

## **Revisionist Discourse and the Portrayal of Islamic Mysticism in Turkish Literature**

### **The Case of Elif Shafak's Forty Rules of Love**

**الخطاب التعديلي وتصوير التصوف الإسلامي في الأدب التركي**

**Dr. Farida LEBBAL**

Department of English Language and Literature, Batna2 University

f.lebbal@univ-batna2.dz

**Received in: 01/02/2020**

**Accepted in: 06/03/2020**

#### **Abstract :**

At time when the image of Islam is maculated by hostility, bigotry and – oftentimes- brutality, Turkish novelist ElifShafak steps up a with The Forty Rules of Love, a novel which juxtaposes the controversial bond between thirteenth century poet and mystic Djalel Eddine Al-Rumi and the ascetic Shams I-Tabrizi on the one hand, with the present-day romance of Ella and Aziz Zahara on the other, unearthing thus the highly esoteric Islamic tradition of Sufism. However, by seeking to shed light on the centrality of spirituality in the philosophy of Sufism, and its ability to mend most existential crises across times and civilizations, the author created a climate for ambiguitywhich triggers questions as to whether The Forty Rules of Love is meantto be a mere historical fiction, in which history is accurately presented and the truephilosophy of Sufism is unbiasedly depicted, or rather a revisionist narrative, where the primary objective of the author is to vehicle her fictional narrative in a historical setting. Along this line of thought, the present paper aims at addressing the

issue of how much “revisionist dramatization” does The Forty Rules of Love entail, to what extent the real lives of the historical characters, namely Rumi and I-Tabrizi, are attended to, and more importantly, how authentic is the philosophy of Islamic mysticism the author presents.

**Key Words:** Revisionist Discourse; Sufism; Turkish Literature; Forty Rules of Love; Rumi.

### الملخص

في وقت يتم فيه ربط صورة الإسلام بالتعصب والعداء والوحشية، أصدرت الروائية التركية أليف شفق “قواعد العشق الأربعين”， وهي رواية تضع جنباً لجنب العلاقة المثيرة للجدل بين شاعر القرن الثالث عشر والصوفي جلال الدين الرومي وشمس التبريزي من ناحية، وقصة إيلا وعزيز زهارا من ناحية أخرى. ومن خلال السعي لتسلیط الضوء على أهمية الروحانيات في الفلسفة الصوفية، وقدرتها على إصلاح معظم الأزمات الوجودية عبر الأزمنة والحضارات، استطاعت المؤلفة خلق مناخ للغموض اثيرت من خلاله أسئلة حول ما إذا كانت رواية قواعد العشق الأربعين مجرد رواية تاريخية، تم فيه سرد وقائع تاريخية بدقة، وصورت فلسفة التصوف بشكل موضوعي غير متحيز، أم كانت خطاباً تعديلياً الهدف منه هو نقل أيديولوجية الكاتبة في إطار روائي تاريخي.

على هامش هذه التساؤلات، تهدف هذه الورقة البحثية إلى معالجة مسألة التعديل الدرامي في رواية قواعد العشق الأربعون، إلى أي مدى تم تجسيد الحياة الحقيقة للشخصيات التاريخية، بالأخص جلال الدين الرومي وشمس التبريزي، والأهم من ذلك، ما مدى صحة فلسفة التصوف الإسلامي الذي تقدمه المؤلفة .

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** الفلسفة الصوفية، الخطاب التعديلي، الأدب التركي، قواعد العشق الأربعون، جلال الدين الرومي.

### Introduction

Revisionism, though in vogue in post modernist studies, is not a newly coined concept, it has long encroached on the political and ideological scene, eliciting a rather negative response due to its

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reputation of being a “colossal, cultural and political derailment” (Margaritis, 2000, p.137). Differently put, Revisionism was long stigmatised for attempting to tailor the historical narrative in order to vehicle authors’ different visions of the world. It frequently was subjected to numerous ethical criticisms which questioned its consequences on the ways in which “nations relate to their past, define their identities in the present and shape their expectations of the future” (Gkotzaridis, 2008, p.725). However, thanks to the limber and “liquid” nature (in Bauman’s terms) of modernist, then postmodernist philosophies, revisionism ended up finding itself a legitimate place in 20<sup>th</sup> century cultural studies as a valid interpretative methodology.

