



## Research Article

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# Sufism: Interfaith Coexistence or Poisoned Gift? A Case Study of Elif Shafak's *Forty Rules of Love* and Mohammed Alwan's *A Small Death*

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## Abstract

*In Alwan's A Small Death "Mouton Sageer" (Alwan, 2016) and Shafak's Forty Rules of Love (2010), Sufism was promoted in as in many literary works because they believed Sufism is the remedy to oppose today's religious bigotry in essence that it called for universal spirituality, equality, love and coexistence among humanity across cultures and religions. This paper investigates the writings and debates of both authors on Sufism from two viewpoints on some of the most critical socio-political issues related to peaceful coexistence and women's empowerment since securing women's rights in society is the keystone of the quest for coexistence and social justice.*

**Keywords:** Sufism, Interfaith coexistence, Social justice, Religious conflicts, Universal spirituality, Sufi literature

## 1. Introduction

In a multicultural world, in which its societal conflicts are more ferocious than its international conflicts, each sect and denomination are annihilated by those who contravene it, strongly by arms onetime and by mythology at other times. Then, the past not only becomes part of the gloomy present but also dominates it in an attempt to chart a future that is not based on intellectual originality or distinct cultural creativity. So, the present becomes a terrifying nightmare in which a modern man comes out of modernity and is pushed into a more severe darkness than the dark of the Middle Ages, where he is stripped of his thoughts, his mind, his emotions, and before this all of his love for the other. In other words, the twenty-first century bears a striking resemblance to the thirteenth century. Both eras will be remembered for their notable instances of religious conflict, cultural misinterpretation, and prevailing sense of unease and apprehension toward those perceived as different. The necessity for affection is particularly pronounced in the current era.

As a result, despite their different nationalities in the last few decades, novelists were alert to these facts, and their writings began to break away from the writings of classical, romantic, and realistic literature, which could no longer represent the man of the twenty-first century with all his frustration and worries which are no longer individual but collective and affect him and the people

surrounding him as much as affect his territory and his infinite world.

## 2. Scope of the Study

Hence comes the significance of what is offered by Elif Shafak, the Turkish novelist. Her contemporary intellectual vision is mainly based on what is considered socio-political, literary, and philosophical at the same time. She studied Sufism and realized that the deeper she read in Sufism, the more ignorant she found herself than ever before. Therefore, she decided to write about Sufism in her novel *Forty Rules of Love* (2010), in which she mixed the reading of the past, thirteenth century, embodied in the characters of Jalal al-Din Al-Rumi and Shams Al-Tabrizi, and the present time represented by the character of Ella, the American housewife. Under the mentorship of Aziz Zahara, Ella undergoes a profound metamorphosis. Aziz, who identifies himself as a practitioner of Sufism, plays a pivotal role in facilitating Ella's personal growth and development (160). Aziz is introduced in the novel as the symbolic reincarnation of Rumi's great teacher Shams Al-Tabrizi as the author argues in many aspects. Shafak argues that there are similarities between the twenty-first century and the thirteenth century. Both eras will be remembered in historical records as periods characterized by significant religious conflicts, cultural misunderstandings, and a prevailing sense of insecurity and animosity towards those perceived as different. Greater than ever is the need for love at these times (15).

Shafak repeatedly states her fascination with Sufism, particularly in her essay titled "The Celestial Eye" in her anthology of non-fiction essays, *Black Milk* (2007). She acknowledges that, among the various Sufi authors and thinkers, she was particularly influenced and captivated by the works of Rumi and Shams of Tabriz, his renowned spiritual partner. Living in thirteenth-century Anatolia, a time of profoundly entrenched bigotry and conflict, they advocated for a spirituality available to all people, regardless of their background. They described love as the essence of existence, the universal philosophy uniting humanity through generations, cultures, and cities (Shafak, 2007, p. 219). Obviously, Sufism was promoted in Shafak's works, as in many literary works, because she believed Sufism is the remedy to oppose today's religious bigotry in essence that it calls for universal spirituality, equality, love and coexistence among humanity across cultures and religions.

Likewise, the same interest in Sufism appeared obviously in the novel *A Small Death* "Mouton Sageer" (Alwan, 2016) by the Saudi writer Mohammed Hasan Alwan, recipient of the International Prize for Arabic Fiction (IPAF). This historical novel is about a famous Sufi saint and traveler Ibn Arabi in the thirteenth century, which is considered a commentary on the contemporary world and politics of today. In an interview with M. Lynx Qualey, Alwan (2017) stated that sometimes it is unavoidable to see a connection between the past and the present since history tends to repeat itself. This is the case in his novel.

