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## Marketing stories: Writing with faith and reading in search of spirituality in Elif Shafak's fiction

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### ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the reception of Elif Shafak's fiction as it circulates within the global literary marketplace, examining the responses of secular and religious readerships in English and Turkish. Taking Shafak's 2010 novel, *The Forty Rules of Love*, and her 2016 work, *Three Daughters of Eve*, as case studies, and referring to media and reader reviews of these books, and public commentary by the author, it evaluates the readerly relationships with spirituality and faith that Shafak constructs as they are emulated by both the readers in her novels and the readers of her novels. In doing so, it asks what reading methodologies Shafak forges in a marketplace that situates books as both stories and products. In the urgent defence of a cosmopolitan ideal, and amidst transcontinental markets and metropolises, this article argues that Shafak puts faith in the potential for conviviality to be fostered by the process of reading.

### KEYWORDS

Elif Shafak; global literary marketplace; reading; spirituality; cosmopolitanism; Sufism

Forty-year-old American suburban housewife Ella Rubenstein is the plaintive protagonist of Elif Shafak's 2010 novel, *The Forty Rules of Love*. As Ella finds herself with too much spare time, she takes a part-time job as a reader for a Boston literary agency and is tasked with reading *Sweet Blasphemy*, a manuscript by unknown author A.Z. Zahara. The manuscript, embedded within Shafak's novel and read simultaneously by both the fictional Ella and the real-life reader, is set in 13th-century Anatolia and follows the relationship between the acclaimed poet Rumi and Sufi dervish, Shams of Tabriz. At first, Ella hesitates at the prospect of undertaking this task. She tells her boss, Michelle: "the subject is alien to me. Perhaps you could give me another novel – you know, something I could more easily relate to" (Shafak [2010] 2015, 13). Michelle chastises Ella: "Most of the time, we read books that have nothing to do with our lives [ ... ]. Isn't connecting people to distant lands and cultures one of the strengths of good literature?" (13). This exchange outlines an archetype of the global literary market that resembles Graham Huggan's ([2001] 2003, 4) vision of the industry, which sees postcolonial texts written in, or translated into, English emerge from publishing houses situated in western metropolises. As sites of significant global political and economic capital, these "rerout[e]

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cultural products regarded as emanating from the periphery toward audiences who see themselves as coming from the centre” (4). Such a centre–periphery model is in dialogue with a particular vision of cosmopolitanism which Walter Mignolo (2000) argues is underscored by imperial politics, wherein the centre gives “benevolent recognition” to the margins. Within this framework, scholars of the global literary marketplace conceive of a metropolitan reader similar to the consumer to whom Shafak’s fictional Michelle’s marketing ethos is clearly directed: a reader of “predictable class and metropolitan location” (Brouillette [2007] 2011, 16), who seeks “to expand their own cultural horizons” (Huggan [2001] 2003, 12).

However, Sarah Brouillette ([2007] 2011, 17) criticizes Huggan’s generalized conception of the “mythic cosmopolitan consumer”, and it might be possible in this vein to read Ella as a caricature of such a figure. By envisioning a particular paradigm for the global literary marketplace in her novel, irrespective of its potential limitations and generalizations, Shafak not only presents intertwining stories of characters in search of love and spirituality, but also outlines possible methods of reading, not simply politically, but aesthetically and affectively. This article explores readerly relationships with spirituality and faith as they are emulated by both the readers *in* and the readers *of* her novels *The Forty Rules of Love* (2010) and *Three Daughters of Eve* (2016), which it considers in relation to public commentary by the author, and media and reader reviews. The geography of both novels – which range from 21st-century Massachusetts to 13th-century Anatolia in *The Forty Rules of Love*, and from Istanbul to Oxford in *Three Daughters of Eve* – encapsulates how Shafak’s fiction migrates and circulates within the global literary marketplace, being received by both secular and religious readerships in English and Turkish.

As this article highlights, Shafak is abundantly aware of how her fiction has been co-opted by neo-imperialist and populist ideologues: marketed as providing a “window” onto an orientalist vision of Muslim women’s lives, or characterized as a profane national insult. While cognizant of the global literary marketplace’s broader ideological and economic machinations, Shafak puts faith in her reader. She deploys a “strategic exoticism” that is not ignorant of the politics at play in the production, marketing, and reception of a text (Brouillette [2007] 2011, 43). She consequently centres fiction’s imaginative and affective potentialities, and the complex cultural, political, and emotional themes of such writing. In this way, Shafak’s novels counter the entrenched hierarchies of neo-imperial, neo-liberal, and paternalistic market forces, and present reading as a convivial cosmopolitan act which is both affiliative and affective (Schiller, Darieva, and Gruner-Domic 2011). Considering her fiction as a defence of this cosmopolitan ideal (Shafak 2014) and reading it in light of the secular and religious populist politics of her diverse audience, this article questions what reading methodologies Shafak forges in a marketplace that situates books as both stories and products.