### **1- What is Revisionism?**

Revisionism- be it historical, fictional or religious- is one of the most elusive and highly debated concepts in contemporary philosophy. It is depicted by the Greek sociologist Athanassios Alexiou (2004) as a “fragmentary contemplation of historical reality”, which originates from “the radical hermeneutics of structuralism, the ‘end of the great narratives’ of postmodernism, the ‘end of social classes’, and the ‘end of history’” (Alexiou, 2004). The sociologist additionally argues that, in an era governed by the above mentioned intellectual trends, historiography found itself weakened by the loss of interest in “the causal relation between things” which came to be replaced by a multi-causal explanation in which everything can be deemed true or valid”(Alexiou, 2004).

### **2- Revisionism and the Problem of Truth, Authenticity and Religious Accuracy**

Converting a historical episode into a fictional narrative has never been an easily-approved endeavour. One of the arguments

behind this discontentment is that it is liable to “challenge the core of a shared historical consciousness and a collective responsibility about the past” (Gkotzidis, 2008, p727). Moreover, as far as the “dominant memory” (Fernandez, 2005, p.17) is concerned, it was contested that there are chances that the kind of reality endorsed and spread by the fictional narrative could clash with the memory of a given nation, resulting thus in an “open ended” reading of history, unfixed presentation of reality and an eventual creation of some breaches in the authenticity of the historical records.

Furthermore, O’Ceallaigh (1994) thinks that “the revisionist tendency to linger on the sectarian hides hypocrisy” (p.15), because “presumably the same type of critic” when confronted with an argument making a case for an ideology opposing his, would criticise the inaccuracy of a possible revisionist discourse. Therefore, the sectarian revisionism, being but an ideology-driven shaped discourse, is seen as an attempt to demobilise the minds of youth and manipulate the moral foundations of a given scheme.

Nevertheless, with regard to postmodernism (in its loosest possible sense related to embracing the self-reflexive tendency), the questioning of authenticity is not pejoratively viewed after all. Quite the contrary, questioning the veracity of historical facts is the position historians are urged to take since it prompts them work in relative terms, hence envision the dislocation of the hegemonic and unilateral positions offered by fixed historiography. This view is supported by Vidal-Naquet, who explains that “A historian, by definition, works in relative terms, [...] The word itself has nothing shocking about it for a historian: he instinctively adopts the adjective as his own” (1995). Otherwise stated, if questioning the authenticity of history attests for something, then it is for the degree of self-reflexivity the author (historian) possesses, and for how unbending he

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proves to the weight of outside pressures, which are two of the main principles of the post-modernist viewpoint.

Still, it should be noted that there are some forms of pressure which should not be that easily overlooked, among which “the sacred” nature of some historical chronicles: when a narrative depicts some underpinning tenets of a given religion /faith/ cult, embarking into a revisionist reading could be viewed as contentious, since any distortion away from the conventional consensus (be it intentional or not) would engender a probable disruptive feature of the religion in question, therefore attribute an “inadequate” qualification to this religion . Moreover, it is unlikely-in the case of narrative of a sacred nature-for a reader (particularly with a religious background) to focuson the purely fictional elements and overlook there ligious-philosophical standpoint, especially if this narrative is not conforming to the ideal that we call truth.

That being said, the revisionist dramatization of historical-religious narratives is full of misleading elements, and it is imperative for any writer to be cautious about how, when and by what strategies they should adopt any eclectic subjectivist representation when adapting a historiographical work to a fictional narrative.

### **3-The Forty Rules of Love:**

Elif Shafak’s the Forty Rules of Love is not her only novel which made allusion to Islamic mysticism and- by extension- to its iconic figure, Djalel-Eddine Rumi.

Arranged in a postmodernist format, the novel inter locks Eastern and Western cultures in two simultaneous plots recounted intrvally in a polyphonic narrative perspective. The story

meshes a contemporary story line with a narrative set in the thirteenth century.

