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The Mythic and Miraculous: The Problem of Gender in Forty Rules of Love

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Abstract: The London based Turkish novelist Elif Shafak's 'Forty Rules of Love' received widespread adulation for preaching a story of platonic love, in an increasingly loveless world, between the much venerated Sufi scholar – Jalal-ud-din Rumi and his mentor – the eccentric dervish Shams Tabriz. The relationship between the two is projected as a representation of the humane version of Islam- Sufism. This version is assumed as the binary opposite of Wahabism which is perceived to desire a fanatic political system based on a selective and parochial interpretation of 'shariah' –religious law. The novel attempts to steer clear of this fanaticism, invoking it repeatedly only to establish the desirability of 'Sufism' it establishes it as an alternative. However, a close reading of the novel reveals several contradictions that raise questions on the nature of intervention proposed by the novel. This essay will examine the novel as reifying oriental myths and misogynist tendencies largely with respect to the treatment of women. The novel reverts back to the oriental representations of Arab-Islamic cultures fuelled "by the slant of the Christian West and the Islamic East, which provided an added fantasy in the Orientalist mind – the "othering" of the Muslims. Such orientalist representations of subaltern Muslim women further calcified and institutionalized their subhuman identity and subalternized them to both local patriarchy and their western sisters." (Hasan 2005, 4)

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The process of canonization is a natural by-product of literary production, and determines literary consciousness of the age. The process is determined by many factors including the political mood of the era as well as visibility, and promotion offered by institutions of circulation. The best seller emerges as a species of literature that intersects both axis at a harmonious point inevitably, and therefore ensures its place in literary posterity. Such recognition, however, is not necessarily a correct appraisal of the literary value of the work, rather as O Henry's famous eponymous short story "Best Seller" proved it may be a product of escapist fantasy. The London based Turkish novelist Elif Shafak's Forty Rules of Love follows a similar trajectory. It has achieved international recognition but on a critical reading, one begins to suspect that the reasons for its success may lie elsewhere than literary merits.

The book achieved widespread adulation for preaching a story of platonic love, in an increasingly loveless world, between the much-venerated Sufi scholar Jalal-ud-din Rumi and his mentor, the eccentric dervish, Shams Tabriz. The relationship between the two is projected as a representation of the humane version of Islam, Sufism. This version is assumed as the binary opposite of Wahabism, which is perceived to desire a fanatic political system based on a selective and parochial interpretation of "shariah" – religious law. The novel attempts to steer clear of this fanaticism, invoking it repeatedly only to establish the desirability of the Sufism it establishes it as an alternative. However, a close reading of the novel reveals several contradictions that raise questions on the nature of intervention proposed by the novel. This essay will examine the novel as working within the post-colonial bazaar as reifying oriental myths and misogynist tendencies largely with respect to the treatment of women. The novel reverts back to the oriental representations of Arab-Islamic cultures fuelled "by the slant of the Christian West and the Islamic East, which provided an added fantasy in the

Orientalist mind – the 'othering' of the Muslims. Such orientalist representations of subaltern Muslim women further calcified and institutionalized their subhuman identity and subalternized them to both local patriarchy and their western sisters" (Hasan 2005, 4).

The delineation of these orientalist traces necessitates an examination of the structure and purported motives of the novel. Located within an interlinked polyphonic narrative of life and art mirroring each other, the novel apparently outlines a feminist project: liberation of a lonely American Jewish housewife – Ella Rubinstein on the cusp of her fortieth birthday, and vulnerable to a midlife crisis. The novel seeks to examine the patriarchal residue in normative social relationships, and the consequent disadvantages accrued by women. Despite her location in the metropolitan Massachusetts, and a job as a reading assistant in a prestigious reading agency, Ella still suffers from being relegated to "angel in the house" role. The novel conflates this relegation with a deprivation of an authenticity in a post-modern consumerist west. This deprivation is redressed by liberating the woman protagonist; liberation achieved through restoration to a universal inclusive Sufism founded upon the principle of humanist love. The normative symbols of love like Valentine's Day are exposed as hollow rooted in a ritualistic consumerism, and thus meant to showcase the loss of authenticity. Almost in the Nietzschean tradition, words have lost all meanings, and are debased currency. Thus, Ella in receipt of David's "romantic" message accompanying his gift – a heart shaped diamond pendant laments that "reading his card felt like reading an obituary. This is what they will write about me when I die" (Shafak 2010, 4). In a world where the spectacle – "simulacra", is privileged over substance, Ella has reconciled to this loss of authenticity, and dismissing love as a shallow sentimentality. At a dinner table conversation, she urges her daughter Jeannette to "Stop Daydreaming and get real, will you? You're being so…. romantic" (Shafak 2010, 10). The dialogue with Jeannette sets up an interrogation of the essence of terms, and traces a clear binary between shallow modernity and authentic Sufism. Ella must abandon the former and

