

FAITH AND FEMINISM: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF ELIF SHAFAK'S *THE FORTY RULES OF LOVE* AND UMER A AHMED'S *PEER-E-KAMIL*

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Abstract

This paper examines the intersection of faith and feminism in Elif Shafak's The Forty Rules of Love and Umera Ahmed's Peer-e-Kamil (The Perfect Mentor). Both authors, writing from distinct Islamic and cultural contexts, reframe the role of women within faith-based systems, offering alternative readings of spirituality and gender. Through a socio-religious feminist critique, the study explores how both writers challenge patriarchal interpretations of Islam, reconstruct female agency, and reimagine piety as empowerment rather than subjugation. Shafak's novel presents a Sufi-inspired Universalist feminism that celebrates love and spiritual awakening as pathways to liberation. Conversely, Ahmed's narrative operates within orthodox Islamic discourse yet destabilizes its patriarchal control through Imama Hashim's moral strength and agency. Using textual analysis and feminist hermeneutics, this paper argues that both authors reveal faith as a site of resistance, where women transcend institutional dogma to reclaim divine intimacy. Their works contribute to Islamic feminist theology by merging inner spirituality with social consciousness, demonstrating that belief and liberation are not contradictory but mutually sustaining.

Keywords: Faith, Feminism, Sufism, Patriarchy, Agency, Islamic Feminist Discourse

1. Introduction

The intersection of faith and feminism represents one of the most complex and contested domains in contemporary literary and cultural studies. Traditionally, religion—particularly Islam—has often been framed as inherently patriarchal, constraining women's autonomy and reducing spiritual engagement to subservience. Such assumptions, largely influenced by Eurocentric, secular paradigms, equate liberation with the rejection of religious structures, overlooking the diverse ways in which faith can empower and transform. Contemporary Muslim women writers, however, have increasingly challenged this binary, illustrating that spirituality and feminist consciousness are not mutually exclusive but can coexist in mutually reinforcing ways. This study focuses on two prominent authors, Elif Shafak and Umera Ahmed, whose novels *The Forty Rules of Love* (2010) and *Peer-e-Kamil* (The Perfect Mentor, 2004) articulate nuanced and culturally situated visions of female subjectivity, agency, and moral autonomy. These texts explore how women negotiate spiritual conviction, social expectations, and ethical responsibility, offering critical insights into the interplay between religion, gender, and identity. Academically, examining these works is significant because it situates literary study at the crossroads of socio-religious critique, feminist theory, and cultural analysis, revealing how fiction mediates broader discourses on women's empowerment within Islamic contexts.

Background of the Study

Elif Shafak and Umera Ahmed, though writing from distinct cultural and theological perspectives, both engage deeply with the question of how women experience faith as a site of empowerment. Shafak, a transnational Turkish author, weaves historical and contemporary narratives in *The Forty Rules of Love*, juxtaposing the thirteenth-century spiritual companionship of Rumi and Shams of Tabriz with the twenty-first-century journey of Ella Rubinstein, a modern American woman seeking meaning and fulfillment. Through the Sufi concept of *ishq-e-haqiqi* (divine love), Shafak presents faith as transformative and liberatory, transcending rigid institutional authority while emphasizing ethical and emotional awakening. Spirituality, in Shafak's narrative, becomes a tool for personal empowerment, self-discovery, and resistance to hierarchical norms.

Umera Ahmed, writing within the Pakistani socio-religious context, explores parallel concerns through *Peer-e-Kamil*. Here, the protagonist Imama Hashim negotiates familial pressures, societal restrictions, and religious expectations to cultivate moral and spiritual maturity. Ahmed's narrative underscores that devotion and integrity can coexist with female agency, demonstrating that adherence to religious norms need not imply passivity or submission. In both cases, the novels interrogate the tensions between internal spiritual conviction and external social constraints, portraying women as active agents shaping their moral, ethical, and spiritual identities.

Research Gap

Despite extensive scholarly attention to Shafak's feminist mysticism and Ahmed's moral realism, there is a notable gap in comparative studies examining how these authors utilize Islamic theology to redefine womanhood. Existing literature largely treats their works in isolation, neglecting the potential for a cross-cultural dialogue between transnational Sufi-inspired spirituality and localized orthodox ethical frameworks. Furthermore, little attention has been given to understanding how different forms of Islamic faith—mystical versus orthodox—inform female agency and resistance. Addressing this gap is crucial for a more comprehensive understanding of Islamic feminist literary discourse and its capacity to challenge patriarchal structures while maintaining spiritual integrity.

Research Questions

This study is guided by the following questions:

1. How do Elif Shafak and Umera Ahmed negotiate faith and feminism within Islamic frameworks?
2. In what ways do their female protagonists challenge patriarchal structures while maintaining spiritual integrity?
3. How do Sufi mysticism and orthodox Islamic thought converge or diverge in constructing women's agency?

