

## IV. Sufism in America and Turkey: A Transnational Dialogue

“What problem is there in finding God?  
It only needs to be uprooted there and transplanted here.”  
Bulleh Shah

The previous section has begun to outline how the theme of Sufism<sup>74</sup> allowed Turkish American authors to establish a compelling connection between the Islamic and the Christian traditions, laying emphasis on their compatibility. This chapter continues to investigate representations of Sufism as a transatlantic phenomenon and its potential as a salient ‘contact zone’ between Turkey and America. Previous chapters have demonstrated the uniqueness of Turkish American texts by comparing them to others that are more firmly (although not univocally) anchored in the Turkish literary scene, such as Pamuk’s novels. The present chapter asks to what extent Turkish American literature subscribes to American narratives and approaches, and does so by comparing texts by Elif Shafak and Güneli Gün with the work of authors who are unarguably rooted in the American canon, such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman, and John Barth. Sufism lends itself particularly well to this task because of its distinct presence in both the American and Turkish American imaginations.

“There are many similarities between the rise of Sufism in Islam [...] and Transcendentalism in the United States,” British Iranian scholar Farhand Jahanpour argues in his article “Ralph Waldo Emerson and the Sufi: From Puritanism to Transcendentalism” (6). In “Emerson and the Sufis,” George K. Rishmawi claims that Transcendentalists may have identified with the Sufi’s spiritual enfranchisement from Islamic orthodoxy and may have found in the separatist impetus of

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74 Sufism is a mystical, heterodox current of Islam. Jahanpour speaks of Sufism as a “general gospel of individualism and spiritual exultation” (6), emphasizing the focus of Sufism on the individual and his/her journey towards God. In order to symbolize the inebriating effect of the union with God on the individual’s soul, in fact, Sufi poetry largely relies on a vocabulary of “spiritual exultation,” such as erotic and drinking imagery. Introductory studies on Sufism include William Chittick’s *Sufism: A Short Introduction* and *The Sufi Doctrine of Rumi*, Annemarie Schimmel’s *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* and *As Through a Veil: Mystical Poetry in Islam*, Alexander Knysch’s *Islamic Mysticism: A Short History*, and Seyyed Hossein Nasr’s *Sufi Essays*.

the early Sufi traces of their own. Rishmawi envisions Transcendentalism as “an American movement that has tried to rid itself of the strong sense of evil which dominated the Puritanism of New England, from which it has originated” and notes that Sufism itself had been born as a reaction to the limitations of orthodoxy and to the power of religious authorities (149).

Transcendentalists looked East and found in Sufism a “splendid deviation” from the rigidity of doctrine and social conservatisms (Rishmawi 153). Emerson and the Transcendentalists, Rishmawi adds, had cast Sufi poets like Hafiz and Saadi as free-thinking icons who had fought for and achieved intellectual independence, and indicated them as examples of self-reliant men (Rishmawi 153). Not only did the Transcendentalists strongly identify with the concerns of Sufism, but there is evidence that their knowledge of and fascination for Sufism assisted them in their effort to delineate a “uniquely American” literary sensitivity (Jahanpour 8). Thus ingrained in the texture of Americanness, it comes as no surprise that Sufism, or an American manifestation of it, traversed the epochs and re-surfaced in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century “Rumi phenomenon” (El-Zein 71).

For a writer of Turkish origins who seeks to establish a cultural kinship between America and Turkey, the confrontation with the Sufi tradition on both sides of the ocean is inevitable. Crucial tenets of Sufism such as the reaction against religious authority and the aspiration to a universal spirituality allow one to establish a triangulation among Sufism, America, and Turkey. The first part of this chapter will outline the influences of American romanticism on Shafak’s ‘Sufi novel’ *The Forty Rules of Love* (2010). I will argue that Shafak’s Sufi novel is also an ‘American’ Sufi novel, as it embeds one of the best known Sufi narratives<sup>75</sup> – the encounter between Rumi and his spiritual companion Shams of Tabriz – in an American context, merging a Muslim understanding of Sufism with an American one. The second part will address the resurfacing of the discourse on Sufism in postmodernism, focusing on the work of John Barth and Güneli Gün.