## 3. Literature Review

There is a growing interest in Sufism in many Muslim nations and the West. The growth of the Sufi movement calls for attention in numerous Western academic disciplines and literary works. Sufi literature comprises works written in a variety of languages that convey and promote Sufi beliefs. Therefore, Sufism has garnered significant popularity and prominence in both Europe and the United States, as evidenced by numerous examples. In her scholarly investigation titled "Literary productions of Western Sufi movements," Marcia Hermansen, a Professor of Islamic Studies at Loyola University, highlighted the remarkable growth and proliferation of distributors and publishers specialized in Sufi literature. Several renowned publishers that focus on Sufi literature include Omega Press, specialized in publications related to the Sufi Order; Kazi Publications in Chicago, known for their works associated with the Haqqani Order; Threshold Books in Vermont, which focuses on Mevlevi literature; Sufi Books/Pir Press in New York, dedicated to Helveti-Jerrahi literature; Octagon Press,

which publishes works by Idries Shah (33). So, the expanding popularity of Sufism is reflected in the increasing number of publications on Muslim mystical movements recently. Over the past decade, Islamophobia and racism have spread throughout the West, especially in the United States and Europe. Muslims frequently endure discrimination and prejudice whether or not they are immigrants and whether or not they practice Islam. Observers of the global scene are more likely to notice that Sufis are highly esteemed by a large audience.

The prevailing body of studies highlighted Sufism as a catalyst for fostering empathetic thinking, kindness, humanity, interfaith peace, piety, cultural integration, societal assistance, redistribution of wealth, and religious needs (Idris & Ahmed, 2011; Kurin, 1983; Rehman & Lund-Thomsen, 2014). The commitment of the Sufi is to the pursuit of unity. Sufism's primary goal is to unite humanity, which is currently divided into many distinct parts, through a better understanding of existence. Their purpose is to promote brotherhood amongst races, nationalities, and religions, as well as respect for one another's faith, scripture, and teacher. To be Sufi is to show sympathy for these lives and to bestow love, compassion, and generosity on all things (Leghari et al., 2017). The journalist and executive director of the Mediterranean Citizens' Assembly Foundation, Esmā Kucukalic (2020), contended that the presence of Sufism in the Balkans predated the Ottoman expansion and has persisted for more than six centuries. In the context of Bosnia and Herzegovina, according to Kucukalic, Sufism has become an integral part of the cultural and historical fabric, remaining largely inconspicuous until recent times as a result of its thorough assimilation. At present, it has become increasingly apparent, yet it has been rendered as distinctly regional, Mediterranean, and globally relevant (171). So, Sufism is promoted to be global and eliminate all religious conflicts. In *The Other Islam* (Schwartz, 2008), Stephen Schwartz analyzed the beginnings and development of Sufism, explained its doctrines, and displayed its connections to other religions. In addition, Schwartz offered a contemporary overview of Sufism in the contemporary Islamic world, predicting an intellectual resurgence of the faith and remedies to fundamentalism and tyranny in the Middle East, Turkey, and Iran. However, some Americans associate Islam with fanatical hate of the West. Still, *The Other Islam* altered this perception and paved the way for people to find common ground in these turbulent times. Sufism, according to Schwartz, is a reform movement against the increasing worldliness of Muslim society; it emphasizes Islam's spiritual aspect. Sufism, often known as the "Islam of the Heart," has attracted all believers Sunni and Shi'a Muslims, as well as Christians, Jews, Buddhists, and Hindus.

However, other studies indicated that Sufism contributes to internal crisis, bigotry, violence, and politico-religious conflict (Epping, 2013; Hassan, 1987; Rehman, 2006; Rozehnal, 2006). Furthermore, numerous researchers examined the political significance of Sufi shrines in the South Asian context (Aziz, 2001; Khan, 2005; Mayer, 1967). The primary emphasis of these studies revolved around the examination of both the explicit and implicit involvement of Sufi religious figures and their followers in political affairs, as well as their esteemed position of authority in the eyes of governing authorities, as measured by the value of their considerable local followers. These Sufis provided political support to the rulers of the Middle Ages (Aziz, 2001; Ewing, 2011; Khan, 2005). In this regard, Ali Khan (2005), in describing the political power of Sufi successors (*sajjada nashins*)<sup>1</sup> during the British period, made the argument that the British acknowledged the local authority of *sajjada nashins* and granted them elevated privileges, lands, properties, and patronage in order to enforce their colonial policies. With their inherited religious power, the *sajjada nashins* acquired vast tracts of land, transforming them into feudal lords in the rural districts of Indo-Pakistan. Hence, the *sajjada nashins* were able to establish a robust political power by virtue of their hereditary religious influence and the prevalence of feudalism in rural regions, notably in the Punjab and Sindh provinces. The Sufi figures of authority have been actively involved in the political landscape of

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<sup>1</sup> The term "*sajjada nashin*" denotes an individual who assumes the role of a custodian or proxy for Sufi holy places.

