

The Geography of Conflict in Elif Shafak's *The Forty Rules of Love*

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Abstract:

In Elif Shafak's novel *The Forty Rules of Love*, thirteenth-century Konya serves as a living map of the rigid social, religious and moral hierarchies of the medieval Islamic world. The paper examines how Shafak uses the physical setting and specific sites of Konya to foreground the spiritual and ideological conflicts that form the centre of the narrative. Structurally, the city is divided into two opposing spheres, the pure and revered spaces of the ruling elite and religious sites which includes the great mosques, the learned madrassas, and Rumi's protected domestic estate, and the marginalised peripheries like the local tavern, the brothel, the city gates where outcasts and lepers are abandoned. The renowned scholar Rumi is locked in his elite, institutional bubble, safe but spiritually stagnant. The arrival of the wandering dervish, Shams of Tabriz, is a radical disturbance of this geographic and social segregation. Shams physically forces Rumi out of his comfort zone by purposefully breaking spatial taboos, entering the tavern to engage with sinners and bringing the outcasts into the sacred places of the city. This paper, through a close reading of character movements and setting, shows how Shafak translates a journey of spiritual awakening into a physical negotiation of space. Ultimately, the novel argues that divine love and human empathy cannot be contained within institutional or domestic walls, but must be discovered by actively dismantling the physical and social barriers that divide humanity.

Keywords: physical negotiation, dismantling, spiritual stagnance, barriers, humanity

Introduction:

The city of Konya, in Elif Shafak's *The Forty Rules of Love*, is more than a historical setting; it is a contested realm where physical geography mirrors social, religious and moral hierarchies. The city is sharply divided between the pristine areas of the elite orthodoxy with its the great mosques, the learned madrassas and the domesticity of Rumi's house, and the

proscribed, neglected peripheries inhabited by the city's outcasts, from the tavern and the brothel to the desolate camps of the lepers. These physical limitations comprise a protected sphere of prestige for the famous Islamic scholar Rumi, within which he remains spiritually stagnant. The arrival of the wandering dervish, Shams of Tabriz, however, completely disrupts this spatial order. By wilfully crossing these taboo borders, Shams pushes Rumi outside his geographic and spiritual comfort zones, bringing the sinner into the sacred space and dragging the scholar into the profane mud. Ultimately, Shafak uses the physical layout of Konya as a map to a deep spiritual adventure, proving that genuine divine love is not to be confined by institutional borders, but only found by actively dismantling the boundaries that divide humanity.

Elif Shafak is an acclaimed British Turkish novelist, activist, political scientist and public speaker. She writes in English and Turkish, and has published thirteen novels. Shafak uses her novels as vehicles of feminism, culture, spirituality, marginalization, humanitarianism and so on. Most of her works based in Istanbul, the renowned city in Turkey which teems with rich cultural heritage. She balances historical facts with fictional narratives while expressing her concern about the plaguing issues of the past and the present. The works of Shafak stand apart for their universal message of humanitarian values. She is the recipient of several awards including the Union of Turkish Writers Best Nobel Prize and her works have been shortlisted for RSL Ontario price, Booker Prize and the Costa Book Award. *The Forty Rules of Love* was chosen by BBC as one of the 100 novels that shaped our world.

The Forty Rules of Love published in 2009 narrates two parallel stories which merge across two different cultures and various geographical locations spanning seven countries. The main plot focuses on the life of Ella, a Turkish American woman who undergoes transformation on encountering the story of Jalal ad-Din Rumi and Shams of Tabriz. The lives of Ella and Aziz al Sahara is deeply entangled with the life of Rumi and Shams in the subplot, which eventually leads Ella to lead a more fulfilling life. The author depicts that the cultural and spatial shackles that define society are still prevalent even in the twenty first century, but with a modified face. It is these shackles that the characters Shams in the fourteenth century Konya, and Ella in the 2008 Northampton, breaks. Ella's perspectives on her life undergoes a major transformation when she reads the novel titled 'Sweet Blasphemy' written by Aziz.

Meeting Aziz in person further opens her eyes to the oppressive way she lives her life. Sweet Blasphemy, the story written by Aziz portraying Rumi and Shams is also set in Turkey because, according to history, their meeting takes place in Turkey. Aziz embodies the character of Shams whereas Ella embodies Rumi. Shams releases Rumi from his domestic, routine, unfulfilled life instilling within him a sense of the free spirit that Shams carried. Aziz does the same to Ella. Therefore, the domestic sphere Ella inhabits in Northampton mirrors the religious thirteenth century Konya and the domestic sphere in

which Rumi moved. Ella is bound by her husband, children and the domestic duties just like Rumi was bound by the rigid rules of Konya's scholarly life.

