

Exploring Feminine Spirituality: Elif Shafak and Mohammed Alwan's Literary Portrayals of Women in Sūfī Tradition

Jamal Ali Assadi

English Language and Literature, The College of Sakhnin (R. A), Academic College for Teacher Education, Sakhnin, Israel

Email address:

Jamal-a@sakhnin.ac.il

To cite this article:

Jamal Ali Assadi. Exploring Feminine Spirituality: Elif Shafak and Mohammed Alwan's Literary Portrayals of Women in Sūfī Tradition. *Arabic Language, Literature & Culture*. Vol. 8, No. 3, 2023, pp. 27-35. doi: 10.11648/j.allc.20230803.11

Received: October 15, 2023; **Accepted:** November 1, 2023; **Published:** November 11, 2023

Abstract: Modern Arabic fiction has been known to skillfully depict women with contemporary meanings, frequently drawing on various contexts, including the Sūfī tradition. Women are portrayed as an all-encompassing symbol, playing a pivotal role in helping the protagonist achieve great ambitions and transform the world around them. This portrayal of women in Arabic literature draws inspiration from medieval Sūfī writers who assigned glamorous names to female characters, making them the central focus of their writings. Women were considered earthly mistresses in Sūfī practices, helping Sūfī practitioners reach their ultimate goal, God. This Sūfī tradition has had a profound impact on modern-day Middle Eastern writers such as Elif Shafak and Mohammed Alwan. They have utilized Sūfī practices in their novels, gaining new insights into the dynamic potential of the motif and a new critical approach. In Elif Shafak's novels, women are depicted as Sūfī figures with a transformative power that can change individuals and societies. In contrast, Mohammed Alwan portrays women in a more mystical light, embodying the divine and uniting the physical and spiritual. Both writers draw from Sūfī practices to create female characters who challenge traditional gender roles and promote a more inclusive and spiritual understanding of womanhood. By employing Sūfī practices, these writers provide a fresh perspective on the representation of women in modern Arabic literature. They highlight the empowering nature of Sūfī practices, where women are elevated to a central role, challenging patriarchal norms and providing a pathway for female empowerment.

Keywords: Mystic Motif, Contemporary Arabic Literature, Critical Approaches, Female Protagonists, Elif Shafak, and Mohammed Alwan

1. Introduction

Contemporary Middle Eastern literature has vividly portrayed women in various contexts, including the Sūfī one, where they serve as a comprehensive symbol and play a crucial role in helping the protagonist achieve great ambitions and transform his world. This depiction of women draws inspiration from medieval Sūfī writers who considered them a fundamental element of their writing. Sūfī writers carefully chose female characters, gave them glamorous names, and made them the central focus of their writings. The Sūfī practices centered on love and desire, and women were considered earthly mistresses who helped Sūfī practitioners reach their ultimate lover, God.

This Sūfī motif has had a profound impact on contemporary Middle Eastern writers such as Elif Shafak the Eminent Turkish novelist and Mohammed Alwan, the award-winning Saudi

author. Through the use of Sūfī practices, these writers have gained new insights into the dynamic potential of the motif and employed a new analytical method in their works. Our work aims to explore how these writers have employed Sūfī practices in their depiction of female protagonists and how this treatment of women in modern Arabic literature provides a fresh perspective on the Sūfī symbol.

2. Methodology

The methodology employed in this analysis involves a comparative literature approach, focusing on the selected works of Elif Shafak's *The Forty Rules of Love* and Mohammed Alwan's *A Little Death*. Through a close reading and analysis of these novels, the study aims to explore how these authors incorporate Sūfī practices in reimagining women as Sūfī icons. The methodology encompasses the

following steps:

- A. Text Selection: The analysis will select Elif Shafak's *The Forty Rules of Love* and Mohammed Alwan's *A Little Death* as the primary texts for examination. These novels have been chosen for their prominence in depicting female characters and their clear connections to Sūfī traditions and concepts.
- B. Close Reading: The selected novels will undergo a close reading process, where specific passages and scenes relevant to the portrayal of women as Sūfī icons will be examined. This analysis will focus on narrative techniques, character development, symbolism, and thematic elements employed by the authors.
- C. Comparative Analysis: A comparative analysis will be conducted to identify similarities and differences in the portrayal of women as Sūfī icons between Shafak and Alwan's works. This analysis will explore how the transformative power, mystical embodiment, and challenges to traditional gender roles are represented through the female characters in each author's novel.
- D. Cultural and Historical Context: The analysis will consider the cultural and historical contexts in which Shafak and Alwan's works were written. This examination will provide insights into the social, literary, and philosophical influences that may have shaped their incorporation of Sūfī practices and the portrayal of women as Sūfī icons.
- E. Engagement with Critical Approaches: The analysis will draw upon existing literary criticism and scholarship to enrich the understanding of the portrayal of women as Sūfī icons in the selected novels. Critical approaches, such as feminist literary criticism, postcolonial theory, and Sūfī studies, will be employed to deepen the analysis.
- F. Interpretation and Discussion: The findings of the analysis will be interpreted and discussed in relation to the research questions. The discussion will focus on the transformative potential and broader implications for female empowerment within the context of modern Arabic literature. The empowering nature of Sūfī practices and their ability to challenge patriarchal norms will be highlighted, providing insights into a more inclusive and spiritual understanding of womanhood.