Pakistan since before the partition (Aziz, 2001). According to Lieven (2011), the sajjada nashins of Punjab's places of worship prioritize maintaining their control and influence over the masses rather than actively promoting democratic government locally. Thus, these successors posed a substantial obstacle to the advancement of socio-political development within Pakistan. To clarify, these politicians commenced employing Sufi shrines as a means to further their political objectives. Nevertheless, the utilization of this subject matter within the realm of literary studies appeared to be hardly encountered. To date, no comprehensive research pertaining to the same subject has been identified.

#### 4. Rationale of the Study

The recent observation of Westerners' promotion of Sufism has prompted an inquiry into the methods and motivations underlying the promotion of Sufism in literary works, which has yet to be discovered. Firstly, this study, far from being exhaustive in covering this research area, aims to contribute to the elimination of a gap in the literature. Despite the extensive literature on Sufism, there has been a tendency to see the Sufi movement solely as a cultural, religious phenomenon with little rigorous analysis of its sociopolitical context and background. Also, these studies have tended to ignore the extent to which ideological shifts are reflected in literary works. Secondly, this study demonstrates through close reading how romanticizing Sufism by writers such as Shafak and Alwan prepares the ground for a revival of an Islamic movement. In their quest, Sufism has become the ground on which individuals may achieve their dreams of interfaith coexistence and global harmony. This paper investigates the writings and debates of both literary authors on Sufism from two viewpoints on some of the most critical socio-political issues related to peaceful coexistence and women's empowerment since securing women's rights in society is the keystone of the quest for coexistence and social justice. As a result, this paper seeks to address the following questions:

Has the promotion of Sufism in Shafak's and Alwan's fiction reflected the global movement to eliminate all religious conflicts?

Is contemporary Sufism divested from any political interest, as its advocates claim?

The fundamental question is whether the new-found Sufism represents a step backward for humanity or an opportunity to foster women's empowerment, peace, love, interfaith, and cultural harmony among Muslims, non-Muslims, believers, and non-believers taking into consideration the Western intervention.

#### 5. Method

The research methodology included the utilization of content analysis, specifically adopting a sociopolitical perspective. The content analysis method is a research approach employed to acquire knowledge by systematically examining and interpreting the characteristics and details of the subject of investigation, with the aim of attaining a comprehensive understanding of the issue at hand. The steps of this method were data inventory and data collection from texts pertaining to the evolution of Sufism in Western contexts, along with the subsequent description of data from the narratives. This involved the application of literary criticism that utilized the examination of Sufi themes and concepts present in the provided qualitative data. This approach employed inductive reasoning, wherein themes and concepts are derived from the data through careful examination and continual comparison. Content analysis was conducted in order to establish a clear relationship between one concept and another.

The study demonstrated through a close reading of *Forty Rules of Love* and *A Small Death* how the writers, such as Shafak and Alwan, prepare the ground for a revival of the religious order by celebrating the values of Sufism in their narratives. This paper validated the central questions addressed above by thoroughly analyzing the sociopolitical context.

This study is divided into three parts. The first part deals with a brief overview of the genesis

and history of Sufism, as well as the evolution of its beliefs. The second part examines the writings of Shafak and Alwan and how both portray Sufism as reflective of the global promotion of the given religious order. Then, it traces the existing institutions of Sufism and how they have been promoted recently by foreign countries in various parts of this religionized world.

## 6. Sufism and its Origin

Sufism (*tasawwuf*) refers to mysticism and religious practice and faith marked by spirituality and asceticism in Islam. The etymology of the word can be traced back to the Arabic term 'Sufi', denoting 'wool' (Suhrawardi, 1973, p. 8). The individuals who embraced Sufism renounced worldly pursuits, adopted a mystical lifestyle, and adorned themselves with garments made of coarse wool. According to Ibn Arabi (1980), Abu Nasr al-Saraj asserted that the woolen raiment is commonly associated with the attire of prophets, saints, and the chosen ones (p. 21). This devotional practice to a mystic life is called 'Sufism' in Islam. The concept of Sufism encompasses a range of philosophical perspectives and practical methodologies oriented towards a rigorous adherence to Islamic norms and the belief that it is possible to draw closer to God and embrace the divine presence in this life. The practitioners are referred to as Sufis. The adherents of Sufism tend to assert that their appellation is derived from the term "safa," denoting the concept of pureness (Ibn Arabi, 1980, p. 10). So, for the Sufi, the only way to gain godly approval is to give one's life to God: the rite of purification is a prerequisite for those who wish to follow this path. The Sufis refer to this path as a spiritual road, the path of others who would sacrifice their lives to win favor with God. The asceticism of the early Sufis was well recognized. Their ideal situation was poverty, and they believed that the world diverted their attention away from God. As a result, if they refrain from obtaining worldly things, they will be spared distraction, will be able to accomplish a high degree of focus, and their prayers will be of remarkable quality.

