

Spirituality, Memory, and Identity in The Forty Rules of Love

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Abstract

“We are born with a soul that longs for the truth, and yet, we are constantly distracted by the world and its illusions. The heart is a thousand-stringed instrument that can only be tuned with love. Memory is the bridge between what we were and what we have become, and through love and forgiveness, we can free ourselves from the past. The search for who we are is not a journey of the body, but of the soul, and once we realize that the essence of our being is love, we will see that we are not bound by any identity, but are part of a greater, divine whole.”

-Shams of Tabriz

Elif Shafak's "The Forty Rules of Love" is an enthralling tale that intertwines the themes of memory, identity, and spiritual enlightenment. The novel employs a dual narrative structure to delve into the transformative power of love, which acts not only as an emotional and intellectual force but also as a spiritual catalyst that redefines an individual's sense of self. By contrasting Ella Rubinstein's contemporary journey with the 13th-century saga of poet Rumi and his

mentor Shams of Tabriz, Shafak invites readers to examine the interplay between personal and shared memories, as well as love's influence on reshaping identity. This essay explores the nexus of love, memory, and identity in "The Forty Rules of Love," arguing that spiritual enlightenment alters individuals' self-perception and their understanding of history.

Keywords: Elif Shafak, Memory, Identity, Spirituality, Transformation.

Introduction

Memory and identity are crucial elements that shape an individual's sense of self. These constructs are dynamic, often mutable, and subject to reinterpretation through personal experiences, cultural contexts, and spiritual revelations. Elif Shafak's "The Forty Rules of Love" narrates a profound change in memory and identity triggered by spiritual awakening and the transformative power of love. The book employs a dual narrative structure, intertwining the lives of two main characters—Ella Rubinstein, a contemporary Jewish woman, and Jalal ad-Din Rumi, the celebrated 13th-century Sufi mystic. Through these concurrent narratives, Shafak explores how love, in its human and divine forms, can act as a catalyst for transformation, redefining memory, identity, and the core of one's being.

This paper will explore the complex interplay between memory, identity, and spiritual awakening in *The Forty Rules of Love*, arguing that the novel illustrates how the act of spiritual awakening challenges and reshapes the perception of the self, creating an evolving, dynamic sense of identity. The analysis will focus on Ella Rubinstein's

transformation as she embarks on a spiritual journey through the teachings of Rumi and Shams of Tabriz, as well as the historical and spiritual journey of Rumi himself, whose encounter with Shams catalyzes his awakening.

This article explores the complex relationship between memory, identity, and spiritual awakening in "The Forty Rules of Love," positing that the novel illustrates how spiritual enlightenment can challenge and transform self-perception, leading to a dynamic and evolving identity. The focus will be on Ella Rubinstein's transformation as she embarks on a spiritual journey through the teachings of Rumi and Shams of Tabriz, paralleled by Rumi's own historical and spiritual odyssey initiated by his meeting with Shams.

Memory and Identity: A Framework for Transformation

In "The Forty Rules of Love," memory transcends simple recollection of past events. It is a dynamic entity, constantly in flux. This is evident in Ella Rubinstein, whose conception of memory shifts as she progresses on her spiritual quest. Initially, Ella's memories are concrete, tied to her traditional self-image as a wife, mother, and literary agency worker. These memories are static, detached from her present self. However, her exposure to Rumi's teachings through Shams of Tabriz challenges this fixed view of memory.

Ella's spiritual passage demonstrates that memory is not merely passive recollection but an active process of re-interpretation. Engaging with "The Forty Rules of Love," she starts to perceive her memories as elements of an expansive, fluid narrative. Her former view of herself, confined by societal norms, is redefined through the prisms of love and spirituality. Memory thus becomes not only a mirror of the past but also a mechanism for personal renewal and growth. Ella's metamorphosis from a conventional figure to one embracing the spiritual and

transcendent facets of love shows how re-envisioning memory can facilitate the reconstruction of identity.