accept the latter. Within this binary, the former matrix is clearly introduced in the aftermath of the dinner table conversation. The ritualistic acceptance and expatiation takes place within the traditional code of woman cooking, and male expatiation achieved through gratitude for being served and forgiven. This neatly fits into the schism of the 'angel in the house' – the emotional fulcrum of the family who lends lifeblood to the marriage by self-sacrifice. Consumed by self-guilt, for her husband's infidelities, she craves for love. In the novel Aladin, Beybars and Kierra mirror her, and exhibit the severe existential crisis that could have befallen Ella were she not liberated. The liberating agents Aziz and Shams are introduced as non-normative characters in quest of establishing an alternative mode of meaning. As wandering dervishes, they come directly in conflict with the social contract that lays down settlement as the foundational aspect of civilization. Their quest is, therefore, a quest for counter culture that is accepting of transgression from norms of settlement and by extension a familial structure. Counter culture can be understood as a subculture "whose values and norms of behaviour differ substantially from those of mainstream society, often in opposition to mainstream cultural mores" (Mirriam Webster, na). Though Darwishes like Shams are located at the margins of the society, if not outside it, by a refusal to dress, behave or settle down like a common man, yet they must retain some link to the society not only in order to survive, but also to perform their identity through an audience on which to exercise their miraculous powers. True to its nature as a subculture, Darwishes replace the norm of social amalgamation and conformity with its opposite: defiance of such amalgamation and conformity to underscore the contradictions hidden and unresolved in the parent normative culture.

One common vehicle of transgression is the destabilization of normative religion. Such normative religion is represented by caricatures like the Judge, Baybars and Sheikh Yassin. These characters are sketched cursorily, and invested with such absolute parochialism that Shams has little choice but to emerge glorious from these interactions. Similarly, in Ella's

correspondence Ella is invested with such little agency and passivity that Aziz's transgressive persona is accentuated without effort. This caricaturing constitutes an act of re-orientalism where Orientalist discourses are perpetuated by diasporic Orientals. Lisa Lau – a postcolonial critic notes that re-orientalism "dominates and to a specific extent distorts the representation of the Orient, consigning the Oriental within the Orient to a position of the other." This occurs by means of "generalization and totalization, and the insidious nature of truth claims" (Lau 2009, 5). The generalization occurs among other things via connotative coding that is determined by oriental biases. Barthes in his book S/Z points out that literary texts incorporate among other codes a connotative code that can be defined as "The accumulation of connotations, sequential thoughts, traits and actions constitute character" (Barry 2002, 14). Forty Rules often employs such oriental coding that severely contradicts the apparent liberatory premise of the work. The judge, for example, is defined as possessing a broad face, a sagging belly, and short stubby fingers, each with a precious ring. This coding marks him as invested with gluttony, ostentatiousness and an inflated sense of self-importance. It evokes an image of authoritative, punishing phallic figure dressed in expensive fur coats and pricey jewellery. The introduction to the judge is suggestive of excess that immediately marks him as a detestable character. The connotative code invoked here is further complimented by a strong suggestion of whimsical personality: "with one ruling he could send a man to the gallows, or he could just as easily pardon a convict's crimes lifting him up from the dark dungeons." (Shafak 46) Such whimsicality and indulgence is a typical oriental construct, and eases the way for Shams to steal the show during all interactions. It is no coincidence that the judge is a creation of Aziz – an occident, white man firmly set in the metropolitan. In contrast to the "esoteric and individualistic interpretations" of Shams, the judge insists on an ossified and totalitarian code of conduct as constituting the Sharia. Baybar is another typical example of such oriental construction. In the tradition of the Judge, religion only serves to amplify his masochistic tendencies. He reeks of a barbaric chauvinism that is portrayed as a direct function of his allegiance and adherence to normative Islam. He is