Thus, since its advent, Sufism has evolved into an intriguing phenomenon. It is the organizational form of both Sunni's and Shia's spiritual dimension. As a religion and philosophy, Sufism is embraced by a large number of Muslims throughout the world. This spiritual and ethical belief is renowned for its inclusive approach, tolerance, and peace. Nevertheless, the past and present history of Sufism is replete with domestic and external wars, which contradicts the popularly held belief of Sufism's detachment from politics and implies that Sufism is neither totally nonpolitical and peaceful nor purely political and militant. (Mehregan, 2016). In her discussion of Sufi institutions, Dr. Farida Khanam notes that during the nascent stages of Sufism, a multitude of Sufi masters and their disciples, known as murids, existed; yet, there was an absence of any formalized institutionalized movement. During the period spanning the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the aforementioned movement gradually underwent a process of formalization, resulting in the establishment of structured orders or lineages (Khanam, 2006, p. 6).

## 7. Sufism in Forty Rules of Love and A Small Death

Sufism has been extremely opposed by radical Islam since its advent to the present day, as Stephen Schwartz claims in his work *The Other Islam* (Schwartz, 2008). Schwartz argues that Sufism is a liberal trend among Muslim Movements because Sufis consume alcohol and men and women are equal in rituals, "they are the 'most progressive' elements in the world of Islam." (83) Notably, unpacking Shafak's novel with all its Sufi rhetorical arguments and rules articulates the overall message of the narrative. Unlike Orthodox Islam, Sufism stands for love, asceticism, peace, tolerance towards consuming alcohol, and gender equality. The author asserts that love constitutes the fundamental significance and objective of human existence, drawing inspiration from Rumi's teachings. According to the philosophy of love in Rumi's teachings, individuals strive to assert their presence within the vast expanse of the universe that envelops them, ultimately seeking to establish a meaningful connection to the existential, aesthetic, and epistemological aspects of the divine (Ansari & Jahantigh, 2019). In Shafak's novel, this profound force affects all individuals, including those who

reject its influence, and even extends to those who employ the term "romantic" in a derogatory manner (15). In this regard, Elena Furlanetto supports the perspectives of scholars, namely Seyyed Hossain Nasr and Amira El-Zein, who conducted analyses on Sufism and its interpretation within a Western framework. According to Furlanetto, it is argued that Shafak presents the narrative of Rumi in a manner that conforms to the Rumi phenomenon, placing emphasis on the preferences and stylistic inclinations of Western readers rather than providing a thorough comprehension of Sufism and exposing the intricate nature of its adaptations in the Western context (2013, 204). Furlanetto's assertion holds some validity in suggesting that Shafak's focus on Sufism correlates with its growing popularity and endorsement in Western societies. Nevertheless, it is important to note that Shafak's narrative effectively communicates notions of interfaith harmony, not solely targeting Western audiences but encompassing individuals of diverse racial and religious backgrounds, specifically Muslims. This narrative seeks to present an alternative to fundamentalist Islam and its intolerant adherents, as elucidated in the subsequent analysis and the examination of data collected from the narratives.

Rumi lived during the volatile thirteenth century, which was marked by religious conflicts, political disturbances, and ceaseless power struggles. In 1244, Rumi encountered Shams, an encounter that resulted in a profound transformation within him. This transformation led Rumi, who was previously aligned with mainstream clerical beliefs, to adopt a devoted Sufi path. Furthermore, Rumi's encounter with Shams ignited a passionate inclination towards poetry, wherein he fearlessly advocated for the power of love, defying societal norms and conventions. He stood for a universal spirituality, as the author states, and extended his doors to individuals from all walks of life. Rather than endorsing an outward-focused jihad, entailing combatting non-believers as practiced historically and presently by many individuals, Rumi advocated for an inward-focused jihad. This internal struggle aims to overcome and ultimately conquer one's ego, commonly referred to as the *nafs* (19-20). So, the main dispute between Sufism and mainstream Islam lies in their interpretation of Sharia and Jihad.

