



Psychoanalytic Insights into the Formation and Expression of Gendered Desire: A Reading of Elif Shafak's *The Forty Rules of Love*"

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Article Info

ISSN (Online): 2582-7138

Impact Factor (RSIF): 7.98

Volume: 06

Issue: 06

November - December 2025

Received: 15-09-2025

Accepted: 17-10-2025

Published: 09-11-2025

Page No: 106-112

Abstract

This article examines the formation and expression of gendered desire through a psychoanalytic lens, focusing on Elif Shafak's *The Forty Rules of Love*. Drawing on Freudian and Lacanian theories, the study investigates how unconscious drives, societal expectations, and cultural norms shape the characters' experiences of love, longing, and selfhood. By analyzing the complex interplay between desire, repression, and gendered subjectivity, the article highlights how Shafak portrays both the constraints and the possibilities of expressing gendered desire in a patriarchal context. Particular attention is given to the ways in which male and female characters navigate their internal conflicts, emotional vulnerabilities, and relational dynamics, revealing the unconscious mechanisms that govern attraction, attachment, and interpersonal power. Through close reading and psychoanalytic interpretation, this study demonstrates that Shafak's narrative not only reflects the psychological intricacies of desire but also challenges traditional notions of gender roles and identity formation. Ultimately, the article offers a critical insight into the intersection of psyche, culture, and gender in contemporary literature, showing how literary texts can serve as a lens to understand the unconscious dimensions of human experience.

Keywords: Gendered Desire, Psychoanalysis, Elif Shafak, *The Forty Rules of Love*, Lacanian Theory, Freudian Theory, Identity Formation

Introduction

Gendered desire is a complex and dynamic phenomenon, operating at the intersection of psychology, culture, and social expectations. It encompasses both conscious experiences of attraction, longing, and emotional fulfillment, as well as unconscious drives, fantasies, and internal conflicts that shape the way individuals experience intimacy and relational dynamics (Freud, 1920/2001; Lacan, 1977/2006) ^[7, 10]. In the field of literary studies, analyzing gendered desire provides an opportunity to examine how narratives articulate the inner lives of characters while reflecting broader societal norms. Psychoanalytic theory offers a framework for understanding these dynamics, emphasizing the influence of unconscious processes such as repression, projection, and sublimation, alongside social conditioning and relational power structures (Mitchell, 2000; Chodorow, 1999) ^[11, 4].

Contemporary literature often engages with gendered desire as both a personal and socio-cultural construct. Texts that incorporate multiple temporal and cultural contexts, such as historical and modern narratives, provide particularly rich material for psychoanalytic interpretation. By exploring how desire is constrained, expressed, and negotiated, scholars can understand not only individual psychology but also the cultural and relational structures that shape human experience. Gendered desire thus becomes a lens through which to investigate identity formation, relational conflict, and the negotiation of power within narrative

frameworks. Elif Shafak's *The Forty Rules of Love* (2009) ^[13] exemplifies this approach. The novel intertwines two parallel storylines: the historical tale of 13th-century Sufi mystic Rumi and his spiritual companion Shams of Tabriz, and the contemporary story of Ella Rubinstein, an American housewife who experiences a profound awakening of desire and self-awareness. This dual narrative provides a unique perspective on gendered desire, demonstrating how internal psychological struggles intersect with societal, cultural, and spiritual norms across time. The historical narrative foregrounds themes of devotion, spiritual love, and transformative interpersonal relationships, while the contemporary narrative addresses the challenges faced by modern women navigating marital dissatisfaction, social constraints, and personal longing. Shafak's portrayal of desire emphasizes both its transformative potential and its limitations under social and cultural pressures, highlighting the intricate balance between individual agency and relational or societal expectation (Al-Mousawi, 2017; Kaya, 2019) ^[2, 9].