In the present time story, Ella, a forty-years-old divorced mother of three, abandons the life she has been leading after a series of correspondences with Aziz Zahara, the author of the novel she was assigned to review. This latter novel (within the novel), sweet blasphemy, tells a historical tale of a spiritual and inexplicable bond between the thirteenth-century poet Rumi and Sufi mystic Shams I-Tabrizi. Through Aziz's words (inspired from the Sufi tradition), Ella regained her own comfortable self-image and eventually fell in love with Aziz.

Historically, Shams I-Tabrizi is one of the most mysterious and notorious dervishes in the history of Sufism. His fame is gained not only thanks to his enigmatic and controversial life (and death), but also because he is remembered as "The Muse" thanks to whom Rumi found his pathway from a conventional reverential academic into an eccentric lover (عاشق) and mystic poet.

#### **4- Revisionist Discourse in The Forty Rules of Love: a Mid-way Between Historical fiction and fictionalized History**

One of the commonly addressed problems related to revisionism and narrative historiography is the terminological issue of whether the work at hand is a historical fiction, or a fictionalized history. These two concepts are very often used interchangeably, but denote different genres.

One simplified distinction is offered by Long (1999), who clarifies that in historical fiction, the weight of emphasis falls on "fiction", suggesting that whatever bits of factual information the narrative may encompass, the story itself is non-factual.

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However, in fictionalized history, the weight falls on history, the claim being that “the story is a representation of real events which took place in the past, whatever fictionalizing maybe involved in the crafting of the narrative”(Long, 1999).

Though a clear allusion to Rumi’s TheTenRulesofSufism (القواعد العشرة), the title makes reference to the sum of experiences and universal principles governing the “religion of love” assembled by the protagonist Shams I-Tabrizi, and which are attainable only through the love and union with God.

As far as the forty rules of love is concerned, this distinction is of paramount importance because, not only because the novel sheds light on the sacred, something which should be approached with extreme caution as it was previously argued, but also because the novel was and still is widely read by young adults, who, as it is widely reported, read and interpret it with an almost conviction about its authenticity. It is even informed that readers and reviewers are often persuaded that the novel in its entity convey. The truth about 13<sup>th</sup> century Kunya, and more importantly, about the very doctrines of Sufism it sheds light on.

However, a thorough analysis of the novel makes it clear that the author adopted a revisionist dramatization while creating the historical characters and portraying Islamic mysticism. What follows is an attempt to demonstrate some of these incongruities:

- 1- Firstly, according to Shafak, Sufism is a completely separate entity from the Fiq'h and Sharia (Islamic knowledge and law), she even attempted in many chapters and sections of the novel to minify and lessen the authority of this dichotomy as she kept claiming that

what matters in Sufism (and Islam by extension) is just the overall feeling one has towards his creator, and all the rest is of minor importance. She has pictured Sufism as a Universal Spiritual sensation devoid of any social or practical manifestation. Moreover, there is an attempt, throughout the novel, to demean the position of Fiq'h as being inferior to Sufism, and to hint that even Drunken Suleiman or Desert Rose the harlot have reached that state of union with God. Most interesting is the test Shams made Rumi take to prove his loyalty to God (while in fact it was to test his loyalty to him), and which is that of inciting him to drink wine (and interestingly enough, which Rumi did not decline!). In fact, these claims and far-fetched images do not conform with what every other Islamic theologian claim about how Sufism and knowledge about Islam (التصوف والنفق) are just two facets of the same coin, as explained Imam Malik (in Hashiat al Allama Al Aadwi, p.195)

"من تصوف ولم يتفقه فقد تزندق، ومن تفقه ولم يتتصوف فقد تفسق، ومن جمع بينهما فقد تحقق".

2- One thing I specifically deem impetuous from the part of the author is opting for multiple Sufi first person narrative voices (Aziz, Shams and Rumi) through whom she fell remarkably short in conveying what constitutes the Sufi tradition. It is true that Sufism is a contested term, and it is true that there are many "corrupt" versions of Sufism (especially modern currents of the school), but anyone with the slightest knowledge of the true teachings of Islamic Sufism, or the historical context of 13<sup>th</sup> century Konya would realize that the writer was only interested in depicting a modern image of Islam that is accepted in the western world, i.e., a hippie-like, unrestricted, free from dogmas and proscriptions of institutionalised religions, and extremely lenient Islam, which is no different than the contemporary western pseudo-religious practices, eclipsing thus the exotic trait the novel could have offered instead.