## **The American Journey as Sufi Journey: Emerson and Shafak**

Several scholars investigated major American Transcendentalists such as Emerson, Whitman, and Thoreau in the light of their interest in ‘Eastern’ poetry. Rishmawi reports that Emerson was “influenced by Eastern culture” and “involv[ed]

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75 The life of 13<sup>th</sup>-century Persian poet Jalal Al-Din Rumi (Balkh 1207- Konya 1273) has been accurately documented, but some of its aspects are still shrouded in legend. One of these is his extraordinary friendship with Shams of Tabriz, a wandering dervish who crossed paths with Rumi in Konya when Rumi was 39 years old.

with the poetry of the Sufis,” which he read extensively in Joseph von Hammer Purgstall’s German translation (147, 149). According to Arthur Ford, Walt Whitman owned a copy of William R. Alger’s *The Poetry of the East*, whose introduction he read over and over (12). He had also certainly read Emerson’s essay “Persian Poetry” (ibid.). Thoreau himself showed remarkable knowledge of Sufi poetry: *Walden* is interspersed with quotations from Saadi’s *Gulistan* (Farzan 573) and Farid al-Din Attar’s *The Conference of the Birds*. Thoreau’s warning “We do not ride the railroad; it rides upon us” (*Walden* 75) is probably a re-adaptation of Attar’s verse “And I am not my Self’s ass, he is mine;/ [...] the beast I ride on rides on you” (Attar 63).

Jahanpour draws a compelling parallel between Emerson’s personal development, the trajectory followed by Transcendentalism, and the Sufi experience.

The study of [Emerson’s] religious thought charts the journey from a narrow and dogmatic religious outlook towards a mystical, universal outlook. The study of Emerson’s journey from Puritanism, towards Unitarianism, towards Transcendentalism and ultimately towards a universal religion of love and spirituality provides a powerful antidote to the narrow and fundamentalist interpretations of religion prevalent in both the East and the West today. (1)

This passage offers a first stepping stone to identify the Sufi “journey” as a recurring trope, a narrative from the East that has successfully been integrated into American paradigms of thought. More specifically, the Sufi journey (to appropriate Jahanpour’s metaphor) translates into the Transcendentalists’ ambition to resist fundamentalism and develop towards more inclusive models of religion and society. This is exemplified by Emerson’s own writing, which moves away from the legacy of Puritanism towards a more universal, welcoming religious thinking that may better satisfy the needs of an ever more variegated society.

The trope of the Sufi journey, with its invitation to figuratively destroy temples, mosques and other symbols of the established religious authority, can be applied to the Transcendentalists’ rejection of Puritan orthodoxy, as well as to their emancipation from the European intellectual tradition, as Jahanpour defines Emerson’s religious reformism as part of his attempt to “create a uniquely American body of literature, molding a national identity out of its European roots” (8–9). Sufi poet Bulleh Shah (1680–1757) wrote:

Destroy the mosque!  
Destroy the temple!  
Destroy whatever you please.

Do not break the human heart,  
For God dwells therein.<sup>76</sup>  
(Bulleh Shah in Jamal n.p.)

Emerson echoes this recurring principle, which resurfaces in several works of early Sufi poets: “How little love is at the bottom of these religious shows; congregations and temples and sermons, – how much sham!” Emerson laments in his journals (Emerson in Jahanpour 3). For Emerson, tradition is an impediment keeping man and God apart, and hindering the individual’s perception of God’s absolute truth: “When we have broken our god of tradition and ceased from our god of rhetoric, then may God fire the heart with his presence” (“The Oversoul” n.p.). As many have argued up to this point, Emerson’s hard judgment on traditional religious institutions – the congregation, the church, the sermon – as misleading idols that must be renounced is reminiscent of the Sufi’s mistrust of orthodoxy. The consequences of such disavowal – the image of God setting fire to the heart of men – also resonates with Sufi poetics, which frequently linger on love, fire, and the human heart as God’s privileged dwelling.

The reported passage by Jahanpour has highlighted another aspect of America’s Sufi journey, namely, its continuous resurfacing throughout American literary history. “The study of Emerson’s journey,” and therefore of the Transcendentalist and American journey, “towards a universal religion of love and spirituality provides a powerful antidote to the narrow and fundamentalist interpretations of religion prevalent in both the East and the West today” (Jahanpour 1). Jahanpour claims that a Sufi-like “journey” is a constituent of American national identity and must continue to operate throughout history, making it possible for certain cultural traits – diversity, inclusiveness, tolerance – to prevail over others. This is in fact Jahanpour’s invitation to his contemporaries: to reflect on Emerson’s Sufi journey and replicate it. If in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Sufism inspired the literary fathers of a country that was struggling for self-definition and enfranchisement from the European and Puritan legacies, now that same ideology may function as an “antidote” to post 9/11 Islamophobia (ibid.). It is exactly in this scenario that *The Forty Rules of Love* can be collocated, considering its urge to treasure diversity, animate a cosmopolitan vision of society, and think of religion in terms of universal spirituality rather than dwell on its extremist manifestations.