### **Elif Shafak in the global literary marketplace: Writerly and readerly expectations**

Shafak has lived a self-proclaimed nomadic existence. Born in Strasbourg, France, she lived in “Ankara, Madrid, Amman, Cologne, Istanbul, Michigan, Boston, [and] Arizona” before settling in London, and has also “commute[d] between cities and cultures” as

a result of her bilingualism, writing in both Turkish and English (Shafak 2013, n.p.). Her earliest works were written in Turkish, her first English-language novel, *The Saint of Incipient Insanities* (Shafak 2004), being published in 2004. Shafak's subsequent novels have also been written in English and translated into Turkish, although she continues to write political and cultural commentary for both English- and Turkish-language media. Commuting between cities, languages, and cultures, she finds value in diversity and in a cosmopolitanism which "insists on the reality of blended selfhoods", holding individuals together by "multiple affiliations" within and across communities comprised of complementary and conflicting relationships to tradition, culture, politics, and religion (Shafak 2014, 19–20).

Shafak's cosmopolitan vision might most closely align with that of Kwame Anthony Appiah ([2006] 2007, xiii) which, in emphasizing an obligation to others beyond "kith and kind" while also finding value in respect for difference, posits the cosmopolitan as "[a] citizen of the world". In a similar vein, Nina Glick Schiller, Tsypylma Darieva, and Sandra Gruner-Domic (2011, 402) define "cosmopolitan sociability" as a communicative environment "based on the human capacity to create social relations of inclusiveness and openness to the world". In tune with the hospitable aspirations of conviviality, they argue that "rootedness and openness cannot be seen in oppositional terms but constitute aspects of ... creativity" through which both secular and sacred spaces are built (400). Convivial cosmopolitanism is constitutive of this meeting of ideas and ideals, communicated with grace and imagination. Amidst continents, cultures, and languages, Shafak presents herself as both a septic and an idealist: critical of the insular political machinations of individual governing forces, she views her fiction and non-fiction writing as a way towards affecting imaginative change. Shafak's lived experience and literary output are transcontinental, her writing borne out of "multiple affiliations" and received within a global literary marketplace that is a metropolitan, neo-liberal conglomerate, yet is composed of a varied readership with varying cultural, political, and religious viewpoints. As Shafak's fiction enjoys widespread popularity among both anglophone and Turkish readerships, this article asks what it is that appeals across differential markets and metropolises.

Shafak has spoken at length about the divisive political and cultural lines drawn in Turkey, "a threshold society" split between two continents (2013, n.p.). Yet, Shafak continues, the country "rarely, if ever, values the complexity and diversity that [its] in-between-ness entails" (n.p.). The contemporary rupture in Turkish political culture primarily emerges between Kemalism, which underpins the secular Republic first instituted by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in 1922, and conservatism, which values the traditions of Turkey's Ottoman past and its religious (particularly Islamic) identity. In 2002, the conservative and populist Justice and Development Party (AKP), led by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, became the majority political party in the Turkish parliament. Shafak observes: "in countries like Turkey both religiosity and secularism may and do take rigid forms" (2003, 78).

Confronting such rigidity, however, Shafak's critical and creative work returns repeatedly to the question of how the religious and secular can coexist. Her positive view on the potential for the coexistence of opposing cultural and political viewpoints is counter to the polarization that underpins surges in nationalism, fundamentalism, and populism (Shafak 2014, 2019). Such political trends are not singular to Turkey, but also appear

notable in the championing of sovereignty and jingoism in neo-liberal democracies in Europe and the US, which often results in the positioning – as in the US, post-9/11 – of Muslim identities as the “Other”, framed in hostile, orientalist terms. The impact of such polarized political perspectives on the reception of writing by Muslim authors post-9/11 is well documented (Whitlock 2007; Morey and Yaqin 2011; Zine 2014). Rehana Ahmed, Peter Morey, and Amina Yaqin (2012, 6), for example, observe “a distinct strain of exoticism colouring western readings of the Muslim Other: a frisson of fear caused by difference, but also comfort in the idea that ‘they’ can be made more like ‘us’”. Hence Muslim writers and/or writers from Muslim majority countries – such as Shafak – enter into a global literary marketplace that trades on readers’ interests in and anxieties about the “Muslim Other”. Shafak articulated this particular frustration in her TED talk on politics and fiction:

If you’re a woman writer from the Muslim world [ . . . ], then you are expected to write the stories of Muslim women and, preferably, the unhappy stories of unhappy Muslim women. [ . . . ] Writers are [ . . . ] seen as [ . . . ] the representatives of their respective cultures. (2010, n.p.)

Several of Shafak’s works do tell the stories of Muslim women – some unhappy – engaging with complex global and local political, cultural, and religious contexts. Shafak does not ignore this kind of political engagement but laments the ways that such writing is pigeonholed by an expectation that it will teach, or even confirm for readers, “‘truths’ about the imperilled lives of Muslim women in faraway lands”, rather than being appreciative of its creative, literary qualities (Zine 2014, 185).