The author spares no effort to unveil this belief in her work, starting from the portrayal of the high judge in Baghdad to the discussion between him and the Sufi dervish. One point emerges from the ironic juxtaposition of the modest dervish lodge and the ambitious judge renowned for his dislike of Sufism. The latter had a wide face, a big belly, and short, tiny hands, each adorned with a priceless ring, and was always attired in fur coats and fine clothing (46). This judge had full authority; with a single judgement, he could condemn a man to the gallows or release a convicted criminal. For the sake of his lodge, the dervish had to maintain a cordial relationship with this influential man, even though he did not approve of his behavior. As the conversation continued, it became increasingly clear that Sufis had been oppressed and shunned because of their individualistic and esoteric interpretations of Islam. The dervish chose to remain quiet while the judge criticized Sufis for disregarding the Sharia and so showing contempt for men of religious authority, "men like him." (47) This conversation continued to be a verbal dispute between the judge and another dervish, but this time the dervish was Shams Al-Tabrizi who dared to confront the judge. Shams disclosed the veracity that the presence of opulent attire, such as silk garments, fur clothes, and costly jewels like that adorning the judge, would impede one's ability to attain comprehension of God (49). Their discussion about the significance of the Sharia proved their difference in practicing Islam, as the author suggests that the majority of Muslims and scholars express contentment with the literal interpretation of the Qur'an while Sufis know the inner meaning. The golden rule that is a doctrine to Sufis and passes from masters to their disciples is that: the prevalence of deceptive leaders and false masters in the world surpasses the astronomical quantity of stars within the universe. It is imperative to avoid conflating individuals who exhibit arrogance and a thirst for power with those who genuinely serve as mentors. This genuine spiritual guru refrains from diverting one's focus towards their own persona, nor will they demand unconditional submission or admiration from you; instead, they will provide support in fostering a sense of appreciation and admiration for one's intrinsic qualities. Authentic mentors possess a level of transparency akin to that of glass. They permit the transmission of divine

illumination through their beings (88). Sufis see themselves as true believers who seek the love of God and, in turn, love all the creatures of God. In the narrative, we find that Sufi was the one who wouldn't fight or resort to violence even if he had a reason when Shams stated that as an adherent of Sufism, he had taken a solemn oath to safeguard life and refrain from causing harm (31). Nevertheless, it is important to note that not all adherents of the Islamic faith embrace these concepts, much like how not all individuals readily embrace the notion of love, as elucidated by the author on multiple occasions throughout the novel. In the narrative, this recurring pattern has always been observed. When ones express veracity, they harbor animosity towards them. The greater the extent to which ones discuss love, the stronger the animosity directed towards them (33). The assassination of Shams by his haters proved this statement.

Yet, it is noteworthy to mention some mistakes that contradict historical facts, which make the novel fail to achieve a full degree of authenticity. For instance, the assassin was hired to kill Shams Al-Tabrizi by some adversaries of Sufism to whom the author refers sarcastically as "a few true believers" in an allusion to refer to the Orthodox Muslims. But the killer was a former member of the Assassins. Historically, the Assassins were military groups established by their leader Hassan Sabbah in Alamut in 1090 who received Ismaili (Shia) Sufi tutelage and bore extreme hostility against Sunnah (Lewis, 1987; Waterson, 2008). In this case, not only the victim was Sufi but also the killer, which indicated that Sufis are capable of violent activism.

Moreover, the dominant belief across religions is that the consumption of alcohol is sinful or negative. In Islam, alcohol is forbidden in this life, and the Qur'an states that it is promised by God as one of the delights in Heaven for the righteous.<sup>2</sup> However, Sufism stands for tolerance and permits drinking alcohol which makes a point of contention with mainstream Islam. Wine is praised in Sufi poetry as well. The author touches on this sensitive topic to reveal the attitude of Sufism towards this matter. A Sufi rule was made explicit by Shams Al-Tabrizi in this regard; he stated that disregarding differences and imposing one's own beliefs onto others could be seen as a form of disrespect towards the divine order established by God (140). Sufis believe that each person was made to be distinct and individual. No two individuals are identical. No two hearts have identical impulses. If God wanted everyone to be identical, He would have made that happen. So, the Sufis do not condemn others based on their behavior or actions. They see the inner realm which really matters to them. Rumi also proved this belief when he visited the tavern and got some wine (241). Even though he abstained from drinking, to Rumi, the wine possesses a profound significance as it unveils the darker aspects of human nature, thereby challenging its innocence, but one cannot blame alcohol for the arrogance and anger that might appear when drunk. In the context of Sufism, it is widely acknowledged that individuals lack the entitlement to enforce their personal convictions upon others. Furthermore, it is emphasized that religious practices within Sufism are devoid of any coercive elements. Whoever wishes to use alcohol will do so, and whoever wishes to abstain will do so. The same issue was addressed by Alwan in his novel; the prominent Sufi saint Ibn Arabi engaged in drinking alcohol. He believed that alcohol is forbidden in Islam and that drinking it made an individual a defective Muslim, but not out of the fold (115). On the spiritual path, according to Ibn Arabi, everyone is on his own. This indicates that religious faith cannot be translated or inspired by others, that it arises from spiritual needs, and that there is no religious fatwa. Ibn Arabi followed his own spiritual path and had his own philosophy, much like Rumi. Years were spent studying and translating Greek, Roman, and Adi Shankara's<sup>3</sup> manuscripts, during which Ibn Arabi recognized similarities and differences between philosophy and Sufism. Unlike philosophy, which is founded on reason and logic, Sufism values intuition.