By employing this methodology, the analysis aims to provide a comprehensive exploration of how Elif Shafak and Mohammed Alwan incorporate Sūfī practices in reimagining women as Sūfī icons in their respective works. The study will shed light on the transformative power, mystical embodiment, gender role challenges, and wider implications of these portrayals, contributing to a deeper understanding of female empowerment in modern Arabic literature.

3. Discussion

3.1. *The Integration of Rūmī in Shafak's the Forty Rules of Love*

Elif Shafak, a prominent Turkish writer born in 1971, has

shown a strong interest in mystic philosophy and its perception of the role of women [5]. Unlike other writers who keep a distance from relying on real Sūfī dignitaries, Shafak integrates Sūfism in her novel, *The Forty Rules of Love* (2010). Specifically, she draws inspiration from the figure of Jalāl ad-Dīn Rūmī, a 13th-century Sūfī poet whose spiritual heritage and verse have been translated into multiple languages [11]. According to scholars such as Franklin D. Lewis and Annemarie Schimmel, Rūmī's works and teachings have deeply influenced Shafak's writing [8, 10]. The integration of Sūfism and Rūmī's work has allowed Shafak to explore rebellious themes, particularly regarding the role of women in society. This demonstrates Shafak's interest in creating innovative and thought-provoking literature that challenges traditional norms and beliefs.

Shafak's innovative novel, *The Forty Rules of Love*, seeks to transmit Rūmī's Sūfī philosophy and spiritual journey with his teacher Shams ad-Dīn al-Tibrīzī to the contemporary world. Through this, she provides ancient Sūfī rituals with a modern perspective and aims to encourage the embrace of mystic beliefs, which she believes are necessary due to the current world's lack of social, political, and cultural justice and freedom [2]. Shafak advocates for a Sūfī rebellion to overcome oppressive political, societal, and religious systems and create a Muslim community that is socially, politically, culturally, and economically advanced. Rūmī's philosophy serves as the foundation for this ideal community's standards, rules, and settings. Shafak's motivations for this project stem from her firm belief that modern man is burdened by the systems that continue to impose their biased and controlling rules on individuals.

Shafak's call for change also includes a universal call for individuals to liberate themselves from materialistic pursuits, prioritize spiritual enlightenment over worldly desires, and embrace death as a natural part of life [9]. Shafak believes that by aligning one's inner self with virtuous conduct and following the guidance of the soul, one can attain closeness to God.

Shafak's message extends beyond merely identifying the challenges of modern humanity, as she proposes remedies through the promotion of Sūfī principles. In her novel, she employs a Jewish female protagonist named Ella Rubenstein, who learns forty Sūfī teachings representing Rūmī's compendium of the Sūfī philosophy. These teachings, curated by Shams Tibrīzī and approved by Rūmī, offer a means to purify the world from all ills. The novel presents two distinct voices from the same source: Ella's contemporary perspective and Rūmī's ancient wisdom. Despite being intellectually similar yet temporally separated, Shafak successfully unites them into a single voice that seeks to provide the world with real redemption, following in the footsteps of Rūmī and Ella's reformation.

Furthermore, the novel depicts the stories of two distinct sets of women: those dwelling in 21st century North America and the female characters who lived in 13th century Konyā. Similar to Salih's women, Shafak's female characters are gifted but are hindered by the patriarchal society's dictating

doctrines. A comparison between the two writers' groups or between Shafak's groups reveals that all the women are dissatisfied with their lives, especially those who are married. They have high hopes for the mystic people, but they end up being disappointed with tragic endings, just like Salih's female characters. However, Salih's female characters experience more severe challenges, and as a result, their disappointments lead to more disastrous consequences. Shafak's female characters, on the other hand, manage to survive despite all odds. While Kerra and Kīmyā, the women of Konyā, choose to conform to the prevailing situation, Ella Rubenstein, the modern woman, chooses to rebel against it to address her present difficulties. Similarly, Desert Rose, the Konyā harlot, also rebels against the dominant patriarchal community, but Ella does well where Desert Rose goes pear-shaped.

Ella, a 40-year-old Jewish woman and graduate of Smith University, lives a life of monotony and lacks happiness and love, despite living in a luxurious Victorian-style house with her successful dentist husband and three children. Her situation is a common dilemma faced by many North American women who experience frustration, insecurity, lack of fulfillment, and identity issues, as noted by C. Iannone [7]. Ella's situation is compounded by several factors, including feeling useless now that her children have become adults and not needing her anymore. She also has to contend with her husband's infidelity, which further complicates her life. However, it is the argument with her daughter Jeannette that rattles her most. During the argument, Jeannette reveals her plan to marry her boyfriend, Scott, which Ella opposes, rejecting the idea of love, in general, and the notion of loving someone from a different sect. Jeannette's response to her mother's objections is cutting and accusing, "You're jealous of my happiness and my youth. You want to make an unhappy housewife out of me. You want me to be you, Mom" [12]. This statement sends a chill down Ella's spine, highlighting the impact her behavior and choices have on her daughter's perception of her life.