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76 These lines are also reminiscent of Whitman’s words in “Song of Myself”: “this head more than churches, bibles, and all the creeds” (Whitman 29). Here, the speaker invites the reader to forsake traditional forms of belief to venerate the human being in its complexity. Whitman’s line is less mystical and more humanist, yet, the idea of the self as the dwelling of what is most sacred remains.

It is not surprising that Sufi poetry has been increasingly constructed as antipodal to rampant post 9/11 Islamophobia. The Sufi's focus on love and tolerance offered a bewildering alternative to what had been depicted by the media worldwide as a religion of fanaticism and violence. For instance, historian William Dalrymple constructs Sufism as "a resistance movement against violent Islamic radicalism" and the most moderate, composite, and pluralistic of Islamic currents ("The Muslims in the Middle" n.p.). Dalrymple employs militaristic terminology to enlist Sufism as an ally of the West in the struggle against Islamic fanaticism ("Sufis, our allies within Islam," "Sufi imams are the front line against the most violent forms of Islam;" *ibid.*), but does not fail to stress the indigeneity of Sufism in an Eastern, Muslim context and describes it as "an indigenous, deeply-rooted resistance movement" (*ibid.*).

The most powerful incarnation of this Sufi revival in the United States is what Amira El-Zein calls the "Rumi phenomenon" (El-Zein 71), which allowed Rumi to become America's bestselling poet from the 1990s on, with sales unsurprisingly skyrocketing after 9/11. The Rumi phenomenon can be read in combination with the 19<sup>th</sup> century myth of the therapeutic Orient. Edward Said explains that Friedrich Schlegel and Novalis urged Europeans to dedicate themselves to the study of Eastern cultures, so as to "defeat the materialism and mechanism and republicanism of Occidental culture" (*Orientalism* 115). The Orient as source of healing for the West resurfaces in the Rumi phenomenon: Cyrus Masroori, for example, celebrates Rumi as cultural mediator: "at a time of suspicion and distrust, a person who can speak to both Muslims and the West is of great value" (243). On a similar note, in *The Forty Rules of Love* a character named Aziz writes: "In many ways the 21<sup>st</sup> century is not that different from the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Both will be recorded in history as times of unprecedented religious clashes, cultural misunderstandings, and a general sense of insecurity and fear of the other. At times like these, the need for love is greater than ever" (15). Aziz's statement is strongly reminiscent of Masroori's: the article and the novel were both written in the same year, 2010, and both of them present Rumi as the solution to the problems of Western society in times of alleged cultural clashes.

Traces of this argument can also be found in Jahanpour's article. In the early 2000s, when the Islamic Republic of Iran was perceived as a potential threat to Western ideals and geopolitical safety, Jahanpour lays emphasis on the commonalities between the American and the Iranian literary traditions: "At a time when political relations between Iran and the United States are so tense and the two nations are viewing each other with hostility and suspicion, it is important to remember that the cultural and literary relations between them have not always

been so acrimonious” (Jahanpour 1). This is how Jahanpour introduces his study on Sufi influences on Emerson. He reminds Americans of their special cultural bond with Iran – Rumi’s homeland – using Sufism to construct an exclusive bi-cultural relationship between the two cultures. “However,” Jahanpour continues, “it is important to know that the rich heritage of religious thinking in the United States itself contains the lofty idea that we can lift religion from its present sorry state and restore it to the more spiritual and universal status that is its true calling” (ibid.). Jahanpour invites Americans to repeat the journey that convinced Emerson to relinquish ‘fundamentalisms’ and embrace an ever more universal, inclusive, tolerant understanding of religion. The origins of this American journey, Jahanpour argues, can be found in the Muslim world, as it shares basic “common values” with the United States: values that contribute to building a sense of transreligious, transatlantic “common humanity” (ibid.).