Yet, as Shafak observes, “this tendency to see a story as more than a story does not solely come from the West” (2010, n.p.). As evidence, she presents the case of her own 2006 trial for “insulting Turkishness” in *The Bastard of Istanbul* (Shafak [2007] 2008), in which a character refers to the massacre of Armenians in World War I as genocide. Shafak comments: “I had intended to write a constructive, multi-layered novel about an Armenian and a Turkish family through the eyes of women. My micro story became a macro issue when I was prosecuted” (2010, n.p.). Her distinction is useful: the micro stories – intimate, personal narratives shared by a small cast of characters and contained within an author’s creative work – transform into issues when their subject matter is capitalized on as part of the political and economic machinations of the literary marketplace. This holds true for the reception of Shafak’s literature in both anglophone and Turkish markets. Whether they are imperilled or profane, Shafak is all too aware that her “fictional characters become the representatives of something larger” when they enter the public – or commercial – field (n.p.).

We may interpret the difference between macro and micro readings of narrative more clearly with reference to Hayley Toth’s (2021, 648) distinction between “a *politics of reading*” and “an *ethics of reading*” in the context of the global literary marketplace (emphasis in original). While a politics of reading necessarily “situate[s] the [reading] self in relation to texts and their production journey”, embedded within a nexus of political and cultural contexts, an ethics of reading aspires for moments of “self-abandonment”, interrupting established, hegemonic epistemological frameworks (648). While Shafak’s novels are subject to particular political readings, her non-fiction commentary and public talks emphasize writing’s imaginative, affective, and

experimental dimensions, characterizing fiction as a “homeland” or “Storyland” for authors (2017b). She champions what we might describe as an ethics of reading, using Toth’s framework: a mode of reading driven by the reader’s intimacy with, and affective responsiveness to, the text and writer, and to a recognition of self-in-other. In the face of both neo-imperial presuppositions about Muslim women’s life experiences, and the censorship of fictional works which present politically contentious perspectives, such idealism may seem naive. However, this article contends that, in fact, such a commitment is a matter of faith, and that Shafak, whose fiction grapples with questions of spirituality and religion in a world fractured by secular and religious populist politics, puts faith in her reader.

Like Brouillette’s strategic exoticism, writing with faith might be described as “not something a writer deploys to teach a reader about the errors in her conceptions about other cultures”, but rather “a set of textual strategies that communicates [ ... ] because the author and the *actual* reader likely share assumptions about the way culture operates, and concur in their desire to exempt themselves from certain undesirable practices” ([2007] 2011, 43; emphasis in original). Inasmuch as some readers will read a book with culturally and politically defined preconceptions, there is, at the heart of any text, a story that is simultaneously contingent upon and separate from the identity politics at play in its production, marketing, and reception. Strategic exoticism might be best described as a contract between the postcolonial author and their (western) readership: the author places their faith in the imaginative and emotional responsiveness of the actual, anticipated readers of their work; and readers are presented with an affective, intimate “micro” story, replete with complex cultural and political themes, to which they might relate.

Shafak describes her primary readership in Turkish: “At book signings, there are feminists, liberals, women in headscarves, Sufis, Kurds, Jews, Armenians, Greeks, the LGBT community. They may not break bread together but their diversity matters to me” (2017a, n.p.). That her fiction attracts, within Turkey alone, such a differential readership from both secular and religious backgrounds and affiliated to a range of cultures and ideologies, indicates the success of the contract between reader and writer. Unlike the nationalist political elite in Turkey, most everyday readers of Shafak’s work, who come to her stories out of both cultural intrigue and emotional interest, relate to her characters and stories even across potentially polarizing differences in individual beliefs. To recognize “the text as an actor at the site of consumption, capable of inspiring and being inflected by multiple readings” is to support a vision of an open, supportive, and flexibly affiliated, or convivial readership (Toth 2021, 652).

In examining the capacity of Shafak’s work to inspire affective and meaningful relationships with readers across continents and religious ideologies, this article considers readerly responses to two of her novels: *The Forty Rules of Love* (Shafak [2010] 2015) and *Three Daughters of Eve* (Shafak [2016] 2017). Seen as sister texts by some reviewers because of their protagonists’ engagement in spiritual quests, these two novels, in fact, differ in a number of ways. In *The Forty Rules of Love*, Aziz, the author of *Sweet Blasphemy*, warns Ella that “religiosity and spirituality are not the same thing” (Shafak [2010] 2015, 145), and the novel’s focus on Sufism points to its attendant spirituality. Meanwhile, Shafak, in an interview about *Three Daughters of Eve*, comments on how “faith is not necessarily a religious concept”: there are also secular acts of faith (2017a, n.p.). This later novel, more deeply rooted in religiosity, interrogates the flaws of dogmatic

faith – both religious and secular – in giving rise to political and populist fundamentalism, and explores the threats these pose. Mapping the possible connections between cosmopolitanism and spirituality in *The Forty Rules of Love*, and between religious and secular faith in *Three Daughters of Eve*, Shafak’s “Storyland” offers us more than one methodology of reading.