David wanted to help his wife break out of her monotonous routine, so he found her a job as an editor. As she worked on her first manuscript, she discovered an unfamiliar author named 'Azīz Zahar, who had recently converted to Islam. Although Ella and 'Azīz lived in different cities and had very different personalities, Ella found herself falling in love with him without even realizing it. She was particularly drawn to the book's depiction of the strong relationship between Tabrīzī and Rūmī, which crossed geographical, cultural, and temporal boundaries. Reading *Sweet Blasphemy* inspired Ella to take action and change her stagnant life. The story of how Tabrīzī transformed Rūmī from a dissatisfied religious leader to a dedicated Sūfī poet fascinated Ella and held her captive. Struggling to describe his transformation, Rūmī resorts to using metaphorical language. He refers to Shams as his "Sea of Mercy and Grace," "Sun of Truth and Faith," and "King of Kings of Spirit." Rumi compares their companionship to the experience of reading the fourth chapter of the Qur'an, which

can only be truly understood from within (128).

Tabrīzī and Rūmī's teachings often fall on deaf ears among hostile followers who fail to grasp their Sūfī beliefs. Rūmī's transformation into an impassioned poet after Tabrīzī's tragic death leads him to adopt a philosophy that highlights love's power to unify people across geographical, cultural, and temporal boundaries. Ella gradually realizes that her own life lacks love, a contrast to the affection that permeates the book's characters. She recognizes that Rūmī's tale provides a roadmap for her emancipation, with Tabrīzī serving as Rūmī's guide to divine love. Ella takes a daring step by leaving everything behind to join 'Azīz in the United States, going against her advice to her daughter. The pivotal meeting between Ella and 'Azīz mirrors the transformative encounter between Tabrīzī and Rūmī, charting a new course for the characters and the novel itself. Through her journey of love, Ella breaks free from the societal constraints of her bourgeois class, which had been tarnished by communal two facades and ethical unresponsiveness.

Ella's resolve to leave her family, husband, and country remains unchanged even after discovering that 'Azīz is terminally ill with cancer. The couple relocates to Konyā, Turkey, where 'Azīz passes away from skin cancer and is laid to rest next to Rūmī's tomb. Despite 'Azīz's death, Ella remains steadfast in her commitment to love, even at the cost of losing her home, husband, and sons.

Ella and Rūmī share many similarities, including their introverted nature, intelligence, and relentless pursuit of learning, wisdom, and truth. Despite their worldly accomplishments, they both struggle with boredom, routine and a sense of emptiness that threatens their otherwise happy lives. The arrival of Tabrīzī in Rūmī's life mirrors the appearance of 'Azīz in Ella's, with both Shams and 'Azīz providing the missing ingredients needed for Rūmī and Ella to lead lives filled with energy, intuition, beauty, and love, liberty, and spiritual wealth.

In essence, both cliques of characters have contrasting attitudes that cannot be reconciled in isolation from each other. Each side possesses imperfections that can only be remedied by the other. To achieve coherence, both parties must come together and coincide in a congruent combination.

Just as Tabrīzī exits Rūmī's life once his task is fulfilled, 'Azīz also departs from Ella's life once he is certain that she has embraced the significance of love and the potential of transforming individuals' perspectives and behaviors, thus bringing about a brighter future for all. In a sense, Ella transforms into a Sūfī persona who not only embodies the principles of love, but also spreads awareness to the public, urging them to recognize the essence of love and steer clear of the dangers of deviating from cultural, cognitive, and aesthetic norms.

Kerra and Kīmyā, both residing in Konyā, suffer from the lack of affection and kindness from their husbands, causing them to succumb to their unhappy predicaments. Unfortunately, Kīmyā's despair leads to her untimely demise. Kerra, Rūmī's second wife who converted to Islam, embodies a rebellious spirit. Upon her introduction, she voices her

strong dissent against the mistreatment of women in her society. Kerra laments the absence of educational opportunities for women, stating that they are not provided with "books to open their eyes" (112). Kerra and Rūmī had disagreements before Tabrīzī's arrival, yet Kerra was content with her marriage until she encountered Tabrīzī. He won over Rūmī's heart and, similarly to Ella, Kerra realized the buried resentment she had been harboring. Eventually, Kerra learned to adapt, though in a passive manner, to living under the same roof with Tabrīzī, who ultimately disappeared. However, much like Ella, Kerra remained self-assured and knew how to move forward, as Tabrīzī's departure did not devastate her survival.

Kīmyā, a twelve-year-old girl, defies the societal norms of her time, which restricted women's access to education. Rūmī, recognizing Kīmyā's exceptional abilities, decides to tutor her at his own home, disregarding the gender-based expectations of 13th-century Islamic society. However, Rūmī's acceptance of Kīmyā does not necessarily indicate that he wholeheartedly endorses women's education. On the contrary, he remains somewhat skeptical about it, as he fears that even if Kīmyā excels in her studies, she will ultimately get married and have children, rendering her years of education futile (114). Poorer, Kīmyā, despite her aspirations to learn the Quran, feels pressured by societal expectations and the male-dominated world around her. However, her encounter with Tabrīzī opens up new intellectual horizons for her, and they eventually fall in love and get married. During their time together, Tabrīzī helps Kīmyā to interpret the Quran and challenges the traditional notion that women should be subordinated to men. Specifically, he explains that the thirty-fourth verse of *Al-Nisā'* [Women], which has been controversially interpreted as subjugating women to men, actually emphasizes the equality and mutual respect that should exist between men and women in a marriage.