Research Gap

Although Shafak's novels have been widely studied for their engagement with multicultural identity, spirituality, and narrative style, the psychoanalytic dimensions of gendered desire remain underexplored. Prior research has often focused on the philosophical or mystical aspects of her work, neglecting the psychological mechanisms that underpin characters' experiences of longing, attachment, and relational tension (Kaya, 2019; Akyol, 2018) ^[9, 1]. Few studies have examined how Shafak's dual narrative structure juxtaposes historical and contemporary perspectives to reveal the interplay between unconscious drives, repression, and societal expectations in shaping gendered subjectivity. Moreover, existing scholarship tends to focus either on female characters or on the historical narrative, without integrating the full spectrum of gendered experiences across both storylines. This study seeks to address these gaps by providing a comprehensive psychoanalytic analysis of gendered desire in *The Forty Rules of Love*, considering the experiences of both male and female characters and the ways in which culture, social norms, and unconscious processes interact to shape desire.

Research Objectives and Questions

The objectives of this study are threefold:

1. To analyze how gendered desire manifests in the experiences of both male and female characters in *The Forty Rules of Love*.
2. To examine the influence of unconscious drives, repression, and societal expectations on gendered subjectivity.
3. To investigate how Shafak's narrative challenges traditional gender roles and presents alternative constructions of desire and identity.

The central research questions guiding this study are:

1. How does Shafak depict gendered desire through the psychological and emotional landscapes of her characters?
2. In what ways do unconscious drives and social norms interact to shape gendered subjectivity?
3. How does the novel subvert conventional gender roles, and what alternative forms of desire and identity does it propose?

Scope and Significance of the Study

The study focuses on a psychoanalytic reading of *The Forty Rules of Love*, with particular emphasis on gendered desire in both historical and contemporary narratives. The scope includes detailed textual analysis, applying Freudian and Lacanian concepts to explore unconscious processes, emotional conflict, and societal constraints. Ethical considerations are inherently maintained through careful textual interpretation, ensuring the integrity of the narrative while exploring underlying psychological mechanisms.

The significance of this study lies in its interdisciplinary approach, bridging literary criticism, psychoanalytic theory, and gender studies. By examining gendered desire in Shafak's novel, the study contributes to an understanding of how literature reflects and critiques societal norms while illuminating unconscious dimensions of identity and relational experience. The study also addresses a gap in existing scholarship by foregrounding the psychoanalytic aspects of gendered desire, particularly in the context of dual narrative structures and cross-cultural settings.

Furthermore, this research underscores the relevance of literature as a site for exploring the intersections of psyche, culture, and gender. By situating desire within both personal and social frameworks, the study offers insights not only for literary scholars but also for psychologists, gender theorists, and cultural critics. The findings may inform broader discussions on the construction of gendered subjectivity, relational dynamics, and the role of narrative in shaping and reflecting unconscious human experience (Butler, 1990; Moi, 2002) ^[3, 12].

Ultimately, this study demonstrates that integrating psychoanalytic theory with literary analysis provides a robust framework for examining gendered desire. Shafak's narrative reveals both the constraints imposed by societal and cultural expectations and the transformative possibilities of self-awareness and relational exploration. By highlighting the psychological, social, and cultural dimensions of desire, this research contributes to interdisciplinary scholarship and offers a model for examining similar themes in contemporary literature.

Literature Review

Psychoanalytic Perspectives on Desire

Psychoanalytic theory has long provided a framework for understanding the unconscious processes that shape human desire, including the gendered dimensions of attraction, attachment, and relational dynamics. Sigmund Freud (1920/2001) emphasized the role of unconscious drives, repression, and early familial relationships in forming desire. According to Freud, gendered desire is not merely a social or cultural construct but emerges from the interplay of innate instincts, unconscious conflicts, and internalized societal norms. The Oedipal complex, in particular, illustrates how early familial experiences influence patterns of desire and relational dynamics, often producing tension between individual longing and social expectation. Freud's theories, while historically criticized for their gender biases, provide foundational tools for examining how repression, sublimation, and identification shape gendered subjectivity (Mitchell, 2000) ^[11].

Jacques Lacan (1977/2006) ^[10] expanded Freudian theory by emphasizing the symbolic and linguistic mediation of desire. Lacan's conceptualization of desire as inherently "other-directed" suggests that individuals' longing is structured by

social, cultural, and linguistic systems, rather than simply by instinctual drives. The “mirror stage” highlights the formation of selfhood and gendered identity, showing how individuals internalize images of themselves in relation to the gaze of others, producing tensions between conscious and unconscious subjectivity. Within this framework, gendered desire is always relational and socially mediated, influenced by norms, ideals, and cultural expectations. Contemporary psychoanalytic scholars have used these theories to examine gendered identity, relational power, and the negotiation of desire in literary texts (Chodorow, 1999; Frosh, 2010) ^[4, 6].

