

The Forty Rules of Love: a Mystical Eliadean Perspective

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Abstract

This interdisciplinary study is a mystical reconsideration of Elif Shafak's *The Forty Rules of Love* (2011), *FRL* hereafter, based on the theologian Mircea Eliade's perspective on the notion of sacred life as *hierophany*. Given the extensive body of reviews examining the novel's Eastern Sufi elements as a mystical framework, this investigation probes the compatibility of Eliade's Universalist spiritual stand with the *Sufi* perspective reflected in the novel. To this aim, it considers the Islamic tradition with a focus on Maulana's mystical transformation via Shams of Tabriz. It also pays attention to the Western cultural manifestations absent in most of the reviews and considers the Orientalist features attributed to the novel by some critics. The investigation concludes that the form of *Sufism* represented in the novel is close to Maulana's original perspective, and there is a spiritual congruity between Maulana's Islamic stand, being affected by Ibn Arabi, and Eliade's Western Christian one. This justifies the depiction of the characters' mystical transformation within *FRL* as being touched by Islamic principles and not totally submissive before the Orientalist discourse.

Keywords: Elif Shafak, Maulana, *Hierophany*, *Sufism*, Orientalism

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1. Introduction

The Forty Rules of Love, is a historiographic postmodern metafictional bildungsroman that introduces two worlds of secular/sacred life, or profane/sacred one to use Eliade's distinctions, to narrate a story of transformation through characters who are associated with these two worlds. Time appears as a non-chronological phenomenon where the past, present, and future merge in a cyclical frame, offering a universal vision of spiritual life beyond the orthodox religious understanding through *Sufi* perspective, and tackling the duality of modern versus traditional man, aiming at representing an inclusive sample of perfect human being. This universalism is discussed as "Rumi phenomenon" or "New Sufism" by writers like El Zein (2010), Furlanetto (2013), Amna et al. (2018), and Gray (2020) as a reaction by writers, such as Shafak, to offer a humanitarian picture of Islam acting based on love rather than the Islamophobic discourse popularized after the 9/11 attacks done by extremist Muslims. This investigation reconsiders this Rumi phenomenon by looking at the novel through Eliade's Western, mystical universalist perspective, to probe its compatibility or probable interaction with Islamic *Sufism*.

The story encompasses two layers of narration in past and present, connected by the concept of love in the frame of a mystical journey as explained by Zarrabi-Zadeh (2015). All the main characters of the story take this journey. One layer details modern American life through the example of a Jewish Family. The other layer, which is within this story, narrates the life story of Maulana, known as Rumi in the West, after meeting Shams of Tabriz. Yet, the quality of this life, described as a mystical one, according to some critics, is not exactly the very one taken by Maulana, following Shams' teachings. As Furlanetto (2013) and Gray (2020) contend, Maulana was totally loyal to the Islamic principles he was brought up with, but *FRL* is mostly a psychological narration of a model of self-healing based on typical Western spiritual understanding of *Sufism*.

FRL starts by introducing Ella, a Jewish woman married to a prosperous medical doctor, mother to three children, having a very luxurious life. She is caring toward all the family members, while she ignores her husband's disloyalty because it is to the benefit of all. In her fortieth birthday, she is offered to read and report on a mystical novel, whose subject is the process of coming to self-understanding as a basis for a comprehensive understanding of the philosophy of life and in connection with creation through references to the life of the 13th century *Sufi* poet and mystic Maulana and his companion Shams of Tabriz. Through the revision, she becomes acquainted with Aziz, the writer of the novel, who has gone through the similar mystical journey of the protagonist of his novel, and encourages Ella to take the same journey. Responding to him, Ella leaves her family, and accompanied by Aziz, travels to Konya in Turkey, where Aziz dies and Ella decides to continue her life based on the very path of self-discovery started by Aziz.

Relying on the representation of religious and sociocultural diversities

emphasized in *Sufism*, this study attempts to investigate the representation of the Universalist perspective of perfection and salvation, beyond spatial, temporal, and classic religious understanding as put forward in the novel. It will be done via focusing on the concepts of Self-love and Other-love, with respect to the notions of equality and unity in creation. The paper will investigate the very process of self-discovery in *FRL*, highlighting the change for a better life through the recognition of diversity as a divine feature and not in contrast to the unification of the opposites. Considering the Orientalist arguments on the novel, this paper will probe the inclusiveness of the mystical perspective in the novel, through Mircea Eliade's notions of eternal return and sacred/profane life, in association with Maulana's notion of return to or unification with God or *rujū*. This reading seeks to see whether Eliade's Universalist perspective, along with his Christian background, are compatible with the *Sufi* perspective in Islamic discourse, or his dedication to Christianity as a historical ideology, raises challenges against his Universalist perspective. It will also consider compatibility or discrepancy of the very form and content of the novel, as a postmodern fiction, where subjectivity is highlighted, with Eliade's modernist understanding of objective reality as the authentic form or essence of being.