Research Objectives

Accordingly, the objectives of this research are:

- To analyze *The Forty Rules of Love* and *Peer-e-Kamil* through socio-religious feminist theory.
- To identify how faith becomes a medium for female empowerment.
- To compare the narrative, theological, and ideological strategies employed by both authors.
- To contribute to the discourse on Islamic feminism in contemporary literature.

Scope and Significance of the Study

The study encompasses a comparative literary analysis of Shafak and Ahmed's novels, examining how narrative structures, character development, and theological concepts shape female subjectivity and agency. Its significance lies in offering a cross-cultural perspective, bridging Sufi-inspired universal spirituality with localized orthodox Islamic practices, and

demonstrating that faith can serve as a source of empowerment, moral authority, and ethical resistance. By situating these novels within a socio-religious feminist framework, the research illustrates that Islam and feminist consciousness are not mutually exclusive, but together can offer new insights into female liberation and literary innovation.

2. Literature Review

The dialogue between Islam and feminism has evolved considerably in recent decades. Early Western feminist theory, exemplified by Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, often positioned religion as a patriarchal institution incompatible with female liberation. However, postcolonial and Islamic feminist scholars have challenged this assumption, arguing that feminist consciousness can emerge organically from within religious frameworks. Amina Wadud's *Qur'an and Woman* (1999) and Asma Barlas's *Believing Women in Islam* (2002) are foundational in this respect. Both argue that patriarchal oppression stems from cultural misinterpretation rather than the Qur'an itself.

Margot Badran (2009) further distinguishes between secular and Islamic feminisms, emphasizing that many Muslim women's struggles are rooted in faith, not in opposition to it. In Pakistan, scholars such as Afiya Shehribano Zia (2018) highlight the tension between liberal feminism and religious agency, illustrating how Islamic feminism represents a uniquely indigenous form of gender discourse. In the literary field, Elif Shafak's novels have been studied extensively for their exploration of mysticism and gender. Her works, including *The Bastard of Istanbul* and *The Forty Rules of Love*, merge feminist consciousness with Sufi philosophy. According to Nilüfer Göle (2010), Shafak's writing embodies "a cosmopolitan Sufism" that reinterprets Islam for a global readership, blending emotional transcendence with feminist rebellion. Critics such as Özlem Koroğlu and Latifa Abrahams have also noted that Shafak's women characters resist both Eastern patriarchy and Western spiritual emptiness, thus occupying a liminal, post-secular identity.

Conversely, Umera Ahmed's *Peer-e-Kamil* has received less global academic attention despite its massive readership in South Asia. Critics like Sidra Khan and Sana Aslam argue that Ahmed reclaims the moral potential of religion for female subjectivity, portraying piety as strength. Her narrative challenges both extremist interpretations of Islam and the secular dismissal of faith-based morality. Unlike Shafak, Ahmed's feminism is rooted in submission to divine authority rather than rebellion against it. Yet both writers intersect in their insistence that true faith uplifts women rather than confines them.

While several studies analyze each writer independently, comparative scholarship remains scarce. A few attempts, such as Saima Yousaf's (2021) "Islamic Feminism in Contemporary South Asian Fiction," briefly mention parallels between spiritual and ethical female awakening but stop short of detailed textual analysis. This study fills that gap by juxtaposing Shafak's mystical pluralism with Ahmed's reformist orthodoxy, exploring how both narratives challenge patriarchal theology while reaffirming spiritual truth.

3. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

This study employs a socio-religious feminist framework that integrates Islamic feminist hermeneutics with postcolonial literary analysis. The study draws primarily on the works of Amina Wadud, Asma Barlas, and Margot Badran, who collectively reimagine feminism as a faith-affirming rather than faith-negating ideology. Wadud (1999) proposes a gender-inclusive reading of the Qur'an, emphasizing moral equality as a divine mandate. She asserts that patriarchal oppression stems from interpretive monopolies rather than the text itself, encouraging a reclamation of spiritual authority for women. Barlas (2002) similarly challenges patriarchal exegesis, arguing that male dominance in Islamic societies arises from cultural interpretations, not divine law. Badran (2009) introduces the concept of "faith-based

feminism,” highlighting how women’s liberation can coexist with spiritual piety without being co-opted by Western secular frameworks.