### Methods of reading (in) *The Forty Rules of Love*

*The Forty Rules of Love* is a bestselling novel in both anglophone and Turkish literary marketplaces.<sup>1</sup> In her review, Alev Adil (2010) notes the wide appeal of Shafak’s novel to readers in Turkey:

Both the observant head-scarfed daughters of AKP, the Islamic party in government in Turkey, and the secular offspring of past Kemalist regimes, are ardent fans [ ... ]. Her engaging vision of a gentle non-judgmental Sufi path to Islam that rejects religious fundamentalism and is accessible to all. (n.p.)

Furthermore, the “easily assimilable introduction to Sufi thought” Shafak offers appeals to both Turkish- and English-language readers (n.p.).

The vision of Sufism Shafak presents in her novels and non-fiction writing is rooted in her aspirations for cosmopolitan conviviality. Ziad Elmarsafy (2012, 8) argues that the presentation of Sufi themes in literature “enable[s] key meditations on individuality, survival, hospitality, autobiography and, above all, the novel itself as a vector for ideas about the world and its habitability”. This description – emphasizing hospitability and habitability – is akin to Shafak’s (2014, 19–20) account of cosmopolitanism as affiliative and communicative. The alignment of Sufi and cosmopolitan thought in *The Forty Rules of Love* makes her work accessible to a varied congregation of readers. Her novel, Amina Yaqin (2018, 132) argues, “offers an instrumentalist reinterpretation of Islam as positive, relying on orientalist tropes about Sufism to convey a vision that appeals to an American literary market”. Capitalizing on the expectations of both religious and secular marketplaces, however, I argue that Shafak’s narrativization of cosmopolitanism interrupts imperial stylizations of the concept. Instead, the stories she tells, directed at multivarious audiences, encourage a model of reading that invites conviviality amongst her characters and her readership. Brouillette cautions that in the global literary marketplace, cosmopolitanism exhibits a somewhat contradictory “liberalism, pluralism, and seeming congruity with multinational capitalism” ([2007] 2011, 60). As market forces capitalize on “a largely inadequate or utopian politics of hybridity and post-nationality”, postcolonial authors “have tended to negotiate positions that recognize, deflect, or interrogate their own complicity” in these market forces (60–61). The success of *The Forty Rules of Love* is due, in no small part, to the marketability of Shafak’s easily assimilable accounts of cosmopolitan and Sufi thought. Nevertheless, this article contends that where the marketplace capitalizes on Shafak’s apparently “utopian politics of hybridity”, the novel’s consequent popularity allows it to reach a broad and differential readership whom she might invite to adopt more nuanced methods of reading (Brouillette [2007] 2011, 60).

Sufism is packaged for both the reader of *The Forty Rules of Love* and for Ella, the reader of *Sweet Blasphemy*, by the dervish Shams of Tabriz. His teachings – the titular 40 rules – are dispersed throughout the fictional manuscript, often accompanied by

situational encounters between characters in the novel through which these teachings can be seen in practice. Shafak's mediation of Sufism enters the global, and particularly the US, literary market on the heels of the "Rumi phenomenon", which saw the eponymous poet grow in popularity in America at the turn of the 21st century (El-Zein 2000). Elena Furlanetto (2013, 203–204) characterizes this phenomenon as an orientalist discourse "produced in the West for the West", and contends that Shafak's contribution in *The Forty Rules of Love* "domesticates Sufism for an American readership" in "a case of self-Orientalisation". This argument is corroborated by reviews of Shafak's novel posted to Goodreads by its American readership.<sup>2</sup> Many of these frame it as an introduction to Rumi and Sufism: "I knew relatively little about Sufism before reading this book" (Anjali 2010, n.p.). Some indicate how *The Forty Rules of Love* has prompted them to conduct further research: "I am intrigued, and plan to research/read more about Rumi, Shams, and Sufism in the future" (Anjali 2010, n.p.); "It made me want to further explore Sufism and Rumi" (Margie 2010, n.p.). They illustrate how that act of reading Shafak's novel is also an act of learning (Holly 2010, n.p.).

Framed by the teachings of Shams, *The Forty Rules of Love* might lend itself to didactic or pedagogic reading practices. The words of the reviewers quoted above might echo those of Shafak's protagonist, Ella, who supplements her reading of *Sweet Blasphemy* with further research on Rumi and Sufism, not least by means of her communications with the manuscript's author, with whom she eventually falls in love. Shafak's didactic framing of her own novel reflects – and critiques – the trend in the reception of postcolonial and, in particular, Muslim fiction, especially following September 11, 2001. A particular example of how pedagogical reading is incorporated into the marketization of postcolonial fiction is the phenomenon of the book club. Gillian Whitlock (2007, 22) suggests this poses "a powerful location for shaping middle-class taste in the West", envisaging a reader from a similar demographic to that of the reviewers noted above, and to the fictional Ella, intent upon learning more about Islam. Shafak's novel's appeal further results from its packaging as a romance whose female characters, in both 13th-century Anatolia and in the present, walk "along the paths of a romanticized notion of Sufism that appeals to a Western perception of Islamic mysticism" (Yaqin 2018, 131). "*The Forty Rules of Love* Reader's Guide" (2022, n.p.) produced by Penguin Random House contains more than one question on the representation of Muslim women, including "What struggles do women face in the Islamic world of *Sweet Blasphemy*?" This line of questioning, which anticipates and directs the readers' interests, confirms the validity of Shafak's own concerns about being "expected to write [ ... ] unhappy stories of unhappy Muslim women" (2010, n.p.), as well as of Jasmin Zine's (2014) discussion of the marketization of Muslim women's writing as "Pedagog[ies] of Peril" that affirm neo-liberal and neo-imperial perceptions of gender-based oppression.