Gendered Desire and Literature

The study of gendered desire in literature examines how narratives represent the interplay of internal psychological processes and external social norms. Literature allows for a nuanced exploration of both conscious and unconscious aspects of desire, revealing how characters navigate conflict, longing, and relational dynamics. Feminist psychoanalytic critics argue that literary texts often reflect, reproduce, or subvert patriarchal structures by depicting gendered patterns of attraction, repression, and emotional labor (Moi, 2002; Showalter, 1985) ^[12, 14]. For instance, representations of female desire frequently reveal tensions between societal expectations of chastity, domesticity, and relational submission, and the individual's pursuit of emotional or sexual fulfillment. Male desire, conversely, may be portrayed through struggles with emotional repression, power, and agency. By analyzing these depictions, scholars can uncover the mechanisms by which literature both enforces and challenges gender norms (Gilbert & Gubar, 1979) ^[8].

Recent studies have also highlighted the relevance of psychoanalytic approaches in cross-cultural literary contexts. Authors from non-Western societies often grapple with social and religious norms that constrain expressions of gendered desire. Literature thus becomes a site for negotiating identity, cultural expectation, and unconscious longing, revealing both universal and context-specific dynamics of desire (Al-Mousawi, 2017) ^[2]. Such studies underscore the importance of integrating psychoanalytic theory with gender studies to capture the complexity of desire as both psychological and socio-cultural phenomenon.

Psychoanalytic Approaches to Gendered Desire in Contemporary Literature

Psychoanalytic literary criticism provides a methodology for analyzing how desire, repression, and identity formation operate within narratives. Chodorow (1999) ^[4] emphasizes that gendered identity and desire are shaped by relational experiences and the internalization of societal roles, which can be traced through character behavior, emotional conflict, and interpersonal dynamics. Literary scholars have applied these insights to both Western and non-Western texts, demonstrating how desire is mediated by culture, religion, and historical context (Showalter, 1985; Frosh, 2010) ^[14, 6].

Studies of contemporary novels, especially those that incorporate dual or parallel narratives, have shown that characters' experiences of desire often reflect tensions between historical ideals and modern self-expression. For instance, novels depicting women negotiating personal autonomy and desire in patriarchal societies highlight the unconscious conflicts between societal expectation and personal longing. Similarly, male characters may confront the unconscious constraints of masculinity, revealing the

psychological cost of conforming to rigid gender norms (Gilbert & Gubar, 1979; Moi, 2002) ^[8, 12].

Elif Shafak's Engagement with Gender and Desire

Elif Shafak's novels have received increasing scholarly attention for their exploration of identity, culture, and spirituality, though research on gendered desire remains limited. Shafak often foregrounds female agency, emotional autonomy, and relational complexity within the constraints of patriarchal or traditional social systems (Kaya, 2019; Akyol, 2018) ^[9, 1]. In *The Forty Rules of Love*, Shafak juxtaposes historical Sufi philosophy with contemporary narratives of female desire, creating opportunities for psychoanalytic interpretation. The novel's dual narrative highlights both the internal and relational dynamics of desire, showing how characters navigate repression, societal norms, and emotional vulnerability (Al-Mousawi, 2017) ^[2].

Scholars have noted that Shafak's portrayal of female protagonists, such as Ella Rubinstein, emphasizes both the constraints imposed by marriage and social expectation and the transformative potential of self-awareness and relational exploration (Kaya, 2019) ^[9]. The male characters, including Rumi and Shams, similarly negotiate emotional and spiritual longing within social and religious frameworks, revealing unconscious drives, attachment patterns, and relational tension. However, most studies focus on spirituality, multicultural identity, or historical context, leaving a gap in psychoanalytic analysis of desire.