Similarly, the imbrications of several cultures, religions, and ethnicities in Konya shaped the

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<sup>2</sup> Qur'an 47:15

<sup>3</sup> Shankara was an Indian Vedic scholar and teacher.

development of Rumi's thought. Eva De Vitray-Meyerovitch (1987) argues that:

Neither Mawlana nor his disciples differentiated between religions, and anyone become part of his entourage. After the death of his wife, who had left two small infants, Djala-od-Din married a Christian woman, Kira Khatun of Konya, who had converted to Islam. (33)

Rumi's tolerance and respect for other religions were evident, and he was loved by the Christian community in *The Forty Rules of Love* (2010). The author indicates the mixture of religions and individuals who engaged in the practice of communal food consumption, participated in collective singing, and held shared beliefs in various superstitious and wondrous phenomena, "Why shouldn't we be able to live together?" (178). It can be inferred that Sufi teachings would pave the way for such interfaith coexistence. Because Rumi and his disciples understood the essence of the Qur'an and embraced it as a whole, they believed that the love of God is the ultimate goal; loving God so deeply and loving all His creatures will make all divisions evaporate into thin air (182). In other words, this was confirmed by Shams Al-Tabrizi when he recalled another rule of love. In the course of one's existence, it is advisable to refrain from engaging in any form of extreme behavior, as such actions have the potential to disrupt one's internal balance. True Sufis refrain from engaging in excessive or extreme behaviors. According to Shams, a Sufi practitioner consistently maintains a demeanor characterized by gentleness and moderation (153). Unlike religious zealots, according to Shafak, Sufis share the extraordinary ability to observe things from two perspectives, their own and another's. (351). That is to say, in the novel, Sufism can be taken as a model for mollifying interreligious conflicts and for encouraging interreligious harmony and peaceful coexistence in this world of mixed faiths and traditions. They love all creatures, ignore differences and look at the heart, avoid extremism and stay moderate, and feel great empathy with the other.

Likewise, through the tale of Ibn Arabi, Alwan maintains that Sufism opposed military activity. In Andalusia's capital, Seville, the Muslim army marched against the Christians. Then, Ibn Arabi refused to participate in a fight in which he did not believe and made it obvious that he did not wish for the Muslims to be defeated but rather for them to withdraw peacefully. To him, living for God and resisting one's own inclinations was more difficult than fighting others (136). Both authors, Shafak and Alwan, reveal the Sufi principle toward Jihad that it is not to fight non-Muslims but rather to curb the self from earthly desires and keep piety. However, Alwan's handling of the imbrication of politics and religion is more realistic and genuine. Over time, numerous schools of Islamic jurisprudence have evolved, each with its own interpretation and implementation of the Sharia. Some of these institutions prospered or were suppressed based on the interests of the sovereign. When a new ruler succeeded to the throne in the novel, a certain school or religious sect might be favored over others. By decree, the Maliki school in Seville was banned, and its books were confiscated, whilst the Shafi'i school was fostered in Damascus. Similarly, Sufism prospered in some regions of the Muslim world and was rejected in others due to political factors. The author reveals the reality of the junction of politics and Sufism. Sufism was fostered by the Seljuk dynasty out of love and conviction, while the Ayyubids sponsored it as a bulwark against the Shia. Alwan asserts that all religious schools and sects serve politics, including the Sufi order (565). In Damascus, the Caliph favored the Shafi'i school, whose scholars despised Sufis, abused them, questioned their faith, and rejected their esotericism during the time Ibn Arabi resided in Damascus. This indicates that Sufism has not always been biased and antagonized; as with every religious school or movement, its existence depends on cooperation with the prevailing political order.

All that is mentioned above seem to be great values of Sufism. Yet, it is essential to comprehend how they deal with women's rights and gender equality as it is not only fundamental human rights but also a foundation for a peaceful and fair world. Women characters in Shafak's work are imprisoned in the traditional role of marriage and motherhood. They are intellectually inferiorized by males, as we saw when Kerra was warned by her husband, Rumi, to stay away from his books and his library; she realized and accepted that the realm of books was not, nor would it ever be, accessible to her (168). Also, Kimya, the adopted daughter of Rumi, encountered the same exclusion when Rumi confronted her with the ugly truth. Based on the data obtained from the narrative, it can be inferred



that Rumi identified Kimya as a female, so despite her diligent efforts in studying and making notable advancements, it is highly probable that she would eventually enter into matrimony and start a family. The acquisition of education over a prolonged period will yield no practical benefits (171). However, it seems that equality is confined to a spiritual level in Shafak's novel. The author also touches on the subject of men-women relationship. Kimya was troubled by some parts of Surat Al-Nisa, where men are said to be superior to women and can beat their wives. According to Shams, the literal interpretation of Quranic texts cannot reveal their true meaning. It requires contextual and intertextual analysis. He explains that when men read a Surat like Al-Nisa, it is not surprising that they conclude that men are superior to women because they want to see it precisely this way (197). The author asserts that a significant number of Muslims misconstrue the teachings of the Holy Quran, erroneously perceiving that it promotes male superiority over females due to their personal inclinations and preferences. Nevertheless, women in Sufism are still marginalized and denied equality in education, let alone independence and empowerment in Shafak's work. Women's emancipation is limited to a spiritual level, and the feminist focus on women's rights appears to be less extreme than in Alwan's.