Nevertheless, there is a question posed as part of this reader's guide that might destabilize narrower perceptions of Shafak's novel:

*The Forty Rules of Love* is about the transformative power of reading, as it is a novel – *Sweet Blasphemy* – that begins to change Ella's life. What is Shafak saying about the personal and imaginative potential of fiction? Have you had similarly transformative experiences from reading novels? ("*The Forty Rules of Love* Reader's Guide" 2022, n.p.)



I would argue that this question is still framed around pedagogy: transformative reading is underpinned by a learning process that departs from the political and cultural perspectives imposed by the reader upon the novel, and is, instead, rooted in literature's propensity for affective, imaginative, relatable storytelling. Book clubs and paratexts like reader's guides are ostensibly instructive and communicative spaces which can invite both discussion and debate with the potential to be either detrimental or transformative. The book club, as Whitlock conceives it, is a western neo-liberal invention, but, if we look beyond the "macro" capitalist and orientalist marketplace, what can the micro story of *The Forty Rules of Love* teach readers? And what kinds of different readings can emerge when an author's readership traverses multiple geographic and linguistic literary marketplaces, as Shafak's does?

In working towards an answer, we might further consider how Shafak's fiction revels in the "utopian politics of hybridity" championed by a global literary marketplace capitalizing on cosmopolitanism (Brouillette [2007] 2011, 60). Mignolo (2000, 722) charts how cosmopolitan thinking evolved via concurrent religious and secular intellectual discourses in line with modernity and coloniality. Cosmopolitanism, then, is not out of place in contemporary neo-imperial discourse: its mandate, that we recognize and learn about difference, risks entrenching hierarchies as the centre gives "benevolent recognition" to the periphery (724). This paradigm plays out in that early exchange between Ella and Michelle in *The Forty Rules of Love*, which presents "good" cosmopolitan literature as "connecting people to distant lands and cultures" (Shafak [2010] 2015, 13). Furlanetto contends that Shafak's cosmopolitanism is caught in this paradigm, in which "a strong imperial(istic) centre is required to foster a multicultural society" (2013, 209). That the particular "moral sensibilities" of cosmopolitanism and humanitarianism might also "promote and justify intervention in other people's sovereign territory" by western military and/or economic powers is also indicative of how cosmopolitanism has been co-opted as part of both neo-imperial and neo-liberal, capitalist agendas (Gilroy 2004, 66).

And yet the "surface-level orientalist strategies and ambiguous understanding of cosmopolitanism" offered up by *The Forty Rules of Love* "are somewhat mitigated by its consistent commitment to the cause of multiculturalism and hybridity" (Furlanetto 2013, 211). For, while cosmopolitanism might supplement colonial paternalism and neo-imperial capital, a hybrid conceptualization fosters new kinds of meaning-making. While Mignolo charts the formation of cosmopolitanism in the context of coloniality – via secular modernity and the Christian civilizing "mission" (2000, 723) – Shafak argues that "cosmopolitanism is not a foreign idea imported to the non-western world in order to advance liberal capitalism and its values" (2014, 20). Shafak's vision of cosmopolitanism finds congruity in the relationship between the spiritual and the secular, but emphasizes that "the idea of being interconnected with fellow human beings is inherent in multiple Eastern cultures and traditions, including Islamic mysticism", as evidenced in the works of Rumi (2014, 20). This narrative of the origins of cosmopolitanism disassembles Mignolo's imperial centre-to-periphery model, instead finding the route of cosmopolitanism's convivial interconnectedness in Sufi tradition. Thus, Shafak circumvents a contemporaneous "armoured cosmopolitanism" which, Paul Gilroy (2004, 66–67) argues, ignores "the ongoing effects of colonial and imperial governance". Instead, she takes her vision of cosmopolitanism from an entirely different historical strait, grounded in

eastern tradition, not western capital. The global literary marketplace might capitalize on Shafak's cosmopolitanism, but hers is not the cosmopolitanism that the western neo-liberal consumer expects.