2. Theoretical framework

This research is an interdisciplinary study of mystical dimensions of Shafak's *FRL* based on Eliade's theological perspective that revolves around the concept of being as the divine manifestation or *hierophany*. As he explains in *The Sacred and the Profane* (1987), Everything becomes sacred in itself, as it embodies the manifestation of God. This ranges from the smallest things like stones or rivers, which are sacralized in different religions, to supreme *hierophanies*, like Jesus Christ as the incarnation of God (11-12). Beyond this, everything becomes profane. He associates this dichotomy with that of real/unreal or pseudo-real in relation to human being's psychological and religious experiences that render life meaningful to him as real, in the recognition of the presence of divinity in creation or cosmos. Human civilization places the archaic man along with the modern one in the traditional classification of nature/culture. Eliade believes this distinction is sharpened in the modern world and needs to be addressed to restore "cosmic sacrality" by retaining integrity in connection with nature as *hierophanic* cosmogony. In *The Myth of the Eternal Return* he writes: The chief difference between the man of the archaic and traditional societies and the man of the modern societies with their strong imprint of Judaeo-Christianity lies in the fact that the former feels himself indissolubly connected with the Cosmos and the cosmic rhythms, whereas the latter insists that he is connected only with History. (1959: vii)

The purpose of human life is to achieve everything at its maximum perfection, and it is actualized through human being's perfection. Eliade (1987) contends that this perfection is imaginable by remaining in a "sacred world" which is considerably

distorted in modern life. This “sacred world” is the prioritized part in the binary of sacred/profane that relates the whole cycle of human civilization. It is associated with whatever known, while the profane elucidates the Other unknown (29-34). This categorization functions at two physical and mental, or literal and rhetorical, levels. In records from primitive human societies, this profane world refers, for instance, to the untraveled geographical territories, like the ones belonging to the enemy, or the underworld that in some cultures, like the Indo-European ones, is associated with the realm of death. Still, this, symbolically and psychologically, reflects the state of mind where and when the primitive societies felt anxiety, facing things unknown, and associated them with the inferior Other. However, in itself, this anxiety acted as a motivator to bring the unknown world under control and make it part of the Self, or “cosmicizing” and “consecrating” it, as Eliade offers (32). This carries a concept of journey that is not only physical, but also a mystical one and into the depth of the self, the final result of which is self-understanding and the sense of presence in and unity with the whole cosmos. It creates peace of mind which is, unfortunately, missing in the modern societies. The only way that primitive and traditional societies kept themselves in tune with this sacred presence was through belief and participating in ritual, archetypal ideas and patterns of practice to relive, again and again, the cosmic creation and presence in the creative Origin. In the modern societies, no “true orientation” toward this Origin or “fixed point” exists, and “unique ontological status . . . appears and disappears in accordance with the needs of the day,” creating “fragments of shattered universe” where human being is “driven by the obligations of an existence incorporated into an industrial society” (23-24).

To address the gap, Eliade offers an instruction or order, taken from the mythical and historical narrations of primitive societies, as “passing through threshold” (1987: 24). It is enacted along with some rites of passage, and embodies passing from the profane to the sacred space of the dominant presence in Origin, or God. He terms the practice an “initiatory” passage, which encompasses the “separation” coming after “birth,” being followed by “death” and “regeneration” or “resurrection.” The separation is a “preliminary condition for any . . . regeneration,” and can be either physical or mental, through which the practitioners leave the comfort zone of their routine life to die to their profane one and be resurrected or reborn as full human beings introduced to the sacred (190-196), reliving the mythical age.

One trope repeated in all these narrations is the presence of the guardians of the threshold who, being gods or the other figures with marvelous powers, attempt to hinder the entrance or passing of the passengers or whoever dedicated to this mission. These guardians generally symbolize the entire impediments, hardships, and fears that a person will encounter when undergoing an important change, or starting a new way of life through a new vision. When passing through this threshold, the passenger is united with the reigning supreme power and, accordingly, becomes involved in his cosmogonic – creation or origination of the universe – act. Eliade

(1959) emphasizes cosmogony, as a divine manifestation, does not happen within the traditional concept of time that is temporal or linear, because this is a relative, subjective concept understood and offered by human mind. As he (1987) explains, cosmogonic *hierophany* transforms this relativity to an objective reality based on limitless divine power beyond subjective borders (23-24). It shapes a circular notion of time, with no definite beginning and ending, where creation and recreation happen, incessantly, as the essence of the very power. This understanding of time is along with the practices which aim is to abolish “social forms,” because, in this way, they recreate cosmogonic time. On the human level, it naturalizes return to the primordial unity, “in which limits, contours, [and] distances are indiscernible” (Eliade 1959: 69). The current analysis excavates the very structure in relation to Maulana’ mystical notion of return and its recreation in the main characters’ lives in *FRL*.