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invested with no redeeming complexity that could rescue his character from caricature, and only serves in turns to accentuate Shams' messianic quality, or Rumi's fortunate ascent to a non-normative religion. Two instances suffice to prove this claim: the first is his unmerciful whipping of Suleiman – the drunk apparently for flouting the Islamic prohibition against drink, but actually clearly for placating his ego challenged by Suleiman's refusal to beg for mercy. On another instance, he thrashes Desert Rose for daring to assert their similarity on account of a tainted past. His hypocrisy is laid bare forcefully by his seeking services of prostitutes especially Desert Rose despite marking her as a pollutant or drinking in her chamber. Both characters stand out to be typically emblematic of the violent, uncivilised and hypocritical who subjugate, and, therefore, necessitate rescue of the subaltern by Shams – the medieval variant of the occident.

Shams' character sharply contrasts with the oriental characters, since he is modelled on Aziz himself. An examination of the codes that constitute his character is therefore imperative. As an anchor to Rumi, and later Ella, Shams is constructed as an anti-establishment figure with an aversion to civilizational codes, especially routine. He is possessed by an almost pantheistic orientation towards nature that gels well with a cosmopolitan spirituality. This cosmopolitanism is complimented further by a curious and contemplative nature that aids quick learning. The master gushes "What took other dervishes months, sometimes years, to learn took him only weeks, if not days" (Shafak 2010, 65). The first section ends with an analogy of silkworm that foreshadows the evolution of Ella suggesting therein that the destruction of an old self determined by an old world order is necessary to produce a precious new self. As future events prove, it is not as much a question of breaking free as much as a complete abandonment of the old world order. The novice emerges as an early symbol of this transgressive legacy; any attempt to mediate a liberated self through the old world order is fraught with rejection. Inevitably, the novel constructs the old world order within the framework of a stereotypical fanatic Arabic Islamic culture - the

most common cultural and literary representation of Arab lands in the western world. As Driss Roudani observes and highlights through her research: "The Western representation of Muslims and Arabs is not a recent fabrication but it had been operational and deep-rooted in the West conceptualization ever since the first contacts with Arabs and Muslims. Down to the Middle Ages, especially during the Crusade Wars and along the Arabs expansion in Europe until the very days of the Third Millennium, the West promotes almost the same stereotypes for Arabs and Muslims" (Ridouani 2011, 1).

One key aspect of oriental gaze like the patriarchal gaze is a benevolent occident who rescues the (effeminate) orient from itself. This aspect is a consistent motif of the novel as Shams and his modern alter-ego Aziz rescue at least five people Ella, Rumi, Hassan- the Leper, Suleiman – the drunk and Desert Rose –the harlot. However, mere rescue or assistance cannot be considered as a sole determiner of an oriental framework. Such a claim necessitates a detailed exploration of the semiotics of the interactions between the characters that validate the reading. The case of Desert Rose is introduced in the second section of the novel: Water. Out on an exploration of the town, Shams stumbles upon the brothel in the "seamy side of the town". The brothel is an avowedly patriarchal space constructed out of the trajectory of "illegitimate" male heterosexual desire. In her book The Creation of Patriarchy, Gerda Lerner comments that the origins of prostitution can be traced to the practice of slave holding. She notes that slave owners rented out "surplus women" for sex and therefore brothels arose from the surplus availability of women to male chiefs, rulers and owners. "The practice of using slave women as servants and sex objects became the standard for the class dominance over women in all historic periods. Women of the subordinate classes (serfs, peasants, workers) were expected to serve men of the upper classes sexually, whether they consented or not" (Lerner 1986, 87). The act of prostitution involves not the purchase of sexually disinterested or disembodied services, but rather involves a contract and

agreement to purchase the sexual use of usually a woman for a fixed time period. Sheila Jaffreys therefore calls it "commercialized sexual violence" as the act of using a woman in prostitution could be seen as the purest form of objectification. An unknown body which is paid for is likely to offer more effective gratification in this regard than a woman who is known and may intrude demands and make comments which might remind her user that she is a real person. The danger for women of this male practice is sexual violence, since every act of sexual objectifying occurs on a continuum of dehumanization that promises male sexual violence at its far end" (Jeffreys 1997, 219). As a result, prostitution has not been "hidden, ignored and minimized (like other forms of violence) but rather defined as something different. This makes it especially troublesome for women to name their own experience, since the payment of money in some way justifies, and legitimizes, the behaviour" (Jeffreys 1997, 219). The brothel emerges as a product of a heteronormative desire to limit the visibility of prostitutes, a geography of containment where non-normative (including non-marital/non-intimate) sexual practices can be articulated away from public eye. In the Islamic context within which the novel is articulated the desire of containment is emphasized as the articulation of sexual desire is regulated strictly. Only heterosexual and heteronormative sexual practices are considered "legitimate" and any non-marital sexual practice is labelled under "zina" or adultery – not only a grave sin but also publicly punishable by death or flogging.

