

**BHAKTI CONTEXTUALISATION OF SUFI NOVEL : *THE FORTY RULES OF LOVE***

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**Abstract**

Bhakti movement and Sufism, two major movements devoted to spiritual devotion, parallel each other in major themes and philosophical roots and intersect at some notions to divert from one another a little. Elif Shafak, a Sufi by head and heart coats all of her writings with philosophical underpinnings of Sufism. Shafak's major Sufi novel *The Forty Rules of Love* is totally an outpouring of Sufi philosophy mediated by the technique of frame narrative wherein telling stories within stories, Shafak jots down forty rules of spiritual love. The rules of spiritual love hold the narrative frame and the technique of multiperspectivity becomes the layout for jotting down the Sufi philosophy and principles. Shams, the mentor and Rumi, the disciple make into the ups and downs of spiritual companionship in materialistic world. These Sufis are studied using the eye-piece of ideology of Bhakti saints. This research article intends to present the Sufi novel in Bhakti light. Using the matrix and mould of Bhakti movement's philosophy, Sufi novel is contextualised. The article focusses on the shared philosophy, beliefs and practices of Bhakti and Sufi movement in the novel of Shafak under study. Though not similar entirely, the articles underpins parallels and contrasts to present a full view possible.

**Key words** – Sufism, Bhakti Movement, philosophy, spirituality and devotion.

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“Both these streams joined and mingled with each other as Yamuna and Ganga at Prayag and majestically flowed home to the sea—the sea of India’s composite culture and ethos” (Pillai 7)

The two streams being talked about are the Sufi movement and the Bhakti movement which though having originated in different soils thrived in manure of similar principles and motivation. Bhakti and Sufi movement does not uphold idol worship or any rites and rituals for the attainment of the salvation or freedom from the cycle of birth, death and rebirth. In fact both these movements insisted on individual realisation of God. The ultimate can be reached within one’s own body. Visiting pilgrimages, taking baths in holy water, lighting lamps, candles or incense sticks are just symbols for the reality that lies within oneself. The knowledge gained from holy books is intended to know how the metaphysical world probably is but exactly what it is can never ever be captured in series of letters. For both the movements rest their faith in practice of meditation, inner reflection and developing more and more spiritual connection with God. What is ‘dhyana’ in Bhakti movement is ‘muraqabah’ in Sufi movement both of which literally mean contemplative reflection. In line with all these, the novel under study *The Forty Rules of Love* holds the rein of the article when the command of studying Sufi novel in Bhakti light flows in air of letters.

“God is not someplace far up in the sky. He is inside each and every one of us. That is why he never abandons us” (Shafak 30). This is what the Bhakti saints uphold too. The ultimate reality, the very essence of God is present within all of us and should not be sought in structures outside, as written in *The Bijak of Kabir* translated by Linda Hess and Shukdeo Singh "I know you / and you know me / and I'm inside of you" ( lines 14-16). As further in the novel we find Shams telling to Novice, one of the rule of religion of love that God cannot be limited in four walls of church, temple, mosque or so, he dwells in the heart of true lover and not in the head of worldly wisdom.

Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh translates in *Guru Nanak Poems for The Sacred Sikh Tradition* “Whatever the One desires comes to pass, / no one can challenge its commands. / Nanak: all abide by the will / of the emperor of emperors” (12). This what the Sufi novel propounds through its another rule that whatever happens to us, whatever falls into our life is nothing but divine will. As Shams in his self-reflection mentions about the nature of a true Sufi that he is happy with what all he receives from God and equally happy for what all he does not. The real trait is patience, ‘sabara’ as Bhakti saints uphold. This traits demands unwavering faith even in the face of tribulations and Shams and Rumi both had this rare trait to look for rose in thorn because pangs of pain only will perfect the spiritual love more.

“Singular, the Sahib is the only One / who designed this whole creation. / Those who serve who realize it, / make their life a success” (128) by Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh in her translated work, stressed the next Bhakti principle of humans as creation of God. Humans are at the highest pedestal of God’s creation. As Rumi in one of his sermons preaches that the will to receive the trait of knowledge was refused by mountains, earth and heavens alike. Only humans agreed to receive it. Having received the same, it is our utmost duty to do what God intends us to do, that is, to merge back in the ocean of love, to attain salvation and to die daily while living. Our sole purpose is to merge the soul back to its source and then only our life will be successful.

Bhakti movement had equality as its core value. During the face time with an era rich in discrimination and lagging in spiritual values, Bhakti movement evolved as a reaction and preached equality worldwide through different saints that have adhered to it. The discrimination on the basis of caste was deteriorating the value of some humans as untouchables and marginalising them. But the Bhakti and Sufi saints equally propose that each individual is creation of god. While man is God's creation, castes are man-made. As a story from the childhood days of Shri Guru Nanak Ji is told very often that he refused to wear the sacred thread which intended to mark his second birth in his caste, making him superior to the untouchables. All the Bhakti saints firmly believed the filth associated with different castes and people has nothing to do with the purity of soul, as in the novel too we find Shams sharing one of the forty rules of love to the Patron of the brothel that the real taint that cannot be washed away is one of hatred and discrimination. Further filth is not outside but is deep inside which cannot be washed away except by love. Bhakti and Sufi philosophy equally stresses on the salt of love without which the food of spirituality would be tasteless for with love only we can conquer this world and the world beyond.

Bhakti saints uphold that one's spiritual journey inside is not something that can be lettered or spoken entirely about. But this journey and its experiences can only be felt and experienced. The divine essence dissolves the one who finds the ultimate reality inside. What is fourth reading of *Quran* for Sufis is meditation of Name for Bhakti saints. Like we have Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh's translation in *Guru Nanak Poems for The Sacred Sikh Tradition*

“No words can tell the state of embracing,  
try explaining it and you'll regret later.  
No paper, no pen, no scribe can describe it,  
philosophizing is no help to realize it.  
So wondrous is the stainless name,  
only those who embrace it in their mind know it.” (7)

In the novel *The Forty Rules of Love*, Shams is the epitome of the religion of love. At various instances in the novel, we find him mentioning about the fourth reading of *Quran*, mentioning its beauty that cannot be put down in words written or spoken. The fourth reading of *Quran*, actually refers to the stage of enlightenment where soul merges back to its source and then there is no concept of dualism. Remembering name, hearing the universal music that is being played from the beginning of this world in the inner worlds of enlightenment is what constitutes practicing the religion of love.

When put in a nutshell, Sufism and Bhakti movement are not two separate water-tight compartments, in fact they are two tectonic plates, moving together, sliding over each other at times and hitting each other too. While Sufis never uphold the theory of transmigration of soul, Bhakti Saints repeatedly stress on it. The former did not believe in theory of incarnation but the latter upheld the same. But rest in terms of individual realisation of God, the prerequisite of longing, yearning and love for the Divine, contemplative meditation, the concept of one's body as an abode of God, equality in the court of God and so, are parallel points drawn in the not perfectly parallel ideologies of Bhakti and Sufi movement. In *The Forty Rules of Love*, Shafak has reflectively embroidered her Sufi philosophy through her forty rules of spiritual love but when observed closely the philosophical underpinnings of this Sufi novel are no different than

the principles proposed by Bhakti movement and the associated saints. Thus a Sufi novel is treated using Bhakti traits.

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