*Forty Rules* renews the invitation to repeat a Sufi journey any American of good will and sufficient sensitivity is eligible to pursue. In the novel, Rumi’s journey from orthodoxy to Sufi mysticism is also the journey of an American woman, Ella, towards self-awareness. Although Ella’s journey is not as intensely spiritual as Rumi’s, she frees herself from the conditioning of society and opens up to the unexpected, the unknown, the Other. Similar to Jahanpour, Shafak places America in a bi-cultural perspective where its present and future are inextricably related to those of other cultural realities.

As anticipated, one of the most salient characteristics of the Sufi journey in its American manifestation is the aspiration to universal, all-encompassing spirituality. In his article “An Islamic Language of Toleration: Rumi’s Criticism of Religious Persecution,” Masroori identifies religious multiplicity as a recurring theme in Rumi’s poetic production. Masroori clarifies that, for Rumi, “multiplicity of religious understanding is not alarming”: quite to the contrary, “the essence of all religions is the same” (Masroori 249). The real cause of conflict, for Rumi, is not religiosity, which unites all men, but the institution of religion, which “deforms our understanding of God” (ibid.). This position is close to the Transcendentalists’ idea of a church of mankind, from which “no pious Hindu, or Buddhist, or Muslim could be excluded” (Jahanpour 5). Emerson embeds this distinction between religiosity and religion as institution as part of a larger discourse of equality: “I do not find that the age or country makes the least difference; no, nor the language the actors spoke, nor the *religion* which they professed, whether Arab in the desert, or Frenchman in the Academy. I see that sensible men and conscientious men all over the world were of one *religion*, – the religion of well-doing and daring” (Emerson, “The Preacher” n.p., emphasis added). This statement, quoted from Emerson’s

essay “The Preacher,” clearly distinguishes between religion as a criterion that *separates* men, along with age, country, and language, and religion as a practice that *unites* them, as it enhances traits he considers to be universally shared.

The principles of Sufism used by American romanticism to devise a uniquely American understanding of religion reappear in *Forty Rules* as part of a different mission. If, for instance, Whitman adopts Sufi aesthetics of placelessness and denationalized belonging and applies them to a markedly American sensitivity, Shafak moves away from the nationalist perspective that had characterized the American discourse on Sufism and enlarges its scope so as to include a global society and its need for a more multicultural, cosmopolitan model of civilization. Shafak’s discourse on Sufism does not limit itself to delineating or confirming a country’s national identity, but articulates a post-national utopia. Shafak’s cosmopolitan model, inspired by the Sufi doctrine, is primarily designed to connect Turkey and the United States in the same way Jahanpour connected Iran and the United States. Acceptance of ethnic and religious multiplicity appears in *Forty Rules* as an answer to questions regarding both countries’ identities in the global age. In this chapter I will differentiate the Transcendentalists’ and the Romantics’ use of Sufism to construct an American national literature from Shafak’s prominently transnational perspective. Moreover, I will draw further connections between Shafak and another ‘Father’ of American thought whose work was profoundly influenced by Sufi poetry: Walt Whitman.

## **Two directions in the American Discourse on Sufism: Whitman and Shafak**

Like Emerson, Whitman also cultivated an interest in Sufi poetry (Ford 12): according to Arthur Ford, Whitman’s fascination for Sufism began during the early phases of *Leaves of Grass*, sparked by works such as *The Poetry of the East*, by W. R. Alger (1856) and certainly Emerson’s essay “Persian Poetry” (1858). The triangulation of Sufism, Whitman, and Shafak is particularly evident and worth investigating in depth. Both Whitman and Shafak draw abundantly from Sufi imagery and themes, but they eventually distance themselves from Sufism and pursue their own literary agendas. My analysis shows that while Whitman merges the message of Sufism with a strong emphasis on the (albeit heterogeneous) nation, Shafak advocates a decidedly transnational perspective. However, while Whitman’s poems reflect qualities of Sufi authorship, at least to a certain extent, the American subplot of *Forty Rules* deviates from the notion of Self that is proper to Sufism. The notion of Sufi authorship, which will receive more attention below, reveals productive intersections between American romanticism

and Shafak's fiction. Whitman's and Shafak's appropriation of some of the literary strategies of Sufi poetry eventually culminates in a detachment from the original aesthetics of Sufism, which lays emphasis on the effacement of individual authorship and belonging, and results in the articulation of different ideas about nation and Self.