Research Gap and Justification

Although several studies have examined Shafak's engagement with spirituality, mysticism, and cultural identity, few have explored the psychoanalytic dimensions of gendered desire. The dual narrative structure of *The Forty Rules of Love* provides a particularly compelling framework for such analysis, as it juxtaposes historical and contemporary experiences of desire and gendered subjectivity. There is a need for research that integrates psychoanalytic theory, gender studies, and literary criticism to examine the unconscious, relational, and cultural dimensions of desire within Shafak's text. Such analysis can illuminate how desire is socially mediated, psychologically complex, and culturally contextualized, addressing a significant gap in existing scholarship.

By examining both male and female characters across historical and contemporary narratives, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how gendered desire operates in literary texts. It also demonstrates the value of interdisciplinary approaches, showing how psychoanalysis and gender studies can complement literary analysis to reveal the unconscious, relational, and cultural mechanisms underlying human desire (Butler, 1990; Chodorow, 1999) ^[3-4].

Theoretical / Conceptual Framework

Freudian Psychoanalysis and Gendered Desire

Freudian psychoanalytic theory provides a foundational framework for examining the unconscious processes that shape human desire, including its gendered dimensions. Freud (1920/2001) ^[7] posited that desire is structured by unconscious drives, particularly the life instinct (Eros) and the death instinct (Thanatos), which govern both relational and self-directed behaviors. Central to his analysis of gendered desire is the concept of repression, wherein socially

unacceptable impulses, fantasies, or emotions are pushed into the unconscious, shaping both internal conflict and external behavior. Freud's theory also emphasizes the role of early childhood experiences, particularly familial dynamics, in forming patterns of attachment, identification, and relational desire. The Oedipal complex, for example, illustrates how the child's unconscious desires and identifications with the same- and opposite-sex parent shape the development of gendered subjectivity (Mitchell, 2000) ^[11].

In the context of literature, Freudian psychoanalysis allows scholars to examine how characters' desires, fears, and conflicts reflect unconscious motivations and cultural conditioning. Applying Freud to *The Forty Rules of Love*, the repressed desires of both male and female characters can be understood as shaped by social norms, religious expectations, and relational constraints. For instance, Ella Rubinstein's initial suppression of personal and sexual desire reflects both marital and societal pressures, highlighting the tension between individual longing and external restriction. Similarly, historical characters such as Shams and Rumi navigate complex social and spiritual constraints that regulate the expression of desire, suggesting the interplay of repression, sublimation, and conscious action. Freud's framework, therefore, provides a tool for understanding both psychological and sociocultural determinants of gendered desire, revealing the mechanisms through which societal norms are internalized and enacted within personal relationships.

Lacanian Psychoanalysis and the Symbolic Mediation of Desire

While Freud emphasized the biological and familial origins of desire, Jacques Lacan (1977/2006) ^[10] foregrounded the symbolic and social mediation of human longing. Lacan conceptualized desire as inherently relational, structured through the "Other" and articulated via language, culture, and social norms. In his model, the subject emerges through the "mirror stage," wherein the individual forms an image of the self in relation to others, creating an ongoing tension between internal identity and external recognition. Desire, in Lacanian terms, is never fully attainable because it is oriented toward another, making the fulfillment of longing always provisional and mediated by social and symbolic systems.

Applying Lacan to Shafak's narrative highlights how both historical and contemporary characters experience desire as socially and symbolically mediated. For example, Ella's longing for personal and emotional fulfillment is not simply an internal impulse but is shaped by cultural ideals of femininity, marital duty, and relational propriety. Similarly, Shams's and Rumi's spiritual and relational desires are mediated through the symbolic frameworks of Sufi thought, religious authority, and historical social norms. Lacan's concepts of the imaginary, symbolic, and real thus provide a lens for understanding how desire is constituted, constrained, and articulated within social and cultural contexts (Frosh, 2010) ^[6].

Integrating Freudian and Lacanian Theory

By integrating Freudian and Lacanian approaches, this study provides a comprehensive framework for analyzing gendered desire in *The Forty Rules of Love*. Freud allows for the examination of unconscious drives, repression, and the psychological formation of gendered subjectivity, focusing on internalized conflicts and relational patterns. Lacan

complements this by highlighting the symbolic and cultural dimensions of desire, emphasizing how language, social norms, and relational positioning shape the articulation and experience of longing. Together, these theories enable a dual-layered analysis: one that explores both the psychological mechanisms within the individual and the sociocultural forces that structure desire.