Shams' intervention in this space is ostensibly aimed to transgress, and repudiate normative morality through a refusal of the binary of sin and virtue, and corresponding legitimate and illegitimate spaces. – the determining factor being the practice and articulation of "legitimate" or "illegitimate" desire. Subsequently, Shams' intervention rescues desire determined by the binary and its corresponding mapping alongside reward and punishment. Shams rather advocates, and apparently practices a non-normative, inclusive and fluid model of religion rather than a normative,

exclusionary and stratified religion associated with tradition. The failure of the traditional normative religion is reflected in the symbol of the hermaphrodite – the confusing flux between male and female features represents the instability of the project. The fragrant rose garden destabilizes the binary further by suggesting purity, and thus nature's rebuttal of the binary. Desert Rose manifests the fallacy of binary by her paradoxical identity – a rose (suggestive of purity and fertility) in a desert (suggestive of bareness and death). This is in keeping with Aziz's later replacement of religiosity with spirituality.

Yet, a close reading informs the fractures and contradictions manifest in Shams as he inevitably ends up contributing to and validating the binary. Seeking to defend the virtue of Desert Rose, he proclaims her as a "good girl". This epithet locates her squarely within the moral matrix that locates non-matrimonial sex as 'bad', and hence condemnable. Desert Rose is 'good' as she isn't a willing participant in the exchange of bodies like the 'bad' hermaphrodite, rather an exploited victim who has internalised societal condemnation. Continuing this strain of judgement, he announces to the bemused Hermaphrodite that "soon she'll embark on a spiritual journey to find God. She'll abandon this place forever." (Shafak 2010, 111) By highlighting the incongruity of a spiritual journey within the boundaries of the brothel, Shams regurgitates the same moral gaze that marked it as immoral in the first place. This condemnation is further accentuated by the verb "abandon" that suggests salvation is not accessible unless she dissociates completely from the world of desire, and seeks an ascetic celibacy. Her ready acceptance of this doctrine follows from the fetishisation of female body and the consequent premium on "virginity." The devaluation of Desert Rose follows from this exoticisation as the village chief is prescribed the cure of sleeping with a virgin. Shams' prescription of abandonment to reach a pre-lapsarian state of purity plays back into the same semiotic system, reinforcing and validating it. By suggesting a clear binary between desire and salvation, Shams ends up reinforcing the very patriarchal

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networks he had set out to repudiate. Small wonder then that Desert Rose echoes him as she describes her resurgence as: “But I have abandoned that awful place. I went to the public bath and washed myself forty times with forty prayers. I took an oath to stay away from men. From now on, my life is dedicated to God” (Shafak 2010, 265). In a moment of self-glorification praise, he warns the hermaphrodite that he is an atypical dervish as he prefers to believe in a non-textual scripture, preferring a more egalitarian material text in the form of the immediate world. The sense of self-superiority and self-entitlement that Shams utters to a bewildered audience is in itself a function of the privileged masculinity that sees it fit to cancel a belief system, and replace it with an another without granting any agency to the female. The label of “privileged masculinity” might come under scrutiny considering that Shams and Rumi are in a very intimate homosocial relationship, if not a homoerotic one. Yet, masculine homoeroticism can intersect with masculine privilege, and is not always completely free of it. Kimmel and Coston suggest that “There are masculinists who are proponents of gay male machismo who rely on hegemonic ideals. This reliance is the main site of access to privilege for these gay men” (Kimmel and M. Coston 2003, 128). Also as Butler pointed out, a marginalized community like women can exercise their privilege w.r.t other marginalized communities like queer women by a simple act as wearing a wedding ring, which indicates their heterosexuality and privilege accrued by conforming to normativity.