### **The Transcendental Author: from National to Transnational Literature**

In Michael Frishkopf's definition, Sufi poetry is highly intertextual, and, by the same token, the Sufi author is a "generalized author," one who refuses the absolute paternity of his poetic production, and rather views it as the outcome of a "strongly connected spiritual-social network" (Frishkopf 92). This approach to authorship, Frishkopf argues, entails a marginalization of the individual author, perceived as subordinate to a textual and social community who contribute to the generation of a text. Frishkopf coalesces the author with the poetic persona, as in Sufi poetry the author's first name is also used to indicate the speaker in the poem, thus enhancing the feeling of a first-person, autobiographic involvement. It seems preposterous that the aesthetics of Sufism, which implied the "backgrounding of the individualized author and text" (Frishkopf 79) may have appealed to a poet like Whitman, whose poetic personae declare to be "solid and sound, [...] deathless and august" (Whitman 33). A philosophy that invites its adepts to pursue the annihilation of the Self in God and thus hopes to achieve "death before dying" (Elias 3) seems antipodal to an author figure who aspires "to cease not till death," and beyond (Whitman 20). Yet, paradoxical as it may seem, the speaker of *Leaves of Grass* does reflect what Frishkopf calls a generalized author, incorporating a larger social system into the nature and extent of his poetic inspiration, operating within a spiritually connected social network.

In "Song of Myself," the speaker is both exalted and dispersed. Although the 'author' is glorified as an emanation of God: "divine [...] inside and out, making holy whatever [he touches or is] touch'd from," he is not Roland Barthes' "author-God," the bearer of final teleological meanings (Barthes 4). Whitman's author-narrator is a permeable entity, which opens up to as many readings as there are readers: "You shall not look thorough my eyes either, not take things from me/ You shall listen to all sides and filter them from your self" (Whitman 21). With these words, the poet-figure in Whitman's text abdicates his role as a bearer of teleological truths. Whitman's speaker shows the attributes of Frishkopf's "interauthor" (Frishkopf 92) and recognizes that his text is the result of a social network of textual producers and not the emanation of an autonomous intellect:

These are really the thoughts of all men in all ages and lands  
They are not original with me,  
If they are not yours as much as mine they are nothing, or next to nothing.  
(Whitman 31)

The speaker is conscious that his inspiration has not been granted to him exclusively, and aware of a spiritual-social network surrounding him:

And I know that the hand of God is a promise of my own,  
And I know that the spirit of God is the brother of my own,  
And that all the men ever born are also my brothers, and the women my sisters  
and lovers,  
And that a kelson of the creation is love. (Whitman 32)

The divinity of poetic inspiration does not lead to a glorification of the poet over his fellow citizens, but to a detection of the divine in each element of creation, which implies the sharing of merits and responsibilities of the poetic word.

Up to this point the poetic persona of “Song of Myself” matches the parameters of Sufi authorship as expressed by Frishkopf, including the possibility to connect with the human community in spite of differences in time and space. “Central to the Sufi reality is the *alam*,” Frishkopf writes, “within which one may establish personal, affective relationships with other spirits, irrespective of distances in time and space” (Frishkopf 86). The notion of *alam* is very prominent in Shafak’s *Forty Rules*, whose American subplot thoroughly revolves around the overpowering love relationship between Ella and Aziz, who have never met in the flesh, live continents away, and are eventually separated by Aziz’s untimely death. This is one of the numerous correspondences the notion of *alam* finds in *Forty Rules*. The aspiration to develop a mode of communication that may encompass diverse realities and places is of paramount importance to Whitman as well. Arthur Ford points out that in “Salut au Monde!” Whitman lists a series of images of faraway places, and specifies that the same variety is contained within himself, so as to stress the inclusiveness of his vision and universality of his message (Ford 14). “What widens with you Walt Whitman?” asks the speaker, “Within me latitude widens, longitude lengthens” (Whitman 93).