Shafak delves into how spiritual awakening reshapes memory and identity in the parallel stories of Rumi and Shams. The pivotal moment in Rumi's life is his encounter with Shams of Tabriz, which profoundly changes his spiritual direction and self-perception. Shams, a wandering dervish, imparts to Rumi the essence of divine love, challenging his conventional beliefs about religion, love, and self. This transformation is intellectual, emotional, and spiritual. Rumi discovers through Shams that love goes beyond the self, and that remembrance is deeply tied to the experience of love and spiritual bond.

Rumi's transformation is an act of remembrance—not the recalling of past events, but an awakening to a profound spiritual truth. His enlightenment with Shams is a revelation of a more eternal and universal form of love. The central theme of the novel is the transformation of Rumi's memory, or his capacity to reinterpret his past and understand himself anew. Rumi's journey of awakening, similar to Ella's reevaluation of her memories through the lens of spiritual love, shows that memory is a mutable process, alterable by spiritual insight. Both characters come to realize that the past can be reenvisioned and grasped freshly, leading to personal development and spiritual awakening. Their stories illustrate the influence of memory in shaping one's self-concept and reality.

The Interplay of Personal and Collective Memory

The intertwined narrative of "The Forty Rules of Love" highlights the interplay between personal and collective memory. Ella's transformation is deeply connected to the shared memories of Rumi and Shams, whose spiritual lessons transcend time and place. Engaging

with Rumi's wisdom, Ella discovers that her identity is bound to the broader spiritual and historical forces that define human existence. Her evolution, sparked by the remembrance of Rumi and his bond with Shams, allows her to break free from her history and embrace a broader, more universal understanding of spirituality and love.

This connection suggests that individual identities are shaped not in solitude but against a backdrop of broader cultural, spiritual, and historical contexts. Ella's enlightenment stems from her quest and the enduring spiritual legacy of Rumi's insights. Thus, the novel suggests a seamless bond between personal and collective memory, with individual identity continually molded by the larger spiritual and cultural stories it is part of.

Love as the Catalyst for Spiritual Transformation

The transformative power of love is at the heart of "The Forty Rules of Love." The narratives of Rumi and Ella highlight love's capacity, be it human or divine, to alter one's identity, memory, and self-awareness. Rumi's lessons conveyed through Shams, promote a love that surpasses the ego, leading to self-dissolution and a deeper divine connection. This love extends beyond mere emotion; it is a spiritual enlightenment that reshapes an individual's understanding of reality, memory, and self.

In their spiritual odyssey, Rumi and Ella discover that love is a formidable force that can dismantle barriers and unlock new horizons and opportunities. The story eloquently illustrates how love can catalyze personal development and transformation, culminating in a deep feeling of unity with the surrounding world.

Ella's metamorphosis is also propelled by her deepening realization of love. Learning about Rumi and Shams, Ella starts to view love as a spiritual force that goes beyond personal ties and emotional feelings. This new insight enables Ella to reframe her memories and

identity, liberating her from her past limitations and adopting a more adaptable and dynamic self-concept. The book reveals that love, in its deepest essence, is the path to spiritual enlightenment and the redefinition of memory and identity.

Conclusion

Elif Shafak's "The Forty Rules of Love" explores themes of memory, identity, and spiritual awakening. The narrative reveals the transformative power of love, both earthly and divine, in reshaping the self and redefining memories, as illustrated by the intertwined tales of Ella Rubinstein and Rumi. The evolution of Ella's spiritual path and Rumi's metamorphosis illustrates that memory is not merely a static archive of the past, but a malleable force that can be reshaped by spiritual insight and love. The book argues that identity is an ever-evolving construct, influenced by personal experiences as well as broader cultural, historical, and spiritual forces.

Shafak's interweaving of contemporary and historical narratives prompts readers to reevaluate the connections between individual and collective experiences, and the influence of love on the reformation of memory and identity. Ultimately, "The Forty Rules of Love" suggests that spiritual enlightenment, with the aid of love, can transform not just individuals but also the collective memory and identity of humankind.

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