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- 3- In one of the dialogues between Shams and the school master, Shams made the claim that one should be “more concerned with the individual’s ecstatic union with God than with strict adherence to Sharia law”. However, this claim does not go in concordance with the real teachings of Islam, where Tasawuf is perceived as the set of behaviours which leads you to knowing God, yet, WITHIN the Islamic tradition. Moreover, Sufism is primarily considered as a fundamental pillar of the religion according to the triad Islam/ Iman/ Ihsan , and “each of these pillars is essential and cannot be left out” (Kabbani, 2004, p.63): “Islam denotes the practical side of religion, Iman is the inner belief, and Ihsan, on the other hand, “intends to make one aware, when combining the two other pillars, that they are always in the presence of God” (Kabbani, 2004, p. 63). The same definition is provided by S. Nouh Ali Salman El Qu’dat in his *منطق التصوف إن تعبد الله كذلك* (1999): *المختصر المفيد في شرح جوهر التوحيد*, explaining that there is no use of doing some religious practices or knowing about some teachings without spiritually getting connected to the creator ».He further explains this notion of Tadjalli (revelation) when the very essence of worship is revealed and when the worshipper attains this union with the worshipped, but this could only be attained, according to S. El Qu’dat with continuous practice *(التجلي هو ثمرة الإيمان والعبادة)* (1999).
- 4- Another aspect the author fails to address properly is the representation of gender roles which initially is supposed to reflect attitudes of the period in which the 13<sup>th</sup> century narrative takes place. There seem to be so many inconsistencies between the overall role of females in the story (Wife of Rumi, his adoptive daughter and Desert Rose the Harlot, all the other prostitutes of the brothel, and the

transgender brothel keeper and manager). All these female characters are attributed different roles which are disproportionately distributed and which do not necessarily obey to historical accuracy. For example, while Rumi makes it clear for his wife never to set foot in his library (suggesting thus that women do not have the right to read, write not even “dust books”), he encourages his adoptive daughter to read as much as she could. Similarly, in a typical conservative Islamic household, he allows Shams to roam anywhere and anytime he wishes, he even allows his daughter to get intimate with his gest. From an Islamic standpoint, it is hard to imagine things of the sort happening in the house of someone people refer to as “Mawlana”.

- 5- Probably the most intriguing and controversial of all these incongruencies is the set of “hints” the author drops ubiquitously in the story about the nature of the relationship between Shams and Rumi. Many critics agree that it is rather a homosexual relation she is inferring (eg: their first meeting, and how they both immediately realized that “they were meant to be”, spending entire months in Rumi’s “sanctuary without allowing anyone to interrupt them”, how Rumi, who is a scholar, blindly follows the orders of Shams the rebel, how the latter asks “Mawlana” to go to a tavern, buy two bottles of wine, and drink from it, the way Rumi weeps and grieves the departure of Shams, ...etc).

All things considered; it is quite possible that the author willingly wanted to re-enact the historical events with what she thought would be substantive embellishments. However, this created a novel loaded with inaccuracies, while, according to many literary

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critics, “accuracy remains a primary obligation to all historical fictions” (Brown, 1998).

### **Conclusion**

Though The Forty Rules of Love found echo among western readers as another novel reviving Djalel-Eddine Rumi and his poetry, it nevertheless contributed, to a great extent, in reinforcing what El-Zein (2000, p.89) calls “an undoubtedly different Rumi created for the American market”. Through her revisionist narrative, Shafak domesticates Sufism for a young, cosmopolitan and liberal audience as she painted the lives of the central characters privileging the aesthetics and love (in its large sense) over assigning the sober teachings of Sufi philosophy. Taking everything into consideration, the revisionist dramatization of historical narratives is still a welcomed tradition world-wide, and despite the critical attacks against it, it only gained a more substantial ground as a manifestation of intellectual relativism.

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