Susumo Kuno points out that attitudinal shifts are enshrined within the syntax of a given linguistic utterance. He points out that the attitudinal shifts can be studied in terms of the degree of empathy i.e. “the speaker's identification, which may vary in degree, with a person/thing that participates in the event or state that he [/she] describes in a sentence,” or as “a camera angle on x rather than y” (Graham 1996, 2). Applying this rule to Shams’ reply, it can be observed that he employs me twice, and the first person pronoun “I” no less than seven times in six sentences that constitute his reply. Therefore, the degree of self-empathy is extremely high as there is

only a singular reference to any other agent – they, the typical Dervishes who are immediately dismissed for their blinkered vision. For a man determined to be egalitarian, Shams' monologue reverts far too quickly to a dismissive self-congratulatory entitlement that prides in its righteousness and superiority over a fallen people in the manner of a typical occident.

Another such ironic reinforcement of patriarchal codes occurs during the mosque scene. The scene finds Desert Rose cross-dressing and sneaking into a mosque to hear the fabled sermon of Rumi. Enrapt, listening to the sermon she doesn't notice the lad next to her stepping on the edges of her scarf. Before, she has a chance to react the scarf falls from her face. She ties it back hurriedly so that she can continue to hide behind it. However, the brief moment of uncovering is enough for Beybars, the guard, to recognize her, and drag her outside. She is about to be lynched for violating the sanctity of the mosque when she is rescued in the nick of time by Shams. The scene is intended to shed light on one of the key patriarchal operations: appropriation of space. Patriarchy allows little or no space for the female subject as public space especially is visibly masculine. Spaces are excavated from places by transgressive vectors of behaviour. Desert Rose's act is an attempt at reclamation of space from places by interrupting the "sacred" space of mosque with the 'profane' sexualized body. The distinction between 'space' and 'place' is envisioned well by Michel de Certeau who distinguishes the two as part of evolving a semiotics of resistance against the "panoptic" gaze of city. De Certeau argues that a place is marked by an adherence to discipline and hierarchy, and thus a stable "configuration of positions" (de Certeau 1984, 117). A space on the other hand is an unstable configuration formed by "intersections of mobile elements…. vectors of direction, velocities, and time variables. Space occurs as the effect produced by the operations that orient it, situate it, temporalize it, and make it function in a polyvalent unity of conflictual programs or contractual proximities" (de Certeau 1984, 117). Desert Rose, therefore, enacts a moment of space making and the novel attempts to locate it as a maiden attempt at tracing a

path of salvation. However, it is imperative to notice the act of space making is informed by a desire to be guided and determined by a male figure – Rumi. Since Rumi has not been liberated from conventional religiosity, and thus can't aid liberation, the attempt is frustrated. No sooner has female space been excavated than the patriarchal order reclaims it back through collective shaming and violence (by Baybar and onlookers). Completely overpowered, Desert Rose finds a saviour in another male figure – Shams, who quickly points out truthfully that religiosity is only a veneer for sexual politics, as violence is just a vehicle of repressed coveting. While this reflects glowingly on Shams establishing him further as a benevolent messiah, it elides the contentious politics of rescue which allots no agency or power to a woman – she is overpowered by men and rescued eventually by a man. In its hurry to establish the credentials of Shams, the novel conveniently overlooks the systematic disempowering of women it enacts.

An analysis of the other women characters underscores this systemic disempowerment of women. Kerra, for example, is harshly reprimanded by Rumi for daring to dusting and touching his books. The incident reeks of entrenched patriarchy that kept education off bounds for women. Her counter-poise Kimya is allowed access to education under the tutelage of Rumi, aided by the ghost of his late wife Gevher. Gevher – the helpful ghost is presented with no other mark of distinction other than the floral slippers bought by her husband – Rumi. This detail is deemed sufficient for certifying Kimya's claim that the ghost is guiding her. The implication that the female identity is dependent upon an object procured by, and by extension the male figure is elided by the sentimentality of the scene as Rumi gets misty eyed about the memory. This patriarchal network is perpetuated further even though a female kinship that is co-opted by hetero-patriarchal frames. Two instances suffice to illustrate it: the tacit support by Gevher to Kimya for marrying Shams, and Desert Rose's aid to Kimya to make herself attractive to an unresponsive Shams. The former is a case of appropriating the queer, which flows from a patriarchal structure. The only power relation permissible

