force that unites all existence. Rumi’s declaration, “Your task is not to seek love, but to remove the barriers within yourself that you have built against it” (qtd. in Mehdi et al. 7), reinforces this idea.

The novel illustrates that surrendering to love leads to spiritual fulfillment. Rumi’s bond with Shams and Ella’s transformation through love highlights the central mystical lesson—love, in its purest form, is the bridge to divine truth.

#### **Conclusion**

---

Shafak's *The Forty Rules of Love* presents mysticism as a path of self-discovery, love, and surrender to the unknown. By following the heart, embracing change, and recognizing love as life's guiding force, individuals transcend their ego and connect with the divine. In a world often dominated by fear and materialism, the novel serves as a timeless reminder that true fulfillment lies not in external achievements but in the ability to love wholeheartedly.

**Reference:**

- Anjum, Fatima, and M. Ramazan. "The Sufi Phenomenon: The Case of Elif Shafak's *The Forty Rules of Love*." *Global Journal of Human-Social Science Research*, vol. 14, no. 7, 2014, pp. 1–6.
- Mehdi, Muntazar, Asma Mehmood, and Arshad Ali. "Role of Sufism and Spirituality in Psychological Well-Being: A Study of Elif Shafak's *The Forty Rules of Love* from a Cognitive and Existential Perspective." *Journal of English Language, Literature, and Education*, vol. 2, no. 3, 2021, pp. 1–18.
- Sherwani, Kawa Abdulkareem. "Representing Eastern Spirituality in Elif Shafak's Novel *The Forty Rules of Love*: A Critical Discourse Analysis." *Journal of Xidian University*, vol. 14, no. 4, 2020, pp. 215–219.
- Zawil, Maha. "Love and Longing for the Reed-bed: A Comparative Study of Sufi Themes in *The Forty Rules of Love* and the *Mathnawi*." *Overtone: Ege Journal of English Studies*, vol. 2, 2020, pp. 83–96.

**Citation:**

**R.Pragathi Sri & Dr. Reshmi K** "Mysticism in *The Forty Rules of Love*: A Journey Towards Self-Realization" *International Journal of English and Studies (IJOES)*, vol. 7, no. 2, 2025, pp. 311-314.  
DOI: 10.47311/IJOES.2025.7.02.314.