13TH CENTURY RELIGION AND SOCIETY IN THE FORTY RULES OF LOVE BY ELIF SHAFAK

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I. Introduction

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The Forty Rules of Love which was written by a Turkish writer Elif Shafak in 2009 recounts the story about the relation between Mevlana Celaddiin-i Rumi and his tutor Shams of Tabriz in general. It is an international bestseller and one of Elif Shafak’s masterpieces. The book is written in the form of first person narrative and with an episodic technique. The point of view of the different characters creates an atmosphere of different ideas about the religion of Islam and how it is understood in the 13th century. The story begins in 2008 with a character named Ella who is working at a book publishing company and her job is to read and check the books in order to tell if the book is qualified to be published or not. One day she receives a letter from someone who is identified himself as A. Z. Zahara. He says he wants to publish his book but he could not trust anyone about his writing because his writing involves a philosophy which could be understood badly or differently if its originality was changed. She accepts the job and starts to read the book as A. Z. Zahara e-mails her the writing part by part in time. As she receives e-mails, we find ourselves reading the book with her and thus the real story begins. This “book inside the book” technique shows that the story based on real events could involve some fictional or even sensible events to some readers and thus protects the author, Elif Shafak from direct satires. This presentation will be about the religious society which is recounted in the “book inside the book” from different points of view and about the wrongs of the religious people who believe in their rights.

II. Religion

The term “religion” defined as believing in some moral code or something sacred, which differs from person to person or culture to culture. According to the religious belief, if something is sacred it must be true. For example; for every child, his/her mother is sacred so, for a period of time, a child believes in everything what his/her mother believes or says so. Because the mother is sacred so the belief of the sacred must be true. This creates a question about the rights and wrongs in religion. In The Forty Rules of Love this question about rights and wrongs are taken and answered wisely by giving examples with the well-known religious

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leaders and good characters who have shameful backgrounds or have been forced to look shameful by the religious society. The first moral lesson and wrongs of the religion are shown when Elif Shafak first introduces Shams of Tabriz. He has a character which looks like careless about the other people from the outside. Some of the bad characters describes him as cold and dour. Some says he is a careless man about himself too. He dresses as a beggar and wears black all the time. One of the characters “the master” describes him;

A few minutes later, the door opened and in walked a man dressed head to toe in black. Lank, gaunt, and of indeterminable age, he had a sharp nose, deeply set pitch-black eyes, and dark hair that fell over his eyes in thick curls. He wore a long, hooded cloak, a wool garment, and sheepskin boots. There were a number of charms around his neck. He held a wooden bowl in his hand of the sort that mendicant dervishes carry to overcome their personal vanity and hubris by accepting the charity of others. I realised that here was a man who did not pay much attention to the judgements of society. That people could confuse him with some vagrant, or even beggar, did not seem to bother him in the least (Shafak 47)

From the inside, the personality and the real Shams of Tabriz differs from the looks of the outside. Because from inside he is the man of his own moral codes and those codes involves every other human being around him. He gives a moral lesson to everybody he meets. He acts as a mirror to everyone. If they see some ugly or nosy character, it is themselves who they see in him. He describes himself with a tale he remembers from a different dervish;

A wandering dervish arrived in a town where the natives did not trust strangers.
“Go away!” they shouted at him. “No one knows you here!”

The dervish calmly responded, “Yes but I know myself, and believe me, it would have been much worse if it were the other way round”

His sense of religion could not be questioned by no one but himself and the God he believes. He is a kind of person who thinks every human being has some flaws or bad habits. He can question himself in every way and never does something he would regret. He has only one value of sacred and it is the God he believes. Thus the author Elif Shafak answers the question about rights and wrongs about religion. In a wise way she explains that if we believe a variety of sacred things, it could create a chaos. But if we believe the one and only sacred thing (Which is the God for Shams) there will be only rights and not wrongs, and she shows as
an example the philosophy of Shams of Tabriz that we should question even the one thing we are holding as a sacred and ourselves to do the right thing.

III. Society

Every creature of the God adapts in their own environment. Furthermore, a being should take another being of its kind as a reference to adapt. As mankind, there are some moral codes that we had created in order to adapt our environment. These codes could change in time. The followers of these codes creates a society to live in harmony and peace. As far as we know, the moral codes of the mankind are equalled with religious facts and thus caused the moral codes to change into sacred codes. As discussed above, there could be different sacred codes in the society and this breaks the harmony and peace. In The Forty Rules of Love there is a serious satire towards the 13th centuries society. When Shams of Tabriz hears about Mevlna Celaddiin-i Rumi, he wants to meet him and his journey begins. He travels many cities from Tabriz to Konya and meets many characters that poorly treated by society but actually whom good at heart. On the other hand, the society that excluded them is the real source of corruption and badness. When he arrives at Konya, he directly wants to test the society by the means of their moral codes, but he never says his intentions even to himself. At first he goes to an inn in order to find himself a place to sleep. He is dressed as a dervish and the place he wants to sleep is not suited for ones of his looks. The word gets out quickly in the city that a dervish stays at an inn. They gossip about a dervish who probably drinks and shames himself. The Innkeeper surprised when he saw a dervish at his place, but he offered him a free bed to sleep and told him he could send away if there are any alcoholic tries to disturb him. He was there on purpose and he was a man that could sense a person in need. While he was investigating the place, he observed the behaviours of society to the regulars of the tavern. He witnessed a Muslim named Suleiman was a regular and he continued to observe the events that happened to Suleiman. In the book, the event that Suleiman tells, pictures the situation of society:

“selamun aleykum” I saluted, smiling from ear to ear.
“A muslim in a tavern! Shame on you!” the man roared “Don’t you know wine is the handiwork of Sheitan?”