This combined framework is particularly apt for Shafak's dual narrative, which juxtaposes historical and contemporary contexts. The Freudian lens illuminates the characters' internal conflicts, repressed desires, and attachment patterns, while the Lacanian perspective situates these experiences within the symbolic structures of culture, religion, and language. For instance, Ella's emotional awakening can be interpreted as a negotiation between repressed desire (Freud) and the symbolic structures that define her social and relational world (Lacan). Likewise, the historical narrative of Shams and Rumi reflects the tension between spiritual longing and societal constraints, showing how desire is mediated by both unconscious drives and symbolic frameworks.

In sum, the integration of Freudian and Lacanian theory provides a rigorous conceptual basis for this study. It enables a nuanced understanding of gendered desire as both psychologically complex and socially constructed, offering insight into how Shafak's narrative represents, critiques, and reconfigures the dynamics of longing, attachment, and identity. By applying this dual framework, the study contributes to interdisciplinary scholarship at the intersection of literary criticism, psychoanalysis, and gender studies, demonstrating the value of combining psychological and cultural analyses in examining contemporary literature.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design, which is particularly suited to exploring complex psychological, cultural, and relational phenomena such as gendered desire in literature. Qualitative approaches allow for an in-depth examination of textual materials, emphasizing interpretation, meaning-making, and the nuanced interplay of themes, character development, and narrative strategies (Creswell & Poth, 2018) ^[5]. Unlike quantitative methods, which prioritize measurement and generalization, qualitative research focuses on the richness of context, subjectivity, and interpretive insight, making it ideal for psychoanalytic literary analysis.

The study adopts an interpretive-analytic framework, integrating psychoanalytic theory with literary analysis. This framework facilitates a systematic examination of how characters' internal conflicts, unconscious drives, and social conditioning interact to shape the expression of gendered desire. By combining textual interpretation with Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic concepts, the research aims to uncover both psychological mechanisms and sociocultural dimensions of desire within Shafak's narrative.

Data Source and Sampling

The primary data source for this study is Elif Shafak's novel *The Forty Rules of Love* (2009), chosen for its rich exploration of gendered desire, dual narrative structure, and cultural complexity. The novel provides two interrelated storylines: the historical narrative of Rumi and Shams of Tabriz and the contemporary narrative of Ella Rubinstein. These parallel narratives offer a comprehensive view of desire across temporal, cultural, and gendered contexts,

making it suitable for psychoanalytic textual analysis.

Purposive sampling is employed to select key passages, dialogues, and narrative sequences that explicitly or implicitly depict expressions of desire, emotional conflict, and relational dynamics. Selection criteria focus on:

1. Instances illustrating gendered desire, including attraction, longing, and emotional fulfillment.
2. Scenes reflecting internal conflict, repression, or unconscious motivation in both male and female characters.
3. Passages revealing the influence of cultural, religious, or societal norms on desire.
4. Dialogues and narrative reflections that highlight identity formation, relational dynamics, or subversion of gender norms.

This approach ensures that the analysis is targeted, theoretically informed, and representative of the central themes relevant to the study objectives.

Analytical Approach

The study adopts a textual and thematic analysis method, combining close reading with psychoanalytic interpretation. The analytical process involves:

1. **Identification of themes:** Key motifs, dialogues, and narrative episodes related to gendered desire, repression, and relational conflict are identified and categorized.
2. **Application of theory:** Freudian concepts (e.g., repression, unconscious drives, Oedipal dynamics) and Lacanian ideas (e.g., the mirror stage, the symbolic mediation of desire) are applied to interpret character behavior, relational patterns, and internal conflict.
3. **Cross-narrative comparison:** Historical and contemporary narratives are compared to explore continuities and divergences in gendered desire across temporal and cultural contexts.
4. **Integration with existing literature:** Findings are compared with previous research on gender, psychoanalysis, and Shafak's work to situate the analysis within broader scholarly debates (Chodorow, 1999; Frosh, 2010; Kaya, 2019) ^[4, 6, 9].

This approach enables a nuanced understanding of both the psychological and sociocultural dimensions of desire, providing a rigorous interpretation of Shafak's narrative and its representation of gendered subjectivity.