Following this, it might be argued that what *The Forty Rules of Love* teaches readers does not, as the book's popularity in Turkey indicates, follow the route of a didactic, paternalist "macro" account of the Muslim world, packaged for the west. Instead, Shafak sets out to establish through her fiction a possible methodology for reading, and the transformative potential of the "micro" story, based not on broader political issues and preconceptions, but rather on the intimate and personal contexts of interconnectedness and conviviality. As I have established, this distinction between the "macro" and "micro" can be modelled using Toth's analysis of the relationship between "a *politics of reading*", contingent on the reader's situational awareness of their relationship with the text and its paratexts, and "an *ethics of reading*", which aspires towards a state of "self-abandonment" (2021, 648; emphasis in original). The "imaginative generosity" the latter reading requires, Toth argues, "empowers that which is not of the self or the self's sociocultural and linguistic horizon", although a sense of this self "will never disappear totally" (648–649). An ethics of reading, then, is enabled by close reading, not in the analytical sense, but in the sense of the reader's immediacy with, and affective responsiveness to, the text. In *The Forty Rules of Love*, Shams offers the character of Kimya advice on her approach to reading the Qur'an using the analogy of the river as an allusion to close reading:

When you look [ ... ] from a distance, Kimya, you might think there is only one watercourse. But if you dive into the water, you'll realize there is more than one river. The river conceals various currents, all of them flowing in harmony and yet completely separate. (Shafak [2010] 2015, 197)

This indicates the multiple readings that might flow through a particular narrative or story. It takes diving into the water – or immersing oneself in the text, in a moment of "self-abandonment" – to comprehend these currents (Toth 2021, 648). Shams instructs Kimya that the fourth and deepest level of reading is "unspeakable [ ... ] after which language fails us" and you "step into the zone of love" (Shafak [2010] 2015, 220). His account of reading is about *feeling*, and Shams's teachings resonate with Shafak's own characterization of imaginative literature as "not necessarily about writing who we are or what we know or what our identity is about", but rather a means to "teach young people and ourselves to expand our hearts and write what we can feel" (2010, n.p.). In both her fiction and public commentary, Shafak makes a case for a practice of writing and reading centred not on politics, but on the capacity of (micro) stories to affect readers.

That the guidance Shams offers arises in response to reading Qur'anic verse is not insignificant, especially given the attention paid to Sufism throughout *The Forty Rules of Love*. Earlier in the manuscript of *Sweet Blasphemy*, Shams advises: "Don't judge the way other people connect to God [ ... ]. He does not take us at our word. He looks into our hearts" (Shafak [2010] 2015, 50–51). His account of spirituality – offered in place of religious dogma – is akin to that of the fourth level of reading, valuing feeling over words or language. Where language might become mired by macro issues, saddled with identity politics, orientalised, or censored, meaning, whether spiritual or otherwise, evoked by the reader's "proximity, reciprocity, and potential connectedness" to more intimate, relational micro stories, might escape such restrictions (Toth 2021, 645). That Shafak aligns

the path of spiritual discovery with the act of close reading is perhaps the reason for *The Forty Rules of Love*'s popular reception amongst its differential readerships. Capitalizing on the expectations of both religious and secular marketplaces, Shafak's narrative in search of conviviality – under the guise of love – ultimately subverts, or even supersedes, such political and cultural affiliations.

### **“The Malady of Certainty” in *Three Daughters of Eve***

*Three Daughters of Eve* begins in Istanbul in 2016, where Peri, the novel's protagonist, attends a dinner party. Throughout the evening, she recalls her youth, growing up in Istanbul in the 1980s, and attending Oxford University at the turn of millennium. In each temporal and geographical setting, the novel's cast of characters seems to inhabit distinct binary or polarizing positions. In 1980s Istanbul, Peri's father, a fervent Kemalist, and her deeply spiritual mother are consistently at odds, analogizing the rigid convictions held by secular and religious followers in Turkey (Shafak 2003, 78). Meanwhile, in Oxford, as Peri and her friends Shirin and Mona attend seminars on the subject of God, they find themselves cast in the roles of “the Sinner, the Believer and the Confused” (Shafak [2016] 2017, 308). Finally, the dinner party set in 2016 features a host of nameless guests, who in their political discussions are identified variously as the architect, the Islamist newspaper tycoon, the PR (public relations) woman, the businesswoman, and so on.

In response to the novel's binaries and caricatures, Merve Pehlivan (2017, n.p.) writes that “what evokes orientalist discourse is the lack of subtlety, the mass assumptions about and contrived polarity among characters”. In a similar vein, Molly Guinness's (2017, n.p.) review suggests that the constant “intellectual sparring” and “thematic baggage” in *Three Daughters of Eve* seems to contradict Shafak's complaint in her TED talk that “critics expect her to be a representative of her own culture and only write about Muslim women” (2010, n.p.). Nevertheless, Guinness muses, “perhaps she just wanted to shut us all up” (2017, n.p.). Here again the concept of strategic exoticism and the contract between “the author and the *actual* reader” are useful (Brouillette [2007] 2011, 43; emphasis in original). Putting faith in the reader, Shafak writes for one who is hopefully “likely [to] share assumptions about the way culture operates, and concur, in their desire to exempt themselves from certain undesirable practices” (Brouillette [2007] 2011, 43). Shafak's public commentary demonstrates her awareness of the ideological expectations of the marketplace. Perhaps, as Guinness suggests, she writes in response to these or, as Brouillette puts it, to ask the reader to look beyond them. Consequently, this article proposes that the binarism and polarity presented in *Three Daughters of Eve* actually allow Shafak to present a defence of uncertainty.