3. Literature Review

FRL has been subject of interest to various perspectives. Self-discovery, spirituality, and *Sufism* are the key concepts discussed by many critics who have focused on the spiritual love in relation to these concepts. Feminist investigations of this novel deal with this notion of love, as connecting male and female worlds of the novel, along with equality, where gender roles alongside the social norms (Zacharia and Senthamarai 2023) have been considered not only in the context of Turkey, but that of the broader Silk Road in its historical as well as modern existence (Ghandeharion and Khajavian 2019).

Saleh (2022) offers similar feminist perspective by focusing on the notion of marriage through the lens of evolutionary psychology. She uses marriage as a trope that highlights biased gendered values adjusted for true womanhood, and explains the way the breaking of this mirror helps Ella find her true self. This reading is related to the psychological review of Mehdi et al. (2021) who discuss the role of spirituality in the development of a “healthy mind.” Through their cognitive stand, they explain *Sufism* as a spiritual practice that addresses existential crises by “positive transformation of individual” (1).

On the other hand, El Zein (2010) draws critics’ attention toward “Rumi phenomenon” by discussing the Americanization of *Sufi* discourse through the “marketization of Rumi.” Engrossed by the very “Rumi phenomenon” and its attraction for writers such as Shafak, Furlanetto (2013) argues that, while this phenomenon reflects a kind of cosmopolitanism in rise, Shafak “succumbs to the oversimplification and decontextualisation of Rumi’s work perpetrated by the American initiators . . . , employing Orientalist strategies” (201).

Kökcü (2020), likewise, reviews *FRL* as the reflection of Shafak’s dedication to cosmopolitanism through which Islam is “westoxicated ... generative of disruptive misrepresentations of Rumi” (p. 138). Gray (2020) discusses “Western Sufism” in *FRL* through the archetype of teacher-disciple, where Rumi and Ella are aligned with

a deconstructed form of *Sufi* Islam via their masters Shams and Aziz. Seblini (2021) explains this by elaborating on polyvocality in this novel as a formal literary-cultural technique reinforcing an Orientalist stand that privileges mystical form of Islamic practice in reconciliation with Western understanding of it, “*representing non-Sufi Islamic voices as cut out of the same cloth of fundamentalism*” (1).

Alongside the negative views about Shafak’s Orientalist *Sufi* representation of Maulana, there have been writers who have elaborated on the reflection of Islamic essence of *Sufism* in *FRL*. Ahmed et al. (2016) discussed the mystical, *Sufi* aspect of *FRL* through Ibn Arabi’s notion of *Wahdatal Wujud*, or unity of opposites, and the creation of universe as the manifestation of Allah.

This notion of unity has been elaborated on in two distinct categories through one of which a separating line is made between God and his creatures – anti-panteism – while the other one assumes all creation as the manifestation of One entity. Bugti and Khan (2019) explain it through the concepts of *Fanā* and *Baqā* as self-annihilation through the sacrifice of ego and survival in Him. They believe that Maulana’s *Sufi* stand, under Shams’ influence, was anti-panteistic one that they refer to as the school of Baghdad, in opposition to the School of Khorasan that believed in unity with God, sharing the very view of Ibn Arabi on *Wahdatal Wujud*. The analyses of characters in *FRL* affirm their compatibility with the school of Baghdad.

Faiyaz (2019) focuses on the notion of love as a spiritual, divine feature encompassing all the thematic aspects of *FRL* in relation to its characters. She discusses a lack of love in the modern, industrial world of the novel as the crux of the calamity that connects it to the similar atmosphere of the thirteenth century reflected in the novel. According to Faiyaz, this love is represented as a connecting aspect of divinity in inter-faith and intra-faith relations in the story, fulfilling the very *Sufi* perspective of unity and equality in diversity. As such, it highlights the notion of human-love through self-love.

Amna et al. (2018) explain this unity linguistically within postmodern frame, highlighting the syncretic mixing of innovation and tradition, and past and present, as one entity, through the lens of intertextuality as a formalistic aspect acting through “the intersection of multiple historical, socio-cultural and political discourses” in *FRL* (1).

As it emerges from this review, these researches focus on the linguistic, social, spiritual, and psychological aspects of awareness and self-discovery, conscious of Islamic *Sufism*, or as it is understood in the West. What this article finds uninvestigated is the fact that, *Sufi* spirituality in the novel is merely introduced by focusing on the Eastern aspect and half of the world of the novel representing the thirteenth century. Maulana and Shams and their effects, and the sociocultural context of their time

are the aspects excavated in these sample analyses, while the other Western half of the novel represented as the parallel, modern version of the very turbulent situation of the thirteenth century is considerably ignored. Considering the Universalist, humanitarian vision associated with *Sufism* in general, the current study has employed a Western mystical perspective, that has the same humanistic, Universalist stand, to investigate notions of perfection and salvation seemingly shared by the diverse human communities of the novel, beyond temporal-spatial and religious borders, and inspect the compatibility of this vision with that of Islamic *Sufism*.