I opened my mouth to answer, but before I could make a sound, something sharp whizzed by my head. I realized in sheer of horror that it was a stone. If I had not ducked at the last second, it would have cracked my skull… (126,127)
The society was at its worst state and Shams wondered about Mevlana. Was he part of this society as well? He sensed that he was his soul friend but how was his moral behaviours? There were a lot of questions to answer but there was still time for him to reach Mevlana. He went to a brothel the other day. They saw him entering the building. It was the most shameful thing he could do in that era. They gossiped about a dervish going to a brothel. The mistress welcomed him and she, like the innkeeper shocked when she first saw him. He wanted to see the most beautiful lady of the house and paid every coin he had to do so. The mistress took him to her in a room upstairs. When the prostitute, Desert Rose the Harlot saw the Shams she was in shock also. After a while they were alone in the room but Shams was never looked upon her. She did not know what to do but to just stand there. Shams talked to her, said he is sensing what is really inside her heart and how the society forced her to this condition. She started crying. They continued to talk and they became friends. Shams visited regularly to talk to her and she was convinced to run away from brothel to be a religious woman on her own. This was a very striking example of how Shams was against the senseless order of the patriarchy. In fact, he wanted her to live by her own moral codes and find the way to Allah. Because he thinks that the real dirt is not on the body but on the soul, and he could see that her soul is clean. But it was impossible for a woman to live by her own at the 13th century. The conversation between the girl and a cruel man named Baybars who is a security guard of the city, explains what a man from society thinks when he sees a girl who is shamed, in a mosque.

As soon as we were alone in the room, I asked “what is a security guard like you doing here?”

“Well, my coming to a brothel is no more bizarre than a harlot going to a mosque” he said, his voice heavy with insinuation.

“I am sure you would have loved to lynch me that day,” I said.

“I owe my life to Shams of Tabriz.”

“Do not mention that revolting name. That guy is a heretic!”

“No he is not!” I do not know what came over me, but I heard myself say, “Since that day Shams of Tabriz has come to see me many times.”

“Hah! A dervish in a brothel!” Baybars snorted. “Why am I not surprised?”

“It is not like that,” I said “It is not like that at all.” (215)

While waiting his meeting with the Mevlana, Shams was very helpful to those who needs a helping hand, and at the end with their meetings with Shams, they all left their bad
habits and reputations aside and started a new life. When the time comes, Shams of Tabriz was very excited and this excitement was seen throughout his words;

Before I met Rumi, just one night prior, I sat on my balcony at the Inn of Sugar Vendors. My heart rejoiced at the magnificence of the universe God had created in His image, so everywhere we turned, we could both seek and find Him. And yet human beings rarely did that. (152)

After he meets with Mevlana Celazziin-i Rumi every doubts he had was gone. Rumi was the kind of person like he always imagined for his soul friend. Rumi was thinking the same thoughts. There were a lot of rumours about Shams but Mevlana did not listened to any of it. They spend years together talking and sharing the ideas, but generally, Shams was the Mevlana’s tutor about life. The hatred for Shams was growing stronger. Because society was adoring Mevlana while hating Shams, and they did not want them to be together. They were calling Shams a heretic. One day Shams wanted to test Mevlana’s trust in him. This was like all the rest, was a lesson to be thought. Shams sent Mevlana to a tavern and he wanted him to buy bottles of wine in front of everyone. Mevlana did not hesitate to do it and the gossips started. Furthermore, he brought the bottles to home. He was trusting him no matter what. Shams put the wines in the glasses and took a sip and wanted Mevlana to do the same. Mevlana said;

“Religious rules and prohibitions are important.” He said.

“But they should not be turned into unquestionable taboos. It is with such awareness that I drink the wine you offer me today, believing with all my heart that there is sobriety beyond the drunkenness of love.”

Just as Rumi was about to take the glass to his lips, I snatched it back and flung it to the ground. The wine spilled on the snow, like drops of blood.

“Do not drink it” I said, no longer feeling the need to continue with this trail.”

“If you were not going to ask me to drink this wine, why did you send me to tavern in the first place?” Rumi asked, his tone not so much curious as compassionate.

“You know why” I said, smiling. “Spiritual growth is about the totality of our consciousness, not about obsessing over particular aspect. Rule number Thirty-two: Nothing should stand between yourself and God. Not imams,
priests... not even your faith. Believe in your values and your rules, but never lord them over others. If you keep breaking other people’s hearts, whatever religious duty you perform is no good.” (246)

In the way of the philosophy of Shams of Tabriz, Elif Shafak teaches a moral lesson to even today’s society. He was a kind of person that never cared what other thinks about himself, and taught valuable lessons throughout his journey, but his aim was not the 13th centuries society but the future ones. Because the society continued to think that he is an evil man who mocks with the mind of a great man like Mevlana.

IV. Conclusion

Throughout the book, the author Elif Shafak, gives a moral lesson about religion to society. The way of Shams of Tabriz show the reader that we should question our beliefs and let no taboo stand between us and the God. We should only take the God and the words of God as a sacred and question ourselves in every step. We should not forget our beliefs even we see the wrong thing with our own eyes. We should first question what is really happening. Also, the author gives an example through the life of Mevlna Celaleddiin-i Rumi and his spiritual rising with the help of the Shams of Tabriz. The Forty Rules of Love shows us the real religious moral values and at the end of the book we understand that Shams of Tabriz is not just a person but a philosophy which should persuaded by anyone who intends to find their spiritual freedom and the true love of God. In other words, there will be always Rumi’s and Shams’es in this world in any era, the important point is about finding your Shams or being Shams.

WORK CITED