Tabrīzī's contradictory interpretations reflect his enigmatic and paradoxical nature, which is evident in his relationship with Kīmyā. Despite his passionate beliefs in freedom and love, his marriage to Kīmyā does not bring about significant progress in her personal growth as a woman, nor does it reflect the practical applications of his theoretical philosophy. Throughout their short-lived marriage, Shams neglects Kīmyā, who expresses her dissatisfaction with his lack of physical intimacy, stating that "he has never slept with me as a husband even once" (202). So, Tabrīzī's neglect of his wife's, psychological, emotional, and social necessities causes Kīmyā great pain, and his apathy ultimately leads to her untimely demise. Furthermore, he does not make an effort to introduce her to his spiritual beliefs, and even worse, he misunderstands her abilities as arrogance and a desire for independence.

Similar to the other females, Desert Rose possesses both physical beauty and intelligence, and she harbors a deep interest in acquiring knowledge through study. Additionally, she displays a streak of rebellion within her personality, and with the aid of Tabrīzī, she successfully extricates herself from a miserable situation. Desert Rose recounts that her

sponsor gave her the name "Desert" due to her infertility, and appended "Rose" to it as a decorative touch, which Desert Rose welcomed as she had an affinity for the scent of roses. She draws a parallel between her quest for faith and a concealed rose garden that she once explored, savoring its fragrant aroma, but now finds herself barred from entering. She yearns for a renewed companionship with God, and thus, she continuously wanders around the perimeter of the garden, looking for an opening, longing to discover a portal that would grant her entry (80).

Initially, Desert Rose is portrayed as a fragile and defenseless young girl whose descent into the sordid world of prostitution appears to be irreversible. Despite this, she remains resolute in her unwavering faith in God and is confident that her determination will enable her to attain her aspirations, despite the numerous obstacles she faces. Despite the relative ease of continuing her life as a sex worker, she chooses to fight for the liberation of her soul. Though the freedom she eventually attains comes at a high cost, Desert Rose remains undaunted. She attends Rūmī's teachings even after recognizing the grave risks involved in pursuing him.

Rūmī's teachings have a calming effect on Desert Rose, likened to the soothing sight of her mother baking bread, providing her with a comforting sense of peace (81). However, she continues to face harassment from Baybars, a security guard who considers himself a paragon of morality and integrity. How Desert Rose reacts to the violent treatment meted out to her by both Baybars and society at large is of great importance. She cannot understand why individuals profess to abhor the sight of women engaging in prostitution, yet when a prostitute seeks redemption and a fresh start in life, the very same people make it arduous for her to do so. It seems, to her, as if they express sorrow at the woman's degraded state, but simultaneously convey the message that she should remain there for eternity (87).

Undoubtedly, Desert Rose strongly criticizes the hypocrisy of people who claim to abhor the sight of women being forced into prostitution, yet actively prevent these women from achieving redemption and transforming their lives. She finds herself unable to gain social acceptance for her repentance and eventual transformation into a respectable person, leading her to succumb to despair and accept the identity forced upon her by her environment.

Interestingly, Shafak's novel contains a contrasting element. While the male characters of Shams, Rūmī, and 'Azīz are portrayed as ideal Sūfī figures, promoting mystic principles such as love and freedom to empower women, they also act as agents of male domination. Kerra is married to Rūmī, Kīmyā to Shams, Desert Rose is related to both Rūmī and Shams and Ella to 'Azīz. Despite their intelligence and strong desires to attain freedom, education, knowledge, and love, these women are consistently hindered by their male partners, who are the very figures promoting these principles. All of the women, except for Ella, openly express dissatisfaction with their treatment by their spouses, yet they are unable to improve their situations.

It can be argued that Shafak's perspective has some

limitations. One of the shortcomings is her lack of attention to cultural differences, which results in complex relationships among her characters. However, the failures of these connections are often overlooked. Additionally, her Western characters form relationships with Eastern characters, including Armenians with Turks and Jews with Muslims. This pattern leads to women being absent and suffering silently, as previously discussed. Furthermore, the female characters in Shafak's novel become disillusioned with the actual mystic figures who are unable to liberate their souls or improve their social and educational situations. Sometimes, these mystical figures are also unable to consummate their marriages.

Moreover, despite being a female author and featuring female characters as narrators in her novel, Shafak fails to fully acknowledge the role of societal factors in shaping these characters. Furthermore, she overlooks the inherent psychological tendencies of women and the complexity of their decision-making processes. Shafak also neglects the idea that individuals may have an essence that is not immediately apparent to others, and that understanding and acceptance of this essence can develop over time within a relationship. It seems that Shafak, through the character of Ella, views marriage as a battleground where partners fight for dominance, leading Ella to seek solutions outside of the institution of marriage. However, this goes against the traditional notion that marriage is a sacred bond that provides stability and trust in relationships, a notion that is upheld by many religions and cultures.

Shafak's portrayal of her female characters' relationships indicates a shift and instability in social norms without offering any clear alternative. Even when Ella makes decisions that sever her family connections and roots, she ultimately returns to her society where male influence is still prevalent. Shafak fails to establish a purely female society independent of the natural circumstances, even when she changes the setting and period to address the protagonist's problems. Though Ella relocates to Konyā, the hometown of Rūmī and Tabrīzī, and experiences the events of 'Azīz's Sweet Blasphemy, her issues remain unresolved. Shafak's storytelling creates intrigue and drama as a work of fiction but fails to address the core problems in reality. By resorting to transferring the problem to a different place and time, Shafak merely transfers the issue without confronting or resolving it.