4. *Sufi* world, a Sacred World

FRL is a novel of change via love. The change embodies transformation from the “profane space” of life to the “sacred space,” to retrieve Eliade’s terms. Faiyaz (2019) describes this profane world of *FRL* as “spiritually barren” because of the lack of “empathy and compassion” (22). The love that changes this profane world is the very divine manifestation in the cosmos, embodying unity despite diversity in sociocultural, religious, sexual, and classist distinctions. It is the principle making true human life possible. In his *Myths, Dreams, and Mysteries*, Eliade stipulates: a genuine cultural encounter “might well constitute the point of departure for a new humanism upon a world scale” (1975: 245). This humanism is a universal one, apparently free of adherence to any of the above-mentioned distinctions. He argues that Western cultural revival can be fostered by taking in beliefs from non-Western cultures. In other words, he believes neither the West nor the East can be looked at as complete examples of genuine life in isolation.

This may be in contrasts with his loyalty to Christian tradition which claims reality and truth exclusive to itself in a historical context. Yet, Eliade justifies this discrepancy by distinguishing between true, original figure of Jesus Christ and his teachings and the modern, secular understanding of him and the assumptions attributed to him in the profane industrial world (1959: 161-162). According to Eliade, Jesus is an aspect or part of the divine manifestation in harmony with the whole creation, including human societies and cultures naturally, and acting based on the very pattern of compassionate, caring love running through the universe, away from separation, inferiorization, and negation of the Other. It highlights faith as “absolute emancipation ... the highest freedom that man can imagine ... able to defend modern man from the terror of history – a freedom ... that finds its guaranty and support in God” (160-161). This is close to an Islamic perspective, as the essence of the Islamic *Sufi* stand that, holding faith apart from ideological, religious dedications, considers all messengers of God linked in fraternity, sharing one soul and common set of sensitivities and instructions. The key point in analyzing *FRL* through concentrating on this feature is to observe the level of compatibility the characters and thematic development of the novel represent with this overlapping notion.

FRL unfolds through the archetype of journey. This notion connects the two Eastern

and Western worlds of the novel, where characters and incidents run a parallelism, putting forward a postmodern form of narration beyond the limitations of time and space. Coming from different religious backgrounds, Jewish Ella and Aziz, a Western *Sufi* convert of Christian, Netherlandish background, are set to be re-figurations of Maulana and Shams of Tabriz. Encouraged by Aziz, she comes to be engrossed by a form of Islamic mysticism that helps her find the purpose or ultimate mission of her life (Mehdi et al. 2021: 6). From the beginning of the novel, this diversity is repeatedly referred to as a motif to highlight the notion of universal spirituality in progress in human life. Taking his mystical journey, Shams, for instance, comes across Arab voyagers, gypsy bands, Christian pilgrims, Buddhist ministers, Jewish dealers, Persian artists, and Frankish bards. He stresses that “despite their seemingly endless difference, all of these people gave off a similar air of incompleteness, of the work in progress that they were, each an unfinished master work” (Shafak 2011: 109). This work in progress can achieve completion through recognizing human values as the spiritual values shared by the all who experience a sacred existence. The point here is to see whether this focus on the shared spirituality confirms or challenges the Orientalist view attributed to Shafak.

In the cases of Maulana and his parallel Ella, we need to consider his doctrinal perspective which focuses on the conviction that the entire endeavor for mystical perfection centers around human being’s “desire to return to his divine origin,” that is “returning to the ontological unity he had once enjoyed” (Gray 2020: 132). For Maulana, the all critical problems of human existence stem “from the painful existence of imperfection caused by alienation from our essential source” (132). Maulana was a practicing Muslim dedicated to the Baghdad school of *Sufism* (Bugti and Khan 2019) that, being anti-pantheistic, recognizes God as the beginning and end of life. On the other hand, Eliade’s notion of eternal return through the recognition of the unity of human being with the whole creation in *hierophany*, as originating from God, reflects similarity with this Islamic *Sufi* understanding. Then, what about Ella?