At Oxford, Peri, “the Confused”, attends the seminars of Professor Azur, in search of the meaning of God (Shafak [2016] 2017, 308). Yet Azur is critical of how “we often try to reduce our understanding of God to a single answer”, lecturing, instead, on the necessity of “find[ing] new narratives, always plural” (246). To counterpose a single answer with multiple narratives is evocative of close reading, as defined in *The Forty Rules of Love*: to finding “various currents, all of them flowing in harmony and yet completely separate from one another” (Shafak [2010] 2015, 197). As Azur condemns “The Malady of Certainty”, such binaries as those presented throughout *Three Daughters of Eve* come into question (Shafak [2016] 2017, 247). In her TED talk, Shafak argues: “I think binary

oppositions are everywhere. So slowly and systematically, we are being denied the right to be complex” (2017b, n.p.). This right to complexity – which is, perhaps, also a right to uncertainty – sits at the centre of *Three Daughters of Eve*. By juxtaposing such binaries as those that exist between Peri’s secular father and religious mother, or amongst the caricatured dinner guests, *Three Daughters of Eve* not only criticizes their rigidity, but also reveals their untenability.

There is a synergy between Shafak’s creative and polemic works. This is directly shown in her TED talk in which she argues that “even in academia, where our intellect is supposed to be nourished, you see one atheist scholar competing with a firmly theist scholar, but it’s not a real intellectual exchange, because it’s a clash between two certainties” (Shafak 2017b, n.p.). This scenario is conjured in *Three Daughters of Eve*, which features a public panel entitled “The God Debate” (Shafak [2016] 2017, 172). In attendance are both a theist and an atheist professor, but also a panellist is Professor Azur, who voices Shafak’s views that “neither theists nor atheists are ready to abandon the Certainty of Hegemony” (178). Azur concludes, instead, that “I, as a simple human being, need both faith and doubt” (180). Faith, from the perspective of the theist, is predicated on absolute certainty but, when uncoupled from religious dogma, or secular fundamentalism, it becomes a matter of uncertainty. Where Shafak charges readers to find “new narratives” (246) and “various currents” ([2010] 2015, 197), she asks them to have faith in uncertainty and take a pathway that lies beyond what they “know”, outside well-trodden hegemonic neo-liberal or fundamentalist routes.

However, as Brouillette warns, within the global literary marketplace, “self-constructing gestures are challenged by the same circumstances that encourage their emergence” ([2007] 2011, 5). Even as Shafak sets out to critique dogmatic constructions of faith in *Three Daughters of Eve*, its critical reception remains, at least in part, determined by its marketization, peritexts, and preconceptions as to its readership. While *The Forty Rules of Love* and *Three Daughters of Eve* might offer up their unique narratives – and while the Sufi teachings of Aziz and his characterization of Shams are distinct from Azur’s conception of faith – reader reviews frequently read the latter novel as a successor of the former. Reviews posted to Goodreads reveal that some find *Three Daughters of Eve* inferior to Shafak’s earlier novel: “this novel does not compare to the forty rules of love as simple as that” (Neveen 2016, n.p.); “it is an unsuccessful attempt at trying to match the greatness of Forty Rules of Love!” (Rima 2016, n.p.). If *Three Daughters of Eve* fails to meet the expectations of its readers, what might this tell us about its reception in the global literary marketplace? Natasha Walter’s (2017, n.p.) *Guardian* review reads: “These heartfelt theological discussions seem to be continuing debates that began in earlier books such as *The Forty Rules of Love*”, so marking *Three Daughters of Eve* as a successor, in taking up the mantle of theological discussion. But whereas *The Forty Rules of Love* centres on spirituality, the questions of religiosity that are interrogated in its apparent follow-up put readers on a different path.

While the popularity of *The Forty Rules of Love* might, in part, be due to its accessible introduction to Sufism, Shafak’s meditations on faith in *Three Daughters of Eve* are much less comfortably packaged. The basis of her earlier novel, presented in the context of the “Rumi phenomenon” in the US, and grounded in Islamic medieval history and culture, is at a far remove from the polarizing and confusing rumination on the subject of faith delivered in *Three Daughters of Eve*. Even when readers find clarity in Shafak’s account of

faith, their reviews focus more on theology and religiosity than spirituality: “it reflects on issues touching [on] Islam and Muslim women [ ... ] in particular[,] which I associate myself with as a Muslim woman” (Neveen 2016, n.p.); “It has helped me understand a lot of things about God” (Tehniat 2017, n.p.). That Neveen’s review finds value in the novel’s rumination on religious culture and theology, and yet also finds it incomparable to *The Forty Rules of Love*, is perhaps a sign that these two novels do, in fact, tell very different kinds of stories, and that spirituality and religion are not one and the same. Readers who approach *Three Daughters of Eve* with the same expectations as for *The Forty Rules of Love*, of finding spirituality and its self-affirming qualities, will be left unsatisfied.