The historical part of the novel's dual narrative structure happens entirely in Konya. It is the seventh most populated and continuously inhabited city located in central Turkey. The city is renowned for its significant history and deep-rooted Sufi traditions. Konya is considered to be one of Turkey's most religiously conservative cities. It is home to Jalal ad-Din Mohammad Rumi, a distinguished Persian Sufi Mystic, intellectual scholar and the founder of the Mevlevi order. The city is famous for its whirling dervishes today. The followers of Rumi who established the Mevlevi order of Islam are known as the whirling dervishes. The thirteenth century Konya was a vibrant, multicultural hub and a centre of Sufism. It is the city to which Shams travels after leaving Baghdad and where he challenges the established intellectual scholar Rumi to look beyond the rigid rules to discover divine love. "Through their platonic and spiritual bond, Shams transform Rumi from a respected but traditional cleric into the passionate poet of divine love as we know today." (Pal, Kanika) In the novel, Konya serves as the battlefield between rigid religious legalism and the Sufi path of heart centred mysticism. In the early chapters, Shafak carefully constructs the physical layout of the city to reflect its rigid socio-religious and moral hierarchies, establishing what might be termed the 'Closed City'. The city of Konya is introduced through these lines "O dervish, in this city you'll find only two extremes, and nothing in between. Either pure love or pure hatred. We are warning you. Enter at your own risk." (Shafak 100) This is a world where the ruling elite and the orthodox religious establishment with clear roots in the grand mosques, the learned madrassas and the wealthy domestic estate of Rumi reign supreme. These architectural structures are not just stone and mortar, but spaces engineered to enforce reputation, intellectual conformity and a sterile form of piety.

Within these walls, Rumi exists as a revered asset of the state, sitting comfortably upon a pedestal of public adoration. But this geographic elevation serves as a conditioned prison. His private study, with locked chests of rare books and his protected home, ruled by strict familial and patriarchal expectations constitute a cocoon that insulates him fully from the raw, messy realities of human suffering. This is a bubble of the upper classes, where space is weaponised to maintain the status quo, so that the religious authorities can speak of divine order without ever having to touch the disorderly world outside. What did Rumi know about suffering? As the son of an eminent man and heir to a wealthy, prominent family, life had always been good to him. I knew he had lost his first wife, but I didn't believe he had ever experienced real misfortune. Born with a silver spoon in his mouth, raised in distinguished circles, tutored by the best scholars, and always loved, pampered, and admired— how dare he preach on suffering? (Shafak 107)

And then there is the 'Forbidden City' with its the neglected outskirts and secret corners of Konya where the marginalised are systematically dumped, in sheer opposition to

the pristine centres of orthodoxy. Shafak maps these spaces of shame and vulnerability through the local tavern, the brothel and the desolate waste grounds outside the city gates. “I heard that in Europe lepers are kept outside the city walls. Here they let us live in the city as long as we carry a bell to warn other people of our presence. We are also allowed to beg, which is a good thing, because otherwise we would probably starve.” (Shafak 104) In an orthodox Islamic city, the ultimate infringing space is the tavern, a place where the rules of society are suspended, a space that houses those who are considered spiritually lost, such as the drunkard Suleiman. “When a true lover of God goes into a tavern, the tavern becomes his chamber of prayer, but when a wine bibber goes into the same chamber, it becomes his tavern.” (Shafak 141)

Out of his frustration, the leper Hassan leaves the mosque where Rumi preaches, exclaiming to God “To me He had given poverty, sickness, and misery. To Rumi riches, success, and wisdom. With his flawless reputation and royal demeanour, he hardly belonged to this world, at least not to this city.” (Shafak 107) Likewise, the brothel and the dark, unpoliced alleys are spaces of literal and structural violence where women like Desert Rose are physically trapped by economic desperation and societal scorn. In pushing the lepers, the beggars, and the ‘sinners’ to these geographic fringes, the wealthy and powerful citizens of Konya effectively police their own visual landscape, sustaining an illusion of collective purity. This spatial segregation creates a deep moral blindness, for the institutional heart of the city is completely disconnected from the raw human pain dilapidating at its borders.