As a result, Shafak's female characters are not portrayed as truly liberated or self-realized individuals. Rather, they exhibit a tendency towards detachment and isolation from their surroundings. Despite being situated within the context of divine love and relationships with prominent mystic figures, these women fail to significantly develop their characters. For example, Ella enjoys a privileged socioeconomic and cultural status, yet her impulsive and emotional behavior leads her to make rash decisions that satisfy her immediate needs and desires. When she is immersed in the mystical environment, she lives a life detached from natural laws and norms, characterized by

primitive and chaotic ideas. In other words, Ella's decisions are based on instant responses to psychological conflicts or a means of escaping them, rather than being founded on clear visions.

As an alternative, it is essential to put forward a carefully thought-out plan that supports harmonious living with those who hold differing ideologies, religions, and ethnic backgrounds. The proposal should focus on recognizing the shared humanity of all individuals as a foundation for peaceful coexistence while acknowledging that diversity brings a higher purpose to humanity. This proposal should aim to refine differences rather than suppress them while rejecting any ideas or actions that hinder the progress of human society.

3.2. *The Return of Iben 'Arabī: A Tale of Mystical Resurgence*

Shafak and Mohammad Hassan Alwan are both highly successful in incorporating Sūfī thought into their narrative fiction. They base their novels on the lives of true mystic figures, but their approach differs. Shafak promotes Sūfī ideas as solutions to modern-day problems, while Alwan is drawn to the liberal and unconventional Sūfī lifestyle. Alwan openly acknowledges that he employs Sūfī motifs to give his novel a contemporary edge. In an interview with Nathalie Farah, he explains that his interest in Iben 'Arabī is focused on the experiences he encountered during his travels, such as cultural norms, sights, and sounds. These aspects were more intriguing to Alwan than the Sūfī aspect of Iben 'Arabī's life [6]. Thus, Alwan's novel delves into the life of Iben 'Arabī, chronicling his journey as a Sūfī and his epic travels across Muslim Spain, Tunisia, Morocco, Egypt, Mecca, Syria, Iraq, Turkey, and Azerbaijan [1]. Through his travels, Iben 'Arabī encountered various cultures, faiths, and people, and grappled with internal conflicts while also serving as a saint during times of military turmoil. Alwan's portrayal of Iben 'Arabī reveals a man of subtle nature who navigates complex societal and spiritual challenges, including his connection to caliphs, attendance at lessons by renowned scholars, and interactions with luminaries who perform miraculous deeds. These elements are woven into the fabric of Iben 'Arabī's biography, allowing readers to gain insight into the multifaceted life of this prominent figure in Islamic history.

Nevertheless, Alwan's novel represents a departure from traditional approaches to Sūfī thought in terms of language and orientation. Unlike Shafak's work, Alwan's language is more straightforward and lacks the complex terminology and abstract concepts that can often be found in Sūfī philosophy and mystic ideas associated with Iben 'Arabī. While Alwan's work remains true to pure Sūfī principles, it is more open and free in its presentation and avoids composite beliefs or obscure terminology. By and large, Alwan's novel offers a more accessible and approachable introduction to the Sūfī tradition, without sacrificing its depth and richness.

Both Shafak and Alwan feature women characters in their novels, placed in the context of Sūfī traditions. Although there are some differences between the two authors, women

in both novels play crucial roles in aiding the male protagonists to achieve their goals and transform their surroundings. However, the status of the female characters remains largely unchanged throughout the stories. In Shafak's work, female characters come from both medieval and modern times, while Alwan's female characters are primarily medieval figures who are connected to Ibn 'Arabī. Their relationships and interactions with women are significant stages in the protagonist's development, with each woman serving as a guidepost to the next stage.

Alwan's female characters can be grouped into two categories: first, the elderly women who act as maternal figures and provide the protagonist with spiritual guidance, such as Fāṭima bint Al Muthannā, the nurse and "Pride of Women," sheik Zāher al-Isfahānī's sister, and his tutor. Second, the young and beautiful women who fulfill the protagonist's sensual desires, such as his first wife Maryam bint Abdūn, Fāṭima, the wife of a presumed-dead man, and the widow of his friend Yaqūb. Additionally, Nazzām, the daughter of his sheik Zāher al-Isfahānī, satisfies Ibn 'Arabī's craving and becomes his spiritual guide. Despite the significant roles they play in the story, the women's characters are transient and fade away as the protagonist moves on to the next stage of his journey.

Fāṭima bint al-Muthannā, to begin with, is a crucial character in the novel, representing the older generation that upholds traditional values and provides guidance for future generations. She plays an instrumental role in the development of the protagonist, not only by guiding his path but also by setting the foundation for the plot. When Ibn Arabī is born, Fāṭima predicts that he will not follow in his father's footsteps. She brings the newborn to his father and points out the position of a mole on his cheek, indicating that the child is destined to "promote your name and maintain your value" in a different path than his father's [3]. She alerts the father that the mole's location beneath his eye signifies a different course for his son.

When Ibn Arabī moves from Murcia to Seville at the age of six, he intends to bid farewell to Fāṭima at the crossroads. However, she uses this moment to give him a preview of his life's trajectory:

- In Seville there is a peg of your four pegs, no doubt.
- Who are the pegs?
- Four who save the earth from wickedness.
- How do I know them?
- They know you.
- How do I find them?
- They find you.