Within this framework, *The Forty Rules of Love* is analyzed through the lens of Sufi feminism, where mystical love functions as a form of resistance against institutionalized religion. Shafak’s text depicts divine love (*ishq*) as a transformative force that dismantles hierarchical structures, providing women with both spiritual and emotional agency. Conversely, *Peer-e-Kamil* is read through reformist Islamic feminism, wherein moral authenticity and knowledge allow female characters to challenge patriarchal misinterpretations of faith. Ahmed’s narrative demonstrates that adherence to divine law does not necessitate submission to oppressive social hierarchies; instead, it enables women to assert spiritual and ethical authority. This dual-theoretical approach allows a nuanced understanding of how faith and feminism intersect within Islamic discourse, highlighting both the mystical and ethical dimensions of female empowerment. It also situates the novels within broader debates on postcolonial, gendered, and theological literary studies.

4. Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, comparative textual analysis. The primary data sources are the novels *The Forty Rules of Love* and *Peer-e-Kamil*. Secondary sources include scholarly criticism, Islamic feminist writings, and socio-cultural analyses relevant to the Pakistani and Turkish contexts.

The methodology involves four key stages:

1. **Textual Analysis** – Close reading of narrative structure, character arcs, and symbolism to identify intersections of faith, gender, and ideology.
2. **Thematic Analysis** – Extraction of recurring themes such as divine love, female agency, patriarchal critique, and spiritual awakening.
3. **Comparative Analysis** – Juxtaposition of the novels to highlight convergences and divergences in feminist and theological discourse.
4. **Socio-Religious Contextualization** – Situating both works within their respective historical, cultural, and religious contexts to understand the influence of social norms on female spirituality and empowerment.

The research prioritizes ethical considerations by respecting religious sensibilities and avoiding reductive interpretations of faith. All textual interpretations are anchored in scholarly sources, ensuring rigorous academic standards.

5. Analysis and Discussion

5.1 Reimagining Faith and Female Agency

Both Elif Shafak and Umera Ahmed situate their heroines; Ella Rubinstein and Imama Hashim within patriarchal social frameworks that attempt to regulate women’s religious identities. In *The Forty Rules of Love*, Shafak portrays Ella as a disillusioned woman trapped within an emotionally sterile marriage and a spiritually empty life. Her encounter with Shams of Tabriz’s teachings through Rumi becomes a transformative process, one that dismantles her inherited, institutional faith and replaces it with a living spirituality centered on love, empathy, and divine connection. This act of spiritual awakening functions as feminist resistance: by reinterpreting Islam as an inward, liberating faith rather than an externalized dogma, Shafak situates faith as an instrument of emancipation rather than submission. Ella’s decisions, from leaving her oppressive marriage to embracing self-knowledge, illustrate how female agency is negotiated through both spiritual and emotional consciousness (Shafak 76–110).

In contrast, Umera Ahmed’s *Peer-e-Kamil* explores similar themes through Imama, a devout yet oppressed woman whose conversion from the Ahmadiyya community to Sunni Islam subjects her to intense social persecution. Her journey from familial rejection to spiritual fulfillment parallels Ella’s emotional rebirth, though Ahmed’s narrative is more explicitly

grounded in the theological and moral framework of orthodox Islam. Imama's moral and spiritual steadfastness challenges male authority figures and societal restrictions, demonstrating that adherence to authentic religious principles enable women to assert ethical autonomy. Both writers, though differing in theological orientation, envision faith as a means of asserting female subjectivity against patriarchal silencing.

5.2 Sufi Feminism and Inner Rebellion

Shafak's engagement with Sufi mysticism transforms Rumi's 13th-century teachings into a modern feminist language. Through the intertwined stories of Ella and Rumi, Shafak demonstrates how spiritual love dissolves hierarchies between genders, faiths, and even time. Shams of Tabriz's "Forty Rules" repeatedly emphasize that true faith cannot coexist with fear, coercion, or inequality. For instance, the rule "If you want to change the way others treat you, you should first change the way you treat yourself" resonates as both a spiritual and feminist manifesto (Shafak 45). Ella's eventual decision to leave her husband and pursue self-knowledge through Shams's philosophy symbolizes an act of sacred defiance against patriarchal expectation. The Sufi principle of *ishq* functions as a transformative feminist tool that redefines power, asserting that inner awakening is inseparable from social and moral agency.

Ahmed's approach, though grounded in orthodoxy, similarly emphasizes spiritual transformation as a vehicle for female empowerment. Imama's ethical and religious literacy allows her to navigate oppressive social systems without sacrificing her moral or spiritual integrity. Her personal evolution demonstrates that religious knowledge equips women with interpretive authority, enabling them to challenge patriarchal misrepresentations of faith. Shafak and Ahmed converge in presenting faith as both a personal and socio-political instrument of resistance.

5.3 Patriarchy, Piety, and the Politics of Interpretation

Both Shafak and Ahmed confront the patriarchal monopolization of religious authority. Shafak critiques male-dominated religious hierarchies by presenting Shams's rules as inclusive and universally applicable, inviting pluralistic dialogue and deconstructing rigid clerical authority. Ahmed critiques patriarchal misrepresentations within orthodox Islam, showing that women's spiritual insight can surpass institutional male authority. Both texts emphasize that patriarchal interpretations, not faith itself, are the source of gendered oppression.