Considering Ella, obviously she does not associate herself with any form of orthodox spiritual views; hers is a heterodox view (Kökücü 2020: 146) that does not demand particular dedication to any religious form, either before or after her conversion to *Sufism*. Before conversion, she negatively associates all religious people, notably Muslims, with fanaticism as the source of all human problems (Shafak 2011: 159). She insists on this stand even after knowing Aziz, who convinces her to take the mystical journey, by emphasizing that she is not to be a Muslim to be a *Sufi*: “Just be Rumi ... let love take hold of you and change you ... we’re all subject to change; it is a journey from here to there” (327). This change reflects passing through different stages, reminding Eliade’s passing through threshold, to feel presence and self-integrity in connection with divine love. This is not at odds with Maulana’s spiritual vision. His metaphysics describes the early phase of creation as an integrated realm, where human being’s inward-looking sense of real being as

well as his recognition of the “virtual existence” of the entire creation in the presence of God reflect a “state of harmonious unity.” To recreate this “original state of spiritual perfection,” Maulana emphasizes one shall be conscious of its “gradual and progressive nature,” and maintains that the mystical journey entails passing through never-ending “successive spiritual ‘stations’” (Zarrabi-Zadeh 2015: 290). Further, Ghandeharion and khajavian (2019) write:

Beyond the clash of civilizations and religions, beyond power rivalry, *The Forty Rules of Love* unites the readers under ‘the banner of the essential ingredient of the life of mankind: love, acquired by the quest of self-discovery, by the process of unlearning in order to re-learn.’ (82)

In itself, this brings to the fore an intertextual technique of narration where the stories of Moses and Khidr from al-Kahf chapter in Quran are alluded to (Shafak 2011: 209) by, symbolically, relating them to the postmodernist time of Ella and Aziz (Amna et al. 2018: 8) along with references to the ties between Maulana and Shams. This reverberates a repeated pattern of master and student life which soul aim is to come to the knowledge, most particularly that of the creation. In Islamic tradition, God creates humanity to reveal Himself and allow the humanity to achieve perfection and understanding by knowing Him. This is the discovery of the philosophy of creation as stipulated in Islamic teachings.¹

This intertextuality touches on Eliade’s emphasis on acknowledging the revelation of wisdom in both Eastern and Western contexts, reflected in their existential perspectives. Put it differently, here by going beyond the limitations of time and place, and juxtaposing Eastern mystical role models and Western figures whose Judeo-Christian backgrounds share the religious allusion to the character of Moses and his mission, the novel emphasizes the recognition of the unity of life as a continuous divine revelation beyond chronological, spatial visions. Yet, what might be considered here is that the unfolding of the story and the characterizations could be more convincing. The sequence of events and changes in the story proceed at high speed, and this reduces the artistic, realistic perceptibility of the novel. For instance, in a scene in the novel, Maulana easily undergoes Shams’ order to personally obtain wine for him (Shafak 2011: 236), an act which is unthinkable, destroying his social position as a religious scholar. For the reader, the internalization of this blind dedication toward his master is not understandable. While in itself, it alludes to Moses’ blind devotion to Khidr, as documented in Quran, yet the novel is not a mere historical report, not letting the reader sympathize with the characters. The quality of the first seclusion that Maulana and Shams have together, is not explained or visualized as well, and the reader cannot figure out how Maulana came up as fully devoted to Shams. This envisions kind of superficial treatment with the key incident of the novel and, in a way, buttresses the marketization of mystical spirituality argued by critics like El Zein (2010) and Furlanetto (2013). This might signal Shafak’s inclination toward “Rumi phenomenon,” while regarding the incident as a historical fact, instead

of a literary or artistic articulation, imitating a Quranic style, somehow, through mere relating, which simultaneously deconstructs the very Orientalist tendencies by stepping away from the full fictional construction of an event that involves allusion to Quranic characters.

Drawing on a cyclic versus a linear view of time, this novel fictionalizes an Eliadean view of sacred life that renders the primordial time of cosmogony ever-present (Eliade 1987: 65) by narrating a modern experience of a sacred eternal returning. The representation of the spiritual revival via juxtaposing the past and present through the parallel narration of an ordinary American woman's current modern life and the older life story of Maulana and Shams aims at bringing them together as one continued present life story repeating the very old pattern and, accordingly, reliving the very spirituality. This is emphasized again and again throughout the novel by Shams:

The past is an interpretation, the future is an illusion. The world does not move through times as if it were a straight line, proceeding from past to the future. Instead time moves through and within us, in endless spirals. ... If you want to experience eternal illumination, put the past and the future out of your mind and remain within the present moment (Shafak 2011: 216).

There are questions here: do the introduction of *Sama* dance and the modern female protagonist's travel to Konya in Turkey reflect the practice of eternal return to offer the unity of creation with Origin in the novel? In other words, do the setting of the contemporary Western way of life, as the illustration of American dream, along with the older Eastern practices and orders of life introduced by *Sufis*, indicate reliving Eliade's "mythical age"?