*A Small Death* made an important contribution to the debate concerning women's emancipation in Sufism. Ibn Arabi argues that Adam without Eve is an individual who has no offspring, and femininity is essential to complete any status (94). In his spiritual seclusion, he was blessed with "unveiling"<sup>4</sup>, Ibn Arabi said his famous phrase and went on to say: "A place that is not feminine is unreliable." Even if the phrase comes in special historical, religious, or Sufi contexts, its meaning has intense loads. It ends up being that a place that does not celebrate women loses its status, value, and radiation. A woman is the one that adds status to the place. Otherwise, the latter remains dull, incomplete, and brutal. Moreover, in Alwan's narrative, the great Arab philosopher Ibn Rushd debated the rights of women. His revolutionary attitude toward women was the result of his enlightened ideals, which made him a revolutionary figure. He asserted that women should hold equivalent positions to men; they should rule and participate in wars as men (124). Ibn Rushd was not a Sufi, albeit Ibn Arabi was influenced by Ibn Rushd's progressive thoughts. Later on, Ibn Arabi met Nizam, a female religious scholar, in Makkah. Both engaged equally in studying and discussing religious texts, and eventually, the narrative discloses that she was his third pillar. This means Nizam is in a higher spiritual rank than Ibn Arabi. In Alwan's work, women appear to have a significant role in the evolution of Sufism. Likewise, Sufism promotes recognition of the feminine as equal to the masculine in the narrative.

## 8. The Political Utility of Sufism

Sufism has historically been closely related to the game of politics and has been instrumentalized. In order to challenge the Soviet Union and the socialist system, Sufism has returned strongly to the political scene since the Cold War era due to the use of the "religious element" by Western-liberal capitalist powers (Abu Rumman, 2020, p. 372). According to Anjum (2014), the political participation of Sufi saints has varied throughout the history of the Indian Subcontinent. Opposite to the belief that Sufis remained distant from rulers and politics, the historical evidence demonstrates that Sufi leaders exploited their spiritual kingdom to acquire political influence and power. Even if the leaders of Sufi movements did not actively engage in institutionalized or explicit political activities, the situation was widely believed during the Middle Ages that the endorsement of a saint was crucial for rulers to wield any significant power. The Colonial authorities came to recognize the significant political and religious influence exerted by Sufi leaders among the local population (Khan, 2005). In 1849, following the annexation of Punjab, the British authorities formulated a strategy to incorporate

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<sup>4</sup> It is a Sufi concept dealing with divine revelation after ascending through spiritual struggles.

the religious and political authority of Sufis into the governance structure (Gilmartin, 1988; Khan, 2005). Despite the dominance of European colonial powers over the Muslim countries of Africa and Asia and the Arab countries of the Middle East, as well as their endeavors to eradicate Islam and its history, religion prevailed. Efforts to convert the people to Christianity, Westernize them, and persuade them to adopt a European way of life failed (El-Hareir & Mbaye, 2011, p. 884). However, colonialism was successful in fostering Sufism, which attempted to serve colonialism in the past.

Similarly, in their quest to encounter terrorism today, According to Alix Philippon (2018), Sufism is currently perceived in the Western world as a moderate and gentle substitute, serving as a weapon against terrorism within numerous Muslim communities and beyond. Indeed, within U.S. policymaking spheres, it has been increasingly recognized as an ideological safeguard against radicalism, a widely embraced instrument of religious soft power, and a favorable portrayal of Islam. The symbol of Sufism, known for its evocative nature, carries a symbolic representation of ideals such as affection, unity, tranquility, kindness, and tolerance. This symbol has served as a source of inspiration for a significant narrative, highlighting the distinctiveness of Sufism within the Islamic faith. Moreover, it is argued that the virtues embodied by this spiritual and predominantly peaceful movement can offer an acceptable counterpoint to the more extreme manifestations of political Islam. Sufism has been consistently depicted as the genuine manifestation of Islam that should be embraced in order to counteract, undermine, and overcome terrorism. Sufism and militant Islamic extremism have been characterized as distinct concepts that are perceived as conflicting entities vying for the essence of Islam. Nevertheless, a concise examination of politicized Sufism and its perception by Western nations demonstrates that this idealized manifestation can be misleading. Philippon contends that Sufism embodies the pragmatic religious ideals that the world must promote in order to confront terrorism. He additionally cites Jonathan Granoff, a previous participant of the United Nations. During the 2016 World Sufi Forum, Granoff expressed that it is imperative for the global community, encompassing both Eastern and Western regions, to reassess and revise its strategic approach toward countering jihadist terrorism. Sufism is a motivating remedy that reawakens the human ability for love, service, compassion, and harmony. So, the need for Westerners to work with Sufis as a bulwark against Islamic extremism leads to the aggressive promotion of Sufism. It has also been incorporated into the internal and foreign policy of other countries, including Pakistan, Indonesia, and North Africa.