Ethical Considerations

Although the study analyzes a published literary text rather than human participants, ethical considerations remain central to scholarly practice. These include:

1. **Academic integrity:** All interpretations are grounded in textual evidence, and proper citations are provided following APA 7th edition guidelines to avoid plagiarism.
2. **Respect for authorial intent:** Interpretations aim to illuminate psychological and sociocultural dimensions of the text without misrepresenting the author's narrative intentions or cultural context.
3. **Cultural sensitivity:** The analysis acknowledges the historical and cultural settings of both narratives, avoiding ethnocentric assumptions or judgments.
4. **Transparency of methodology:** The criteria for passage selection, thematic coding, and theoretical application

are explicitly stated, ensuring replicability and rigor within qualitative research norms (Creswell & Poth, 2018) ^[5].

By adhering to these ethical principles, the study ensures responsible scholarship, transparency, and reliability in the interpretation of gendered desire within *The Forty Rules of Love*.

Analysis / Discussion

This section analyzes gendered desire in Elif Shafak's *The Forty Rules of Love* through the combined lens of Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis. The analysis focuses on the interplay of unconscious drives, societal norms, and relational dynamics, examining both historical and contemporary narratives. Gendered desire is explored as both a psychological and socio-cultural construct, revealing how characters navigate internal conflict, repression, and relational tension. The discussion is organized thematically, highlighting key patterns in desire, identity formation, and subversion of traditional gender roles.

1. Repression and Unconscious Desire

Freudian theory emphasizes that desire is often repressed when it conflicts with social norms or internalized moral codes (Freud, 1920/2001) ^[7]. In *The Forty Rules of Love*, repression is a recurring motif that shapes both male and female characters. For instance, Ella Rubinstein initially suppresses her longing for emotional and sexual fulfillment within her marriage. Freud's concept of repression explains her internal struggle: societal and marital expectations have constrained her ability to recognize and act upon her desires (Chodorow, 1999) ^[4]. Shafak asserts: "She was living a life that was expected of her, and in doing so, had lost touch with the parts of herself that craved intimacy and connection" (2009, p. 43).

Ella's repression illustrates the tension between individual desire and external expectation. Her emotional awakening triggered by reading the story of Shams and Rumi symbolizes the surfacing of repressed desires into consciousness, an essential Freudian process. Similarly, Shams' unconventional approach to spiritual and romantic longing challenges the rigid social norms of 13th-century Konya, revealing the interplay between internal drives and societal repression.

Repression also operates differently for male characters. Rumi's spiritual and relational longing is tempered by social authority, familial duties, and fear of scandal. Lacanian theory complements Freud here by suggesting that these desires are mediated through the symbolic order, religious norms, community expectations, and linguistic constructs that structure relational possibilities (Lacan, 1977/2006) ^[10]. In both narratives, desire is constrained not only psychologically but socially, highlighting the dual forces of repression and cultural mediation.

2. Desire, the Mirror, and Gendered Identity

Lacanian psychoanalysis emphasizes the formation of gendered identity through the mirror stage, where individuals internalize images of themselves in relation to others (Lacan, 1977/2006) ^[10]. In Shafak's novel, this process is evident in the characters' navigation of selfhood and desire. Ella's engagement with Shams' story acts as a mirror, reflecting both her unconscious longings and the societal expectations

that have shaped her identity. She begins to perceive herself not only as a wife or mother but as a woman with autonomous desires: “For the first time in years, she wondered what she wanted, not what was expected of her” (Shafak, 2009, p. 91) ^[13].

This self-recognition is a critical moment in the Lacanian framework: the subject becomes conscious of desire while simultaneously recognizing its mediation through cultural and relational “Otherness.” Similarly, Shams’ interactions with Rumi reveal a mirror-like reflection of desire and identity, where Rumi’s spiritual awakening is intertwined with his recognition of Shams as both a relational other and a catalyst for self-knowledge. Lacan’s notion of desire as fundamentally relational highlights how gendered subjectivity emerges in relation to others, not in isolation. Gendered identity in the novel is constructed through these mirror dynamics. Female desire, particularly, is depicted as a site of tension between self-realization and social conformity. Male desire, on the other hand, is often tied to relational and spiritual responsibility, illustrating the gendered differences in the experience and expression of longing. Psychoanalytic analysis shows that both genders negotiate desire within constraints, yet the modalities of constraint, social, familial, or religious differ, reflecting cultural constructions of gender (Chodorow, 1999; Frosh, 2010) ^[4, 6].