To answer it, as the novel relates the very *Sufi* perspective found in Shafk's other works (Mohammadi Achachelooei 2019), first we need to observe whether Maulana's ideological stand is the principle running throughout the novel. This ideology considers human being's inward reality, the one before Adam's fall, as the selfless one and of the same essence of the Creator that is to be fully regained through the mystical journey (Zarrabi-Zadeh 2015: 292). In *FRL*, Shams explains *Sama* dance as a spiritual practice helping practitioners to be present before the soul of creation: Al-Jamal, al-Kayyum, al-Rahman, al-Rahim. Through famine and flood, dry and athirst, I will sing and dance for Him till my knees buckle, my body collapses, and my heart stops pounding. I will smash my ego to smithereens, until I am no more than a particle of nothingness, the wayfarer of pure emptiness, the dust of the dust in His great architecture. Gratefully, joyously, and relentlessly, I commend His splendor and generosity. I thank Him for all the things He has both given and denied me, for only He knows what is best for me. (Shafak 2011: 181)

Eliade discusses different forms of dance as recreating "originally sacred" archetypes rooting in *illo tempore* and being performed by heroes or gods. The reiteration of these dances can take the human being or his/her understanding outside of the profane life

(1959: 28). Later, he also elaborates on the essential role of circular movement for the maintenance of the elements of cosmogonic act by “continually bringing back their return” as “the most immediate, most perfect (and hence the most dearly divine) expression of that which, at the pinnacle of hierarchy, is absolute immobility” (p. 89). In other words, this is not a mere physical activity, but it “can become a sacrament, that is, a communion with the sacred” (Eliade 1987: 14).

According to Zacharia and Senthamarai (2023), “Shafak’s novels have women as their central characters and most of the stories are told from a female perspective” (222). This is not totally true about *FRL*. We have two sub-plots, with parallel male and female characters whose voices are also reflected as first person narrators in different sections of the novel. On the whole, the novel seeks to elaborate on the notion of perfect human being than centralizing women. By characterizing Ella as a middle-aged American woman who finds her life meaningless, Shafak crafts a typical modern human being who represents the “fallen man.” Her life, resembling Aziz’s earlier one, relates the modern non-spiritual life where “contact with the transcendent is lost,” and her “existence in the world” has ceased “to be possible” (Eliade 1987: 34). To gain salvation, this modern human being needs to develop “a sensibility less closed to the miracle of life and the experience of renewal” (Eliade 1959: 77). This renewal signifies the end of an era and the beginning of another one. It is the “reactualization of the Creation” (69). In itself, it signals the birth or “initiation” or “resurrection” of an era or life, and explains Aziz’s recommendation for changing life through moving from here to there (Shafak 2011: 327).

Sufi practices are among the procedures through which “resurrection” can be actualized, as they assist in regaining mental health (Mehdi et al. 2021: 3). Being involved with *Sufism* through Aziz, Ella experiences “resurrection” in her life. The leaving of her husband and the comfort zone of her married life symbolize the act of being involved in Creation by passing through the threshold. She conquers the guardians of this threshold who are anxiety over an unpredictable future and a loss of financial stability and established family life, with the entire of social relations, expectations, and recognitions associated with it; these are significant values of idealized American life. In fact, she experiences an “initiation” and “resurrection” by being dead before her death, symbolically prefigured by the death of her beloved dog called Spirit (Shafak 2011: 142) – the emotional attachment of Western human being to dogs shall be considered here – and is argued by Shams: “At every moment and with each new breath, one should be renewed and renewed again. There is only one way to be born into a new life: to die before death” (336).

In other words, this is a kind of a rite of passage, reflecting the way Ella consciously adopts a spiritual practice, a mystical journey along with Aziz, to turn her profane life into a sacred one by travelling through the unknown Other, outside the world of her everyday experience (Eliade 1987: 29). As such, she becomes familiarized with the unknown, and transforms its chaotic condition into an orderly

one associated with the cosmos. That is to say, she becomes involved in the divine practice of cosmogony (31). The symbolic departure or “separation” from previous life, experienced by all the dynamic characters of the story, including Aziz, Suleiman the Drunk, and Desert Rose the Harlot, signals a beginning and “every beginning repeats the primordial beginning” (57). Ella and these characters go through “death” and “resurrection” by experiencing a “new birth” and becoming a “new man” (Eliade 1959: 69) by leaving their prosperous or familiar routine life showcased as loveless, soulless, meaningless, and dark, where they automatically repeated the programs planed in advance, or lived the life set or approved by others, out of fear of confronting the recognized social values or undergoing the pain of transformation.

According to Eliade (1959), Modern man is in favor of “novelties,” while “the man of the archaic civilization” considers them as “sin,” “faults,” and so on because they stand outside the circle of the repetition of established archetypes (154), and this abolishes periodicity. Ella rebels against this reiteration of the fixed norms and values of her community. It seems she represents a modern woman in favor of novelties. Then, how can we justify this action through an Eliadean view? Is her act of leaving her routine, mechanical life embodying a modern person’s struggle for “self-assurance” (154)? Doing so, she joins Aziz, a practicing devotee of Eastern *Sufi* tradition. *Sufi* practice is based on the repetition of a fixed series of actions, which in itself abolishes chronological, temporal order, reimagining original creation *ab ovo*. This again challenges Eliade’s elaboration on modern and archaic man. It can be elaborated on by Eliade’s recognition of the eschatological notion of revival in monotheistic religions, including Judeo-Christian one. According to him, any breaking of any profane form or entity is a spiritual act shaping a sacred realm (1987: 73), even if not following repetitive archetypal, predictable, and mytho-religious patterns. In other words, repetition through the imitation of pre-established patterns is not always an *imitatio Dei*, that is imitating a “trans-human model” (87), but a desacralized reiteration, “emptied of religious content” (107) and profane, therefore. These all are congruous with Maulana’s notion of transformation via going through different states, physically and mentally, as explained by Zarrabi-Zadeh (2015).