I strolled in the opposite direction from the mosque where Rumi was preaching. Gradually the surroundings began to change. As I moved northward, the houses became more dilapidated, the garden walls falling down, and the children more raucous and unruly. The smells changed, too, getting heavier, more garlicky and spicy. Finally, I stepped into a street where three odors loomed in the air: sweat, perfume, and lust. I had reached the seamy side of town. (Shafak 110)

The arrival of Shams of Tabriz triggers the novel’s central conflict. Shams is a radical disruptor of the segregated geography of Konya, deliberately crossing the forbidden lines. Refusing the notion of permanent homes, borders, or institutional allegiances, Shams employs his body and his movements to wage a quiet war against the spatial hypocrisy of the city. As soon as he heard about Rumi on entering the city of Konya and witnessed the two extremes of the city, Shams noted that “These were the kind of people that the scholars failed to see while sitting in their ivory towers. I wondered if Rumi was any different. If not, I made a note to myself that I should be a conduit between him and the underbelly of society.” (Shafak 152) He deliberately breaks through the map of morality in the community by going to rescue Desert Rose and to the tavern to engage Suleiman in conversation, boldly claiming that the divine presence is found in the darkest corners of human suffering, not in the sterile corridors of the elite. Furthermore, Shams drags these marginalized figures into the sacred

centres of the city, forcing a highly reluctant Rumi to stand in public alongside a drunkard, thereby shattering the scholar's carefully curated reputation. By invading Rumi's private estate, taking over his study, and tossing his precious, isolating manuscripts into a fountain, Shams violently disrupts the patriarchal domestic space and upends the family hierarchy. Through these calculated spatial trespassing, Shams proves that spiritual awakening cannot begin until the physical walls dividing the sacred from the profane are entirely torn down.

A core Sufi concept illustrated in Konya is Fana, that is annihilation of the ego. The Sufism practiced through Rumi, in Konya becomes a catalyst in breaking down social barriers. Shams help Rumi embrace people from all walks of life including drunkards, beggars and prostitutes. Konya's spatial conflict is finally resolved by the radical transformation of Rumi's relationship with the geography of the city, which gives birth to the Sema. The meeting with Shams influences Rumi to abandon the prestige of his pulpit and the stagnant limits of his private study. Shams teaches Rumi that to be filled with divine love he must first empty himself of reputation, pride, and social status. He is no longer a static leader anchoring the institutional spaces of the madrasa. Rather, he becomes a dynamic presence moving through the dilapidated streets and marginal areas of Konya, actively mingling with the ostracized and the outcast. This spiritual liberation is physically expressed in the creation of the Sema, the sacred whirling dance. Unlike the rigid, structured rituals performed within the traditional walls of the mosque, the Sema is an ecstatic, boundary-breaking practice that can take place anywhere. As Rumi and his followers whirl, their physical motion effectively dissolves the architectural and social restraints of the building around them. This dance transcends the limitations of spatiality, converting a contested and localized landscape into an infinite space suffused with divine love. In this physical evolution Shafak shows that Rumi has not just changed his point of view but has redrawn the map of his world, thus proving that real spirituality cannot be confined within walls, but has to be lived in the open, uncharted territory of human connection.

In the modern story of Ella and Aziz, it is in Konya that they decide to spend the last days of Aziz. The spiritual atmosphere of the city aids Ella in finding answers to all of her questions regarding her existence and to daringly dream about her future. Ella, when compared to Rumi, finds herself transformed under the influence of Aziz breaking free of her domestic sphere which she controlled and curated obsessively. Meanwhile, Aziz transcends through death just like Shams. He transcends with the full knowledge that he has fulfilled his duties.

In the end, the narrative journey in *The Forty Rules of Love* shows that the city of Konya is not just a passive backdrop, but a physical reflection of the human ego and the desire for control. By mapping out a landscape divided into areas of elite religiousness and marginalized exile, Elif Shafak translates an internal spiritual crisis into a physical journey. The novel's plot is driven entirely by characters moving across these heavily controlled

boundaries: Rumi stepping down from his high position, Shams entering spaces of both sin and luxury, and outcasts being forced into the view of religious leaders. When Rumi finally steps into the mud of the streets and onto the open floor of the *Sema*, Shafak shows that true spiritual awakening requires breaking down the physical and social walls that divide people. For a modern reader, this historical mapping carries a relevant message. By showing that love and genuine empathy cannot be contained within the walls of a mosque, a school, or a wealthy home, the novel critiques how people continue to build walls whether it be physical, national, or social in order to isolate themselves from the suffering of others. Ultimately, Shafak's *Konya* serves as a reminder that the journey toward love requires us to open up and tear down our private sanctuaries in order to live in a shared, open world. Thus, the forty rules introduced by Shams emphasize that God is found through love, compassion and self-reflection rather than fear of strict ritual.

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