3. The Interplay of Desire and Relational Dynamics

Freudian and Lacanian frameworks also illuminate the relational dimension of gendered desire. In the historical narrative, the bond between Shams and Rumi exemplifies desire as both emotional and spiritual, highlighting attachment, identification, and projection. Shams functions as both an object of desire and a mirror for Rumi’s self-exploration, reflecting Freud’s theory of transference in relational contexts (Mitchell, 2000) ^[11]. The tension between societal expectation and internal longing is evident: the community disapproves of Shams’ influence, illustrating how relational structures regulate the expression of desire. In the contemporary narrative, Ella’s relational dynamics reveal similar tensions. Her interactions with Aziz Zahara, a writer and potential love interest, catalyze a confrontation between repressed desire and socially conditioned morality. The narrative demonstrates how desire is relationally constructed: Ella’s longing emerges not only from personal dissatisfaction but also from interactions that mirror and validate her unconscious drives. Lacanian theory interprets these dynamics as desire mediated through the Other, emphasizing that fulfillment is never absolute but contingent upon relational recognition (Lacan, 1977/2006) ^[10].

Moreover, Shafak portrays relational power and gendered negotiation. Female characters often navigate subtle social and relational constraints, revealing how desire intersects with agency and constraint. Male characters, conversely, navigate both internal psychological tension and external social expectation, illustrating the gendered variability in negotiating desire. Across both narratives, Shafak highlights the tension between conscious action and unconscious motivation, demonstrating the complexity of desire as both an internal and socially mediated phenomenon.

4. Subversion of Traditional Gender Roles

A central insight emerging from the psychoanalytic reading is Shafak’s subversion of traditional gender roles. Female desire, exemplified by Ella, challenges the patriarchal

expectation of passive femininity. Her awakening and subsequent choices illustrate a departure from repressed subjectivity toward self-recognition and agency. Freud’s theory explains the psychological liberation from repression, while Lacan situates this liberation within the symbolic domain of cultural and relational negotiation.

In the historical narrative, Shams’ unconventional masculinity, his openness to emotional vulnerability, spiritual longing, and relational intimacy subverts the traditional patriarchal model of male authority. The juxtaposition of these narratives emphasizes that desire is not merely a private psychological experience but a socially and culturally contested space. Shafak’s depiction reveals both the limitations imposed by gender norms and the possibilities for agency and transformation, reflecting a feminist psychoanalytic perspective that examines desire as both constrained and liberatory (Butler, 1990; Moi, 2002) ^[3, 12].

5. Integration of Psychoanalytic Insights

Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis together provide a multidimensional understanding of gendered desire in Shafak’s novel. Freud illuminates the psychological mechanisms, repression, unconscious drives, and attachment that structure internal conflict and relational expression. Lacan situates these mechanisms within the symbolic order, showing how desire is mediated through language, social norms, and relational recognition. The dual narrative structure of *The Forty Rules of Love* allows for comparative analysis, highlighting both historical and contemporary dimensions of gendered desire.

The analysis demonstrates that desire in Shafak’s work is:

- **Psychologically complex**, shaped by unconscious drives and internalized norms (Freud).
- **Relationally mediated**, contingent upon interactions with others and the symbolic order (Lacan).
- **Culturally contextualized**, reflecting historical, religious, and social norms that shape expression and recognition.
- **Transformative**, offering characters opportunities for self-awareness, agency, and subversion of gendered expectations.

By applying psychoanalytic theory, the study shows how Shafak portrays desire not as a simple expression of emotion but as a dynamic, multi-layered process influenced by psyche, culture, and gender. The novel thus functions as a rich text for exploring both the psychological and socio-cultural dimensions of gendered desire.