*Three Daughters of Eve* offers up no numbered and orderly rules, climactic and sorrowful romantic relationship, or aspirational conclusion, as in *The Forty Rules of Love*, where Ella chooses to “see what my heart says” (Shafak [2010] 2015, 349). It provides very little by way of conclusion, a point of contention for some reviewers: “It amounts to nothingness; a mere collection of scattered thoughts that were left as such!” (Rima 2016, n.p.). And yet we might argue that this lack of closure is precisely the point. As the novel draws to an end, the dinner party, hosted by caricatures in the midst of a polarizing political debate which touches on systems of power and oppression, is disrupted by the entry of two gunmen whose motivations are left undisclosed. In the face of rigidity – of binary perspectives and static debates unmoved by the conviction of certainty – we might suggest that entropy is inevitable.

But while the gunmen disrupt the previously uncompromising scene of debate among the party guests, Peri hides upstairs in a wardrobe and calls Azur. Their conversation is a resolution of sorts. While the macro political and religious debates circulating downstairs are found to be untenable, the micro story – the one that charts a deeply personal and affecting relationship between Peri in Istanbul and Azur in Oxford – finds, if not closure, a shared understanding of the risks posed when faith, both religious and secular, becomes all-encompassing. “There’s something about love that resembles faith”, Peri tells Azur:

The magic of connecting with a being beyond our limited, familiar selves. But if we get carried away by love – or by faith – it turns into a dogma [ ... ]. We suffer in the hands of the gods that we ourselves created. (Shafak [2016] 2017, 364)

This vision of faith is tantamount to adoration without question – to the younger Peri’s damaging infatuation with Azur, which loses touch with reality – and in keeping with fundamentalist religious or populist beliefs, which polarize and divide communities. There is, as Peri argues, magic to be found in the connection with “being beyond our limited, familiar selves”, a hallmark of Shafak’s aspirational cosmopolitanism, which is affiliative and communicative (Shafak [2016] 2017, 364). It is when that being, text, feeling, or ideal becomes so all-encompassing as to be beyond reproach that it becomes dangerous.

*Three Daughters of Eve* makes a case for the right to complexity and uncertainty, and argues that hegemony, whether on political, religious, or secular grounds, is unsustainable. This is a difficult case to make in a literary marketplace that depends on these very same structures. Trading in binaries and caricatures that unsettle both religious and secular populism, the novel offers no clear path to spiritual discovery or satisfying love story. Instead, Peri renounces the grand narratives used to build up people, politicians,

and ideals into gods, and, as the novel closes, walks into the unknown: “In a few minutes, no more, everything was going to change – a new beginning or an end too soon [ ... ] she opened the door of the wardrobe and stepped out” (Shafak [2016] 2017, 365).

## Producing “Storyland”

Shafak writes not in line with, but rather in spite of, the ideological and economic machinations that underpin the global literary marketplace. While her fiction is a cultural product that circulates within this expansive market, is framed by neo-imperial and populist political ideologues, and is received by secular and religious readerships both in English and Turkish, its author, Shafak, positions herself as a counter to prescriptive and dogmatic readings. Putting faith in her reader, or rather, perhaps, in the intimate and imaginative processes and potentialities of reading, Shafak foregrounds her fiction as story over product.

For Peri, in *Three Daughters of Eve*, reading offers a place of solace: “She preferred being in Storyland to being in her motherland” (Shafak [2016] 2017, 70). For Shafak, in both her fiction and her political and cultural discourse, “Storyland” exists as an aspiring “home-land” for both writers and readers (2017b, n.p.). Amidst transcontinental markets and metropolises, “Storyland” represents a meeting place of sorts, a space where the capacity of storytelling to connect a diverse community of writers and readers can be celebrated. Shafak makes a case for reading the micro, fostering connections both locally and further afield, despite the macro issues that circulate as part of literary marketplaces, buttressed by economic and ideological capital. For Shafak, reading is a cosmopolitan act which is affiliative and affective. By this account, the story is no longer seen as a singular product of capital consumption, but as productive, with creative and imaginative potential. As Shafak’s fiction is produced within differentiated literary marketplaces, and received by readers from all manner of backgrounds, she, herself, produces “Storyland”, a place of likely and unlikely meetings, with the capacity to foster conviviality.

## Notes

1. The Turkish translation sold half a million copies in just eight months (Strauss 2010).
2. Speaking of responses to Khaled Hosseini’s (2003) *The Kite Runner* posted on Amazon, Timothy Aubry (2009, 25–26) describes the site as “a remarkable source” which might “produce a better understanding of the desires, values, and expectations that shape the reception of ‘foreign’ fiction among Americans”. Goodreads, which shows reviews posted from across regions, is a similarly useful source. My sample includes the first 300 ratings in order to consider timely responses to the novel. However, I am only able to read those in English.

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