In the same context, in his work, *Sufism and Politics in Morocco: Activism and Dissent*, Abdelilah Bouasria (2015) maintained that Sufism has always engaged in political activism, whether through power struggles, competition for patronage, or the mobilization of the people. In an effort to combat extreme Islam, he says that the United States has imposed the global model of Sufism on several Muslim countries. Nixon Center's policy analysts feel that promoting Sufism can be used to counteract extremism within Islam. As Bouasria predicts, the American policy will not succeed, and it may even be counter-productive and spark a wave of Sufi violence, given that Sufism has a history of violent activism, dating back to the Assassins in 1095 and continuing to the present day in Iraq, where Sufis declared war on American forces in April 2005. The concept of Sufism's spirituality and individuality began to dissipate as Bernard Lewis emphasizes that "Sufis are peaceful but not pacifist, and there are jihadist Sufis" (Schwartz, 2008, p. 28). For instance, Baba Edmond Brahimaj, Bektashi leader in Tetova, is willing to engage in counterjihad assisted by Westerners against other Muslims in Balkan (Schwartz, 2008, p. 85). Rosemary Hicks (2011), in her work "Comparative Religion and the Cold War Transformation", argues that a conception of Sufi spirituality is rooted in overtly Protestant ideologies of rational thinking, liberation, and individual faith, all within the context of political projects of religion-making that seek to fashion an Islamic faith that is compatible with Western-American political views. Unquestionably, the effort to incorporate Sufism as a force in opposition to extremism and terrorism falls into the modern paradigm of political instrumentalization. In the long and short term, Sufism's collaboration with imperial powers globally and to authoritarian orders locally is excessively detrimental.

## 9. Conclusion

Studies and discourse on Sufism are undoubtedly undergoing positive development and expansion, which is increasingly reflected in some literary narratives of Sufism. Sufism is central in the two novels and the perspective from which Elif Shafak and Mohammed Alwan write. Shafak's *Forty Rules of Love* has an abundance of Rumi's teachings, which reflects his widespread success as a phenomenon in the Western market. Amira El-Zein presents a perspective characterized by heightened indignation, categorizing the Rumi phenomenon as a distinctly commercialized spiritual enterprise originating in the United States. This program of spirituality is purportedly tailored to cater to the American populace's yearning for spiritual direction (2000, 72). Nevertheless, this study provided partial support for the aforementioned assertion, albeit on distinct premises. It argued that the popularity of Sufism and its leaders in Western discourse has mostly been driven by political motivations. As a result, the literary works authored by Shafak and Alwan effectively advance the principles of Sufism and the teachings of its revered Saints, strategically catering to the Western market. These works consistently assert that Sufism has the potential to cultivate an environment of interfaith tolerance, offering an alternative to fundamentalist interpretations of Islam.

Sufism has represented values of peace, interfaith harmony, social support, and spiritual solace. However, Sufism as an institution is definitely losing its piety. Its original values have degraded by shifting from "give" to "take." Originally, the institution of Sufism provided the common people with love, tranquility, cultural tolerance, and harmony, but foreign nations began to provide socioeconomic and political assistance to the existing Sufi institution. Earlier (original) Sufi institutions denied worldly passions, political authority, and luxurious material components. In contrast, contemporary pseudo-Sufism strives to maintain its political and elitist dominance. Unfortunately, Sufism today is neither pure, spiritual, nor divested from political interest. Sufism has been utilized by different governments both locally and internationally for diverse political objectives. In response, Sufi leaders have effectively capitalized on these circumstances to advance their personal interests and consolidate their power. The empowerment and legitimization of Sufi leaders and followers by the West may have led to the radicalization of certain Sufi figures who were recruited in the fight against radicalization.

Sufism must stay free from political dictation. If the Westerners want a peaceful alternative to militant religious movements, which they created, they should stop interfering in people's faith and engaging Sufism in politics and war as they already have done in the Balkans and Subcontinent India. Everyone should be an individual in his spiritual path, and faith should not be dictated or forced. By doing so, Sufism may offer a chance for humanity to create a spiritual site of belonging and potential solidarity that transcends socioeconomic strata, ethnic variations, cultural differences, and geographical boundaries.

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