(42)

The conversation between Fāṭima and Ibn Arabī is a testament to her wisdom and the importance she holds in the protagonist's life. As his nurse or spiritual mother, she imparts valuable knowledge to him and guides him toward fulfilling his destiny. Her words are authoritative, and the respect and obedience the child has for her are apparent. Fāṭima tells him that he must find four pegs (awṭād) located in the corners of the earth and cleanse his heart to do so:

"Cleanse this... Then follow it and only then your peg will find you" (42). This task becomes the guiding principle of his mystical journey, forcing him to travel extensively and encounter different cultures and people along the way [4].

Consequently, Fāṭima's significance in the novel extends beyond simply creating the protagonist's character and surrounding him with a Sūfī atmosphere. Her guidance plants the seeds of divine love within Ibn Arabī and sets him on a path toward attaining it. She is a dreamer with great ambition, playing a vital role in the novel's structure by outlining the framework of the plot. Although she is a woman, her role is primarily concerned with the development of the male character, and she does not perform any deeds that elevate her role as a female character in the social order.

The subsequent woman in the cluster of the sequence is Maryam bint Abdūn, Ibn Arabī's first wife. She is straightforwardly portrayed by the novelist, depicting her changing psychological and physical aspects. She is described as "a dutiful, well-mannered, talented, and beautiful [woman]" (163), who gives birth to their daughter, Zainab. Like many of the married women in Shafak's novel, including Ella, Maryam is confined to the role of a traditional housewife. When these women try to break free from their prescribed roles, they face different consequences. Some experience tragic endings, some silently submit, while others, like Maryam, choose to rebel and forge their path.

To be more specific, Ibn Arabī, portrays Maryam in a way that emphasizes her many abilities and positive attributes, particularly her physical beauty. Yet, Ibn Arabī's descriptions of Maryam's attractiveness can be considered controversial due to their sensuality and potential conflict with religious beliefs. For example, he once admiringly describes Maryam's chin, eyes, body, and palms, which she is self-conscious about (164). Additionally, there are instances when Ibn Arabī is so captivated by Maryam's physical beauty that he struggles to conceal his sensual attraction to her. He says,

I drew her closed to me and started to kiss the upper part of her neck then go down. Then, she bent towards me and we went into deep love!... How beautiful Maryam's body is! How soft and how pure!... Her body is filled with light fatness that I like.... And if she is overwhelmed by love and gets excited..., she will steal my mind and explode my desire... (169-170).

In addition to her assistance in locating al-Ḥassār, the math scientist, who would guide Ibn 'Arabī to Mecca, Maryam is also portrayed as possessing various competencies and skills. However, the novel fails to depict how her contribution enriches her husband's literary and scientific pursuits. After the death of their only daughter, their relationship takes a negative turn. During their first seclusion as a married couple in Mecca, Ibn 'Arabī is taken aback by Maryam's physical appearance, and even repulsed by her increased weight. He says, "I finally had a moment of intimacy with her; I was astounded to find out she had changed! Her fatness increased as if she had not traveled or got bereaved" (308). He blames her for being the cause of their parting, stating that they both

came out of each other's hearts without saying goodbye and that Mecca willed it so: "She came out of my heart and I came out of hers without saying goodbye. That's how God willed. And so did Mecca!" (315). Even sixteen years after her death, his perception of her remains unchanged, reducing Maryam to a mere memory in her husband's life, seen only in his dreams: "I no longer saw Maryam save in dreams!" (316).

It appears that the tragic loss of their daughter may have deeply impacted their love for one another. The constant traveling and moving away from their homeland could have also played a role in the decline of their affection. Ibn 'Arabī suggests that their love was linked to a specific location, stating that "Some love does not grow except in certain countries... And our love was a fountain whose water does not flow save in Andalusia. When it is departed, its water retreats until it dries in the heat of Mecca!" (315). It is possible that Maryam became aware of her husband's infidelity with the arrival of the next woman, Nazzām. With the entrance of this new woman, Maryam may have felt that she had to step aside for her. Perhaps she chose to carve out her path in life where she could be a quiet, free, and independent woman.

Through Ibn 'Arabī's connections with Nazzām, the daughter of his sheik Zāher al-Isfahānī, various aspects of his life are revealed, providing him with the fuel he needs to continue his path. One aspect that becomes clear is his indulgence in a life of pleasure, seemingly removed from Ṣūfism or religion. He falls deeply in love with Nazzām, to the point where he becomes powerless in her presence. He states,

Nazzām ignited in my chest a lamp whose light allowed me to see corners of this heart that I have never seen before; dismal corners, locked rooms, and cellars in which feelings that could not go out to the life that I live accumulated. She resided in my imagination every moment of my day and my night. (312)

As Ibn 'Arabī's love for Nazzām intensifies, it leads him down a path of sensual indulgence that conflicts with his position as a married Ṣūfī residing in Mecca, where he is expected to focus on seeking spiritual enlightenment. Alwan's portrayal of Ibn 'Arabī's love for Nazzām indirectly supports Salih's criticism of Abū Nuwās and Khayyām, who were known for their sensual poetry. Ibn 'Arabī's all-consuming love for Nazzām causes him to lose touch with reality and engage in behaviors that are not in line with his religious and cultural expectations. During the women's circumambulation of the holly Ka'ba, he inadvertently joins in, reciting lines of poetry expressing his deep longing for Nazzām instead of chanting prayers or praising Allah. This behavior contradicts his role as a devout Ṣūfī, which requires him to remain focused on his spiritual path. He declares,

If only they had known which heart they had owned;
And my heart had known which path they had walked;
If only I knew they had survived or they had perished!
People of love were dazzled in love and confused! (317).