Considering Aziz, he is a Shams-like figure who recreates an original Christ-like figure, as well. As mentioned before, Eliade distinguishes the current dominant form of Christianity and recognition of Christ from the real historical Christ. He believes,

the Christological drama have become inaccessible to Christians living in a modern city. Their religious experience is no longer open to the cosmos. . . . for a genuine Christian the world is no longer felt as the work of God (1987: 179).

This explains why Aziz converts from the dominant Christianity to Eastern *Sufism*, with its notable Islamic essence. Jesus Christ is always described as the incarnation of divinity in love. In *FRL*, Shafak represents love as an eternal phenomenon beyond the chronological or liner understanding of time and that of place-bound space. As both

the sub-plots of the novel in relation to Ella and Maulana unfold alongside each other, they highlight the notion of everlasting love and life beyond death and separation; Aziz's death, repeating the very death of Shams, illustrates "the beginning of a new spiritual existence" (Eliade 1987: 196) by sacralizing the Western and Eastern sub-worlds of the novel. This repetition renders the narration line in the novel a circular one, reflecting a notion of the eternal return as the carrier of an internal capacity for everlasting life and renewal. The concept of love in *FRL* is the representation of the very capacity. It may be argued that the reflection of this love is problematic, considering the representation of Shams, the main *Sufi* character in the novel, as a patriarch. In relation to his wife, he always ignores her emotional dependence, giving priority to "his mystical feelings" (Ghandeharion and Khajavian 2019: 75). Kerra, Maulana's wife, is also disappointed of the widening distance between her and her husband, all because of Shams. This partly challenges the philosophy of equality associate with *Sufism* in *FRL* and, creating view of a loveless, dark life and buttresses the notion of the profane life and criticisms about the Orientalist representation of Shams and Maulana in the novel. These maybe argued as kind of episodic representations by Shafak for artistic, fictional reasons to create dramatic effect which, no doubt, damages the integrity of the narration. However, this gap is somehow covered and deconstructed by Desert Rose, the Harlot's dynamic characterization in the novel who, saved by Shams' teachings, starts a clean life anew as a *Sufi* herself (Shafak 2011: parts 3-5). The same is true about Ella, the main female character of the novel, who dies to her previous, modern, profane life to start a sacred one (Shafak 2011: 249). As such, *FRL* can be looked at as the illustration of the very divine cosmogonic energy that keeps life going on ceaselessly ad infinitum by leading the main characters to experience revival from within.

Based on what was discussed, one seeming discrepancy in the novel will be addressed. Postmodern fiction relies on a subjective, epistemological perspective that, arguing for relativity as the essence of recognition, refuses hierarchy. Eliade's modernist, objective theory of *hierophany* by arguing for the adoption of trans-human model, where natural human being is united with the supernatural Origin as His manifestation, challenges the notion of hierarchy in creation, as well. Accordingly, Postmodern relational subjectivity, in a way, overlaps Eliade's objective reality and no considerable discrepancy will rise, comparing them together. Further, considering the congruity of Maulan's original teachings, reflected in *FRL*, with Eliade's perspective and the reflection of the spiritual resurrection the truth-seeking Western representatives of the novel experience, I cannot agree with Seblini (2021) that, like Turkey itself, this novel reflects indeterminate movement between original Islamic spiritual traditions and Orientalist stand, partly succeeding and partly failing in "bringing the East and the West together" (1). This failure signifies a profane life, which is replaced by a sacred one in the novel. Spiritual experience of recognizing or redefining Self beyond the apparent differences, and in unity with the Origin, helps

humanity to go out of the profane space; we are all the manifestation of the sacred Himself and all is love.

5. Conclusion

FRL is about the sacred and profane modes of life, as “the possible dimensions of human existence” (Eliade 1987: 15), by illustrating the transformation of the modern secular human being to a spiritual one through the repetition of primordial cosmogonic act. The current study investigated this transformation by adopting a mystical, theological perspective introduced by Eliade. The narrative analysis focused on the notions of *imitatio Dei* and love as determining a spiritual map for creating a divine life in harmony with cosmos and its Creative Soul.