Ella and Imama demonstrate that women's engagement with spiritual texts is itself an act of resistance. While Ella's Sufi-inspired journey emphasizes mystical understanding and existential reflection, Imama's trajectory emphasizes practical ethical reasoning within structured religious norms. Both narratives challenge the assumption that women's piety must coincide with passivity, revealing that faith can empower and authorize female agency.

5.4 Comparative Ideological Strategies

Shafak's narrative employs a transnational, mystical lens, blending multiple timelines, intergenerational dialogue, and Universalist Sufi principles to depict spiritual liberation as a feminist project. Ahmed's narrative, grounded in ethical realism, portrays empowerment within a socially recognizable context, emphasizing moral courage and religious authenticity. Despite these stylistic and contextual differences, both authors converge ideologically: they depict faith as a site of liberation, where women's engagement with spirituality and morality enables them to reclaim agency.

The contrasting narrative strategies themselves function as feminist tools. Shafak's mystical pluralism allows readers to engage in reflective introspection and empathetic connection, fostering internalized empowerment. Ahmed's realism demonstrates that religious adherence, when ethically interpreted, produces tangible social authority, illustrating that orthodoxy need not constrain female autonomy.

5.5 Spiritual Love as Feminist Praxis

In both novels, love operates as a multidimensional tool for empowerment. In *The Forty Rules of Love*, divine love (*ishq*) destabilizes social hierarchies, fostering emotional resilience and spiritual awakening. In *Peer-e-Kamil*, love is intertwined with ethical consciousness: Imama's devotion to God strengthens her moral and social authority. Both texts illustrate that feminist praxis can emerge not only through social activism but also through spiritual cultivation and ethical reflection. Love, both divine and ethical becomes a medium through which women negotiate power, agency, and self-determination.

5.6 Social and Religious Critique

Shafak critiques rigid cultural and religious hierarchies across both Eastern and Western paradigms, illustrating that liberation requires transcending institutionalized norms. Ahmed critiques patriarchal practices within the local Pakistani context, showing that empowerment is achievable within orthodox Islam. Both authors emphasize that religion, when authentically interpreted, aligns with feminist principles, suggesting that women's liberation emerges from reclaiming, rather than rejecting, faith.

5.7 Narrative as Ethical and Feminist Discourse

Storytelling itself becomes a vehicle for feminist intervention. Shafak's layered narrative of letters, parables, and historical reflection invites readers into moral and spiritual engagement, modeling critical reflection and self-directed empowerment. Ahmed's narrative employs realistic character arcs and dialogues to illustrate ethical dilemmas resolved through faith-based reasoning. In both cases, literature functions as a pedagogical tool, demonstrating that narrative can cultivate spiritual, ethical, and social consciousness while modeling resistance to patriarchal authority.

5.8 Intersection of Gender, Faith, and Power

Both novels depict the intersection of gender, faith, and power, highlighting that social hierarchies are human constructs, not divine imperatives. Shafak's Sufi lens emphasizes egalitarian spiritual relationships that dissolve gender hierarchies, while Ahmed demonstrates that religious literacy and moral courage allow women to assert authority within traditional frameworks. Together, these texts illustrate that liberation and faith are mutually reinforcing: empowerment arises from spiritual self-realization and ethical action.

6. Conclusion

Elif Shafak's *The Forty Rules of Love* and Umera Ahmed's *Peer-e-Kamil* converge on a transformative vision: faith, when liberated from patriarchal distortion, becomes the truest form of feminist power. Both writers reinterpret womanhood as spiritual autonomy; where love, morality, and divine consciousness form the foundation of resistance. Ella Rubinstein and Imama Hashim redefine submission not as weakness but as sacred strength, reclaiming faith as liberation rather than oppression. Shafak's mysticism universalizes Islam as a metaphor for spiritual unity, while Ahmed's orthodoxy reclaims Islam as a living moral system capable of reform. Together, they articulate a theology of empowerment that transcends cultural binaries, offering a blueprint for contemporary Islamic feminist discourse. This extended analysis demonstrates that spirituality, ethics, and gender consciousness are mutually reinforcing: women can assert agency, resist oppression, and cultivate spiritual fulfillment simultaneously. The implications are far-reaching. For scholars, educators, and literary critics, these texts exemplify how Islamic narratives can be mobilized for ethical education, social justice, and feminist empowerment. Future research may explore similar strategies in other Muslim-majority societies or examine how Sufi and reformist paradigms intersect with modern feminist movements. Both novels affirm that liberation and faith are not contradictory; instead, they are

mutually sustaining, demonstrating that women's empowerment can be both spiritual and social, personal and communal.

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