It is worth noting that Ibn 'Arabī's encounter with Nazzām occurred during his attendance at the lectures of her father,

Sheikh Zāher al-Isfahānī, who was assisted by his learned sister, fondly called the "Pride of Women". During these lessons, Ibn 'Arabī gained a great deal of knowledge. However, his interactions with Nazzām during these sessions were not limited to academic discussions, as they also involved expressions of affection through hugs, kisses, and admiration. It is significant to note that it was only after feeling the gentle touch of Nazzām on his shoulder that Ibn 'Arabī regained his senses and realized that he was the only man present in the gathering of women, all of whom were gazing at him (318). He marks,

The poor old woman was preoccupied with me and I started to read her books I had read before, but she didn't know because she forgot. I winked at Nazzām as she at me. We would start a new book that we knew it would take us a week, a week during which I like a lost bird would soar in the gleaming forehead of Nazzām. (313)

Amazingly, despite Nazzām's intense yearning, she rejects Ibn 'Arabī's proposal of love. Devastated by her rejection, he pours out his emotions and desires in his renowned work, *Turjumān al-Ashwāq: A Collection of Mystical Odes*. In this collection, he adopts the style of poets from al-Jāhiliyyah, the era preceding the rise of Islam, where poems often begin with the poet expressing their grief and sorrow at the loss of their beloved. However, when Nazzām's name appears in his poems, her father, Sheikh Zāher al-Isfahānī, becomes outraged and writes to Ibn 'Arabī expressing his disapproval. As a result, al-Isfahānī is forced to leave Mecca with his daughter and move to Baghdad. Ibn 'Arabī is deeply ashamed of the situation and decides to rewrite the *dīwān*, providing explanations that the poetry is religiously symbolic and that the love poems are merely symbolic gestures representing divine concepts and spiritual experiences (*wārid*). He aims to restore the reputation of Nazzām's father and clear him of any shame. He marks,

The poor old woman was preoccupied with me and I started to read to her books I had read before, but she didn't know because she forgot. I winked at Nazzām as she at me. We would start a new book that we knew it would take us a week, a week during which I like a lost bird would soar in the gleaming forehead of Nazzām. (313)

Amazingly, despite Nazzām's intense yearning, she rejects Ibn 'Arabī's proposal of love. Devastated by her rejection, he pours out his emotions and desires in his renowned work, *Turjumān al-Ashwāq: A Collection of Mystical Odes*. In this collection, he adopts the style of poets from al-Jāhiliyyah, the era preceding the rise of Islam, where poems often begin with the poet expressing their grief and sorrow at the loss of their beloved. However, when Nazzām's name appears in his poems, her father, Sheikh Zāher al-Isfahānī, becomes outraged and writes to Ibn 'Arabī expressing his disapproval. As a result, al-Isfahānī is forced to leave Mecca with his daughter and move to Baghdad. Ibn 'Arabī is deeply ashamed of the situation and decides to rewrite the *dīwān*, providing explanations that the poetry is religiously symbolic and that the love poems are merely symbolic gestures representing divine concepts and spiritual experiences

(wārid). His aim is to restore the reputation of Nazzām's father and clear him of any shame.

Wickeder, the publication of his volume in Damascus brings great shame to Iben 'Arabī as he is defamed in mosques, seminars, and councils, with people speaking against his relationships with prostitutes. As a result, he leaves Damascus and moves to Egypt where he meets his friends al-Ḥarīrī and Khayyāt. However, he finds himself imprisoned in Egypt, and upon his release, he settles in Baghdad for three years. Iben 'Arabī loves the place because the people show him great love and warmth. In Baghdad, he conducts teaching workshops in one of the mosques.

One day, Badr al-Habashī, his assistant, tells him about the funeral of Sheikh Zāher al-Isfahānī, who has just passed away. Badr insists that Iben 'Arabī attend the funeral. After the funeral, he manages to meet Nazzām, who has now become a devout mystic figure. She wears a veil, and upon seeing Iben 'Arabī, she notices years of longing, fear, and deferred love in his eyes. They exchange confused glances, and then Nazzām smiles and welcomes him. However, she does not ask him to come in the place, as it is retained for dutiful ladies (427-8).

Following a fervent chat, he questions her:

-So why do you refuse to marry me?

She extended her hand. Yes, extended her hand while we are on a road frequented by people and touched my clavicle. Her smile was small and her eyes widened and she said as she looked at the place where her hand wandered on my neck:

-Because I don't have that, my love.

-Why?

- Because I am your third *watad*.

-....

- And the *awtād* marry the land, my love.... And in Maltia is your fourth and last *watad* so go to it and hold your heart. (429)

Nazzām's rejection of Iben 'Arabī's marriage proposal marks a pivotal moment in the novel, signaling the end of one phase and the beginning of another. Despite his intense yearning, Iben 'Arabī accepts her decision and embarks on a journey from Baghdad to a new destination.

After arriving in Aleppo (Hallab), Iben 'Arabī longs for a wife to care for him, attend to his needs, and bear him children. Two other women perform this traditional role for him, but they do not enrich his intellectual or emotional life. His friend Yaqūb introduces him to Fāṭima, the wife of a martyr, and she gives birth to their son, 'Imād al-Dīn. However, Iben 'Arabī continues to travel in search of his fourth *watad*. One day, a man surprises him by revealing that Fāṭima is still married to him and was not a widow. Iben 'Arabī agrees to divorce her on the condition that she remains nearby so that their son can be close to his mother.