in patriarchy is a binary – the male in whom power resides, and the powerless woman. In such a scenario, any gesture that indicates a loss of masculinity, specifically a claim to ownership of the female body, established as natural order is met with anxiety, incredulity and dismissed as unnatural. Hence, Kimya counters Kerra's concerns with an assurance that Shams will "learn (from her) to be a good husband and a good father" (Shafak, 2010, 297) The conflation of husband with father is a typical heteronormative construct that subordinates desire to procreation, as it ensures that women perform reproductive labour, and thus maintenance of status quo. This domestication project shifts the entire burden of keeping the marriage functional on her, absolving Shams of every responsibility in the marriage. This burden is further complicated by the nature of marriage, which is primarily conceived to shield Shams from calumny, and ensure that the demise of the flaneur Shams. Rumi hardly protests the proposal, and Shams too consents readily; the novel provides no opportunity to doubt it as Shams is silent on it. A more sympathetic reading might read the silence of Rumi and consent of Shams as the fallout of prohibitive heteronormativity where freedom to express sexuality is inexistent. Compulsory heterosexuality entails an erasure of queer desire, and a necessary adherence to heterosexual marriage. It could be argued then that the marriage is a device for the two 'friends' to be together without incurring social wrath. While such a reading can certainly not be ignored, it is also imperative to note here that such a compromise follows from male privilege. While the victimization of men can't be ignored, yet at the same time it is useful to note such an arrangement is fundamentally unjust to the woman. While the two men collude on a device to stay together, there is little heed paid to the emotions and desires of the woman in question. This erasure of woman's self is fundamentally a patriarchal arrangement, especially considering Rumi holds considerable sway over Kimya – being a father figure to her and a mentor to her. Rumi's possession of cultural wealth and Shams' charisma place them in positions of power over Kimya who is vulnerable and comparatively lacking in power. This is not to deny, Kimya doesn't exercise her agency in choosing to marry Shams' ignoring a well-intentioned and accurate warning by Kerra about the

folly of her endeavour. It is to suggest that her recklessness is a result of her confidence in heteronormativity that is perpetuated as the natural order. Shams and Rumi atleast in appearance conform to the code, if not in intention or spirit.

The marriage night scene is more appalling for its normalization of misogyny. Throughout the novel, he is extolled as unconventional and subversive, yet on the eve of the marriage night he flippantly conforms to the patriarchal value system of female virginity and purity. Usually Shams is dismissive of conventional binaries preferring to refute them by siding with the pejorative side of the binary. This is repeatedly proven during situations like conversing with the leper beggar – Hasan, or his tender care of the drunk Suleiman or encouraging the prostitute Desert Rose to abandon the brothel, and offering her shelter the novel constructs him as an unconventional character at odds with normative religion. His apparently blasphemous comparison of the Prophet and Manusr-al-Hallaj and interrogation of normative religion establishes him as an apparently subversive character. Yet during the marriage scene, he abandons this side. This scene is narrated by Shams himself as he leads the reader through the whole emotional maelstrom that rises within him. Brooding on the sadness of the songs being sung, Shams concludes that women associate marriages with death like him. The death referred to here is the death of the subversive Shams, as he succumbs to normative pressures and enters a marital alliance. In contrast with his habit of departing from tradition, Shams follows tradition and gifts Kimya a comb made of tortoiseshell in keeping with the tradition of the groom gifting the bride after lifting her veil. Moreover, to confirm the death of his homoerotic self, he kisses his bride repeatedly on her lips – an intimate gesture keeping in with his expected role, and fondles her intimately acknowledging his arousal. Then just as suddenly he stops and affirms his inability to consummate the marriage. The sequence of events merits a recollection here: Shams consents to the marriage, gifts his bride, kisses her and arouses her only to abandon the project. The only explanation offered is his realization of

the depth of Kimya's emotions after observing the intricately woven carpet. Whether it is homosexual guilt or a moral scruple, either way Shams doggedly refuses to fulfil his marital obligations. When Kimya protests that this refusal will lead to accusations against her, as she will be subject to a slanderous campaign, Shams protests feebly eventually conceding that she is "right". Rather than resist such a narrative, and campaign against it (As he has previously done), Shams gives in to it meekly. He decides to take the route of self-flagellation, and cuts his own hand to spill blood on the sheet – the sure marker of consummation. Thus, he writes back into the binary of virgin vs fallen woman that led to the exclusion of Desert Rose. Although the novel makes Shams act "valorously" and repentant, the male privilege that determines this act can hardly be mistaken. He doesn't choose to abandon his role as the arbitrator of female purity, rather chooses to conform to the role. Thus the two wise men in their wisdom – the scholar and the dervish, both offer Kimya as the sacrificial lamb at the altar of their friendship. Thus, Kimya unwittingly turns out to be collateral damage in this skirmish between this. Interestingly, it is a male figure Aladin who rightly points out the male privilege, the immoral self-centeredness of this marital alliance. Although Aladin is smarting more from a wounded ego than any real concern for Kimiya, he has accurately surmised the level of intimacy between the two men, and the device they employ to preserve it.