The notion of imitation, represented through the repetition of some archetypal patterns, is the connecting concept running through the main characters’ actions in the novel, who follow the role models whose actions and mentality, they believe, can transform their life to a perfect one. At first, the recognition of the lack of these two aspects in their life motivates the characters to start a journey of self-discovery symbolically represented by these characters’ physical journey to other places to give meaning to their routine, monotonous life. That pain, or bitterness, or meaninglessness Ella, Shams, Maulana, and Aziz experience in earlier phases of their life represent their “unquenchable ontological thirst” that reveals their “terror of nothingness” (64). Highlighting the lack of true love through Ella’s loveless life, Aziz’s and Maulana’s loss of loved ones, and Shams’ wandering from Samarkand to Baghdad and, then, Konya to find it, the novel resorts to *Sufism* as the answer that offers divine love as the only solution to resolve the existential crisis being experienced by modern man. As such, *FRL* touches the Eliadean perspective that “human existence is possible only by virtue of this permanent communication with the sky” (34).

I cannot deny that Shafak acknowledges the commercialization of spirituality—specifically Sufism—in the United States (Furlanetto 2013: 203), as she engages deeply with the notion of faith as a secular interpretation of religious belonging. Yet, the way she intricately develops both subplots of *FRL*, deliberately reflecting the original Islamic essence of Sufism as a unifying force, challenges the complete acceptance of an Orientalist mindset as the dominant or defining perspective in the novel. The references to key practices associated with Sufism, such as *Sama*—a whirling dance symbolizing listening—and the notion of contemplation as a means to unite with the Divine, coupled with elaborations on its religious philosophy through various allusions, evoke a vision of an eternal presence aligned with the circular concept of time and existence. This perspective bridges the Islamic essence of Sufism with a Universalist vision of spirituality that transcends temporal and spatial boundaries, grounded in the principle of love.

Sama dance in circular movement connotes the idea that there is no linear beginning or end, that is to say, there is no death; all is eternal life and presence

as the essence of a benevolent source of love, manifesting Himself through His creation. This touches on Ibn Arabi's stand as well and is the very idea of cosmogonic *hierophany* discussed by Eliade. Symbolically, this is represented through the revival Ella experiences because of the arrival of Aziz as a *dervish* whose "dance has spun the events of her life," and makes her realize that without self-love, she cannot love others (Saleh 2022: 37). Accordingly, she rearranges her life by breaking the mirror of marriage; "in a new perspective, the swirling began and maybe it stops one day and she will be able to have another mirror . . . arranging her life once again" (37).

To summarize, and as a suggestion for further studies, there have been investigations of the influences Eliade and "other foundational figures in the study of religion in the second half of the last century" received from Muslim scholars, notably Ibn Arabi (Morris 2001: 104) in developing their spiritual vision. I believe further excavation of the awareness of the fiction writers of the century of this recognition can end in exciting results in the representation of cultural interaction between the East and the West, and challenge the dominant Orientalist arguments against some of Muslim writers active in this field, Shafak among them.



Endnotes

1 In his article, he explains three stages of mystical perfection according to Maulana that include *Nafs*, Intellect, and ineffable heart which the *Sufi* goes through to experience annihilation or *fanā* to be reunited with God.

2 Return to Zarrabi-Zadeh (2015) for further information.

3 Daphne Hampson discusses this historicity as the nub of Christian ideology that assumes Jesus as the Incarnation of divinity in a particular time and place as the sacred ones and revered as the real, true references of temporal/spatial dimensions of being. For full discussion please refer to:

Hampson, Daphne (2002). *After Christianity*. London: scm Press.

Hampson, Daphne (1991). *Theology and Feminism*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

4 This is mentioned in the main sources of both branches of Islam, Shiaatism and Sunnism. For example, in *Sahih al-Bukhari* 3443, Book 60, Hadith 113 we read: Allah's Messenger (pbuh) said: "The prophets are paternal brothers; their mothers are different, but their religion is one." Elsewhere, in Ahmed Al-Rahmani Al-Hamadani (1996). *Imam Ali ibn Abi Talib*, first ed. Tehran: Al-Muneerwe again we read: Jabir ibn Abdullah was narrated that Prophet Mohammad (pbuh) addressed him, asking: "O! Jabir, which kind of brotherhood is the best? I replied, the sons from the same father and mother. The prophet (pbuh) replied: we, the prophets, are brothers" (p. 307).

5 This refers to a controversial saying attributed to God, known as the hidden treasure or *kanzan makhfiyyan*. Famous scholars and writers like Ibn Arabi, Maulana, and Mulla Sadra have referred to it while there have been others who considered it as unauthentic. For further information, refer to:

Abdu'l-Baha, (1985) "Commentary on the Islamic Tradition 'I Was a Hidden Treasure' : *Tafsir-i-Hadith-i-Kuntu Kanzan Makhfiyyan*." (Momen, Moojan, Trans.). *Baha'i Studies Bulletin* 3:4, pp. 4–35. https://bahai-library.com/abdul-baha_kuntu_kanzan_makhfiyyan.

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