Conclusion

This study has examined the formation and expression of gendered desire in Elif Shafak’s *The Forty Rules of Love* through a psychoanalytic lens, integrating Freudian and Lacanian theory. The analysis demonstrates that desire in the novel is a complex interplay of unconscious drives, relational dynamics, and cultural mediation. Both historical and contemporary narratives reveal how characters navigate internal conflicts, societal expectations, and relational constraints, highlighting the psychological and socio-cultural dimensions of gendered subjectivity.

The study’s findings underscore the significance of repression, as theorized by Freud (1920/2001) ^[7], in shaping the characters’ experiences of longing and self-expression.

Ella Rubinstein's initial suppression of personal and sexual desire exemplifies the tension between internal drives and external expectations, while Rumi and Shams' historical experiences illustrate how cultural, spiritual, and relational constraints mediate male desire. In tandem, Lacan's (1977/2006) ^[10] conceptualization of desire as inherently relational illuminates how characters' longing is mediated through the gaze, recognition, and expectations of the Other. Ella's awakening, facilitated by her engagement with Shams' story, highlights how self-recognition and relational reflection enable the articulation of desire within a symbolic framework.

The dual narrative structure of the novel offers a unique lens for comparing historical and contemporary experiences of gendered desire. In both narratives, desire is portrayed as a dynamic force that both constrains and liberates, reflecting the interplay between unconscious motivation, social norms, and personal agency. Female desire, in particular, emerges as a site of negotiation between self-realization and societal expectation, revealing the constraints imposed by patriarchal structures and the transformative potential of agency and self-awareness. Male desire, conversely, is shown to balance internal emotional needs with relational responsibility, highlighting gendered differences in the experience and negotiation of longing. These insights contribute to a nuanced understanding of gendered subjectivity, illustrating how literature can illuminate the unconscious and cultural dimensions of human desire.

The implications of this study extend beyond literary analysis, offering valuable contributions to interdisciplinary scholarship at the intersection of psychoanalysis, gender studies, and cultural critique. By integrating Freudian and Lacanian frameworks, the study demonstrates that gendered desire is neither purely psychological nor purely social but emerges from the interplay of unconscious drives, relational dynamics, and cultural mediation. This perspective encourages scholars to consider both internal and external determinants of desire, emphasizing the importance of interdisciplinary approaches for understanding complex human experiences.

Furthermore, the study highlights the relevance of contemporary literature as a tool for exploring psychological and social phenomena. Shafak's narrative illustrates that literature can reveal the subtleties of desire, identity formation, and relational negotiation, offering insight into both individual subjectivity and broader cultural patterns. The novel's emphasis on transformation, self-awareness, and relational reflection suggests that the representation of desire in literature can serve as a model for understanding human psychology and social interaction in diverse cultural contexts. Despite its contributions, this study also points to areas for future research. Further analysis could explore comparative studies of gendered desire across multiple works by Shafak or other contemporary authors, examining variations in narrative strategy, cultural context, and character development. Longitudinal studies might investigate how representations of gendered desire evolve in relation to societal change, globalization, or shifts in cultural norms. Additionally, incorporating intersectional perspectives such as the role of race, class, religion, and sexuality could further enrich understanding of the complex factors shaping gendered subjectivity and desire in literature.

In conclusion, this study affirms that Elif Shafak's *The Forty Rules of Love* provides a rich site for psychoanalytic

exploration of gendered desire. The novel illustrates the interplay of unconscious drives, relational dynamics, and cultural mediation in shaping human longing and identity. By employing Freudian and Lacanian frameworks, the study demonstrates how literature can illuminate the intricate processes underlying desire, revealing both the constraints imposed by social norms and the transformative possibilities of self-awareness and agency. Ultimately, Shafak's work contributes to a deeper understanding of the psychological, cultural, and relational dimensions of gendered desire, offering a model for interdisciplinary scholarship that bridges literary analysis, psychoanalytic theory, and gender studies.

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How to Cite This Article

Hussain SHI, Ehtsham M, Al-Khalidi RAS, Rizwan M. Psychoanalytic insights into the formation and expression of gendered desire: a reading of Elif Shafak's *The Forty Rules of Love*. *Int J Multidiscip Res Growth Eval*. 2025;6(6):106–112. doi:10.54660/IJMRGE.2025.6.6.106-112.

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