When she asks Desert Rose for advice on how to arouse Shams, she immediately rushes to defence of Shams: "Shams is an enlightened man. I do not think this is the right way to approach him" (Shafak 2010, 313). The mapping of expression of desire as not right, and hence immoral and wrong only attests the degree to which Desert Rose has internalized the notion that seeking physical pleasure is unbecoming of 'enlightened' beings. The female is restricted to the role of a barbaric seductress incapable of enlightenment. Kimya overcomes this objection by reminding Desert Rose of the natural primacy of desire, but fails to impress Shams. Extending Arlie Hochschild's definition of emotional labour, it could be argued that Kimya labours to make

herself attractive in the marital workplace to satisfy the husband-customer – the ultimate judge of the product's value. The customer, Shams brusquely dismisses her attempt coldly "I am disappointed in you, Kimya" (Shafak 2010, 313). The rejection and judgement embodied by disappointed is a direct product of the self-entitlement that Shams feels. She is censured, therefore, by both man and woman. It could be argued, no doubt, that the rejection is basically a manifestation of frustration at Kimya's repeated attempts to tame the queer. Trapped in a heterosexual marriage, and burdened further by guilt Shams' dismissal is a timely reminder of the disenfranchisement of queer populations. Yet, it is equally undeniable that his "disappointment' follows from Shams" anger at Kimya's refusal to restrain and muzzle her desire and demand her share of love and intimacy.

Subsequently, the novel allows Kimya to accept the responsibility of failure of consummating the marriage and die of heartbreak. The ease with which she accepts Shams' neglect, and his complete lack of guilt beyond the mundane "saddened" firmly establishes the authorial complicity in a patriarchal framework that rebuts the liberatory choices the novel seeks to explore. It is not denied that the novel comments on the restrictions patriarchy imposes upon men by fixing their role in a hetero-patriarchal societal framework. The novel does comment upon the impossibility of expression of non-normative desire like homoerotic love in a patriarchal society Shams' murder is symbolic of the absolute intolerance that such expressions arouse. Yet, while expressing this impossibility the novel fails to realize that it simultaneously reinforces a masculinist justification for the choices the men make. This disastrous choice also comments on the novel's failure to evolve any comprehensive model of female agency. The choice suggests that independent female choice not mediated through a male is liable to be disastrous for the female herself. Interestingly, the same is not applicable to Ella who finally decides to take the plunge and divorce David. By the end of the novel, she is completely free of the self-guilt that plagued her back. Unlike the oriental women, her choice liberates her.

The novel, therefore, intentionally and unintentionally raises several questions on the nature of representation especially representations of normative gender and cultures. Its investigation into the pressures of patriarchy and social conventions, while good natured, also perpetuate an underlying masculinity that it originally set to rebut. The interventions are particularly troublesome when one examines "Sweet Blasphemy" the novel that records the stories of Rumi and Shams. It does successfully raise several pertinent questions on the normative world orders of "fundamentalist Islamic orient and the consumerist Judeo-Christian occident", but its positing of Sufism as a quest for spirituality which can fill the void at the heart of both is particularly a simplistic and misleading solution to the complexity of problems it raises. It betrays a tendency to engage in re-orientalism and perpetuate the centrality of the white western subject. The novel can therefore be assumed to be determined by an imperial gaze that "reflects the assumption that the white western subject is central much as the make gaze assumes the centrality of the male subject" (Hawthorn 2006, 48). By its conflation of the male and the oriental gaze, the novel undermines its emancipatory project, rather reaffirms the side-effects of the post-colonial paradigm that allows the post-colonial to be fetishized and consumed in a world increasingly suspecting of multi-culturalism.

The novel can therefore be safely presumed to be determined by an imperial gaze that "reflects the assumption that the white western subject is central much as the make gaze assumes the centrality of the male subject" (Hawthorn 2006, 48). By its conflation of the male and the oriental gaze, the novel completely undermines any emancipatory project, rather reaffirms the side-effects of the post-colonial paradigm that allows the post-colonial to be fetishized and consumed in a world increasingly suspecting of multi-culturalism.

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