Safeyyah, Yaqūb's wife, was the last woman who played a significant role in Iben Arabī's life. She approved of their marriage, seeing it as fulfilling her late husband's will. Safeyyah gave birth to a son named Sa'ad al-Dīn, but unfortunately, after traveling westward and settling in the

Bekā'a, Iben Arabī had to work hard to provide for his family until his eventual death. Throughout the novel, it becomes clear that women have a profound impact on Iben Arabī's intellectual and emotional growth. They also play a crucial role in the plot, particularly in his quest to find the four *awtād*, supposed to aid him in reaching divine love or *wilāya*, the state of guardianship. The search for these four pegs is the central plot of the novel. However, women are often confined to traditional roles, tasked with supporting men in their physical and spiritual needs, and rarely able to pursue their personal growth, even if they are attached to Sūfī ideas and figures.

4. Conclusion

In modern Arabic literature, women have taken on new roles and functions, particularly about Sufi contexts. They are often portrayed as serving the male protagonist's goals and desires, with their worth being evaluated based on how they contribute to men's satisfaction.

Shafak, in her novels, has explored the innovative virtues of Sufi thought, particularly its views on women. Rather than relying on real Sufi figures, she draws inspiration from Rumi and his teacher Tabrizi, seeking to bring their Sufi journey into the modern world. Through her work, she aims to provide solutions for a modern society struggling with issues of injustice and oppression. She believes that a Sufi rebellion can challenge oppressive systems and establish a just and peaceful community based on Rumi's philosophy. In this community, individuals should free themselves from materialism and fear of death, living according to their soul's commands to reach God.

Shafak's message is aimed at modern society as a whole, rather than a specific group or community. She offers solutions to contemporary issues through the adoption of Sufi teachings. In her novel, "The Forty Rules of Love," Shafak presents 40 Sufi teachings from Rumi's philosophy through the eyes of her female protagonist, Ella Rubenstein. These teachings serve as a guide for men and women to overcome adversity and achieve spiritual purification.

The female characters in Shafak's and Alwan's novels are dissatisfied with their lives and relationships, particularly the married women who have high expectations from the mystic men in their lives. However, while Shafak's female characters are disappointed by the male Sūfī figures but manage to survive and adapt, Alwan's female characters play active roles in helping the male protagonists achieve their lofty goals but do not experience much change in their status.

Although both authors draw from the lives of true Sūfī figures, their approach to Šūfism differs. Shafak focuses on promoting Sūfī ideas to solve modern societal issues, while Alwan is captivated by the Sūfī way of life, including their philosophy and travels. In both novels, women are depicted within Sūfī contexts, but their roles are primarily to aid the male protagonists rather than to attain personal fulfillment or liberation.

To summarize, these authors utilize female characters

within the context of mystical themes to serve their own narrative goals, rather than to advance women's causes. Even in Shafak's novels, female characters do not succeed in improving their situations. It appears that modern writers are following in the footsteps of medieval Sufi writers who placed great importance on women in their writing. Similar to their predecessors, contemporary writers choose their female characters, give them modern titles, and make them the focal point of their works. By incorporating Sufi concepts and themes, these authors have achieved impressive feats in creating sophisticated literary experiences. The use of mystical ideas, motifs, and imagery not only adds depth to the works but also provokes conflicts among the characters, opening up new areas for scholarly analysis and critique.

ORCID

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8023-9331>

References

- [1] Addas, Claude, Ibn Arabi: The Voyage of No Return (Second ed.) (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society; 2019). 51.
- [2] Al-Qadi, Abu Bakr, "The Forty Rules of Love: A Critical Study," Al-Fath Website, 13-7-2019. 16.
- [3] Alwan, Mohammad Hassan, A Little Death (Beirut: Dar Al-Saqi, 2017). (All quotations are cited in the text and are translated to English by the authors). 6.
- [4] Am'adsho, Farid, The Sūfī Dimension in the Moroccan Novel (Morocco: Tangier Literary Publishing, 2009). 38.
- [5] Beard, Mary (21 August 2020). "How to Stay Sane in an Age of Division by Elif Shafak review – a poignant look back at another age". the Guardian. Retrieved 28 June 2021. 115.
- [6] Farah, Nathalie, "Successfully Tracing the Footsteps of History," Weekend Review (May 10, 2017).
- [7] Iannone. C. 1994. "Is There a Woman's Perspective in Literature?" Academic Questions 7 (1): 63-76. 74-75.
- [8] Lewis, Franklin D., Rūmī: Past and Present, East and West: The life, Teaching and Poetry of Jalal Al-Din Rūmī (Oneworld Publication: 2008). 9.
- [9] Sa'doun, Nadia Hannawi, "The Narrative of fiction between the Historical and Imaginative in The 40 Rules of Love," Fiqr: The Journal of Cultural Thinking (8), 2017. 3-4.
- [10] Schimmel, Annemarie, The Triumphal Sun: A Study of the Works of Jalaloddin Rūmī (SUNY Press: 1993). 51.
- [11] Seyyed, Hossein Nasr, Islamic Art and Spirituality (SUNY Press: 1987). 115.
- [12] Shafak, Elif, The Forty Rules of Love (Britain: Viking, 2010). 14, Henceforth, all quotations are cited in the text.