It is true that, as Ghulam Fayez confirms, Whitman and Sufi poetry share a “dynamic, fluid, microcosmic and macrocosmic [Self], [who] can occupy infinite centers and overlap infinite centers at one time” (Fayez 18). Yet, the inclusiveness granted by a macrocosmic Self in “Song of Myself” mostly embraces a national experience. Even the Near East imagery in “Song of Myself,” Ford clarifies, “suggest[s] the range and diversity of [Whitman’s] own experiences and thus the experiences of the race” (Ford 16). The speaker of “Song of Myself” affirms to be

“one of the Nation of many nations” and proceeds to list a series of American locations, declaring to feel at home in “the fleet of ice-boats, [...] / on the hills of Vermont or in the woods of Maine, or the / Texan ranch” (Whitman 31). Whitman’s poetic persona does embody the Sufi notion of *alam*, which endows him with a ubiquitous quality, but his universality is deeply anchored in the American reality, whose vast range of landscapes and cultural manifestations are synthesized in the speaker’s vision. In “Song of Myself,” Sufi concepts such as the *alam* and the vision of nature and humanity as a spiritually connected unity are employed to express an American national conscience and reinforce its cohesion. The larger social and textual community that appears and participates in “Song of Myself” is the American community, and the speaker introduces himself as the transversal voice of his nation. He remains, in Ford’s words, loyal to his “passion to be that most American of poets” (Ford 12).

Shafak also grapples with the de-individualization of the author in *The Forty Rules of Love*, which introduces three figures of Sufi writers – Rumi, Shams of Tabriz, and the present-day wandering dervish Aziz Zahara. As anticipated, Shafak’s use of Sufism converges with and diverges from Whitman’s, revealing striking similarities and one significant difference: the integration of the Sufi doctrine in a transnational discourse, instead of a primarily American one. Nevertheless, one can confidently affirm that the canons of Sufi authorship provide a common ground to Whitman’s poetry and Shafak’s fiction. The speaker in “Song of Myself” shares several attributes with Shafak’s Shams of Tabriz, a character modeled on Rumi’s legendary companion. Since Rumi’s awakening to mystic poetry happens towards the end of the novel (“Maulana is writing verses, they are beautiful” announces Rumi’s wife Kerra on page 286), from this point onwards my analysis of Sufi authorship in *Forty Rules* will concentrate on the figures of Shams and Aziz.

First of all, the strongly connected spiritual network theorized by Frishkopf as the ideal dwelling of the Sufi author prominently reemerges in *Forty Rules* when Shams declares that “the universe is one being, everything and everyone is interconnected through an invisible web of stories. Whether we are aware of it or not, we are all in a silent conversation” (207). The “invisible web of stories” brings to mind the derivative quality of Sufi textual production, which does not envision itself as the product of an individualized author, but rather a distillate of preexisting textual and cultural knowledge, the paternity of which is promptly rejected by the author.

Despite the fact that Shams – whose verses have been overshadowed by Rumi’s more conspicuous production – is a model of authorial selflessness and humility, traces of the Author-God can be found in *Forty Rules* as well as in “Song of Myself,” as in both texts the Sufi author is exalted and dispersed. In *Forty Rules*, author and God share a common creative activity and are so intensely connected

to appear interchangeable. “God is the greater storyteller” (275) claims Shams, and Aziz is suspected to “have wanted to create his central character on his own image, just as God created human beings in his image” (185).

The most important difference between Whitman’s and Shafak’s ‘American’ adaptations of Sufism is the idea of placelessness and denationalized belonging.<sup>77</sup> A prerequisite of the Sufi author in both texts is the universality of his message, synthesized in the concept of *alam*. The rootedness of the author in several places at once leads, in Whitman, to an omni-comprehensive rootedness in a newly shaped national spirit. In Shafak, instead, it implies a lack of roots, and a renegotiation of the concept of belonging. If Shafak follows Rumi in indicating the lack of place as a legitimate space of belonging and thus has her characters affirm they belong nowhere, Whitman’s speaker discards the idea of belonging by claiming to belong everywhere. Both Whitman’s and Shafak’s understandings of diffused rootedness originate from one of Rumi’s poems, which leaves visible traces in both “Song of Myself” and *Forty Rules*.

Rumi ( <i>Mathnawi</i> )	Shafak ( <i>Forty Rules</i> )
For I do not recognize myself	Not Christian or Jew or Muslim, nor
I am neither Christian nor Jew nor Gabr nor	Hindu, Buddhist, Sufi or zen.
Muslim	Not any religion or cultural system. I am
I’m not of the East nor of the West	not of the East, nor of the West...
nor of the land nor of the sea.	My place is placeless, a trace of the
(Rumi in Farzan 579)	traceless.
	(183)

Whitman (“Song of Myself”)  
 A Southerner soon as a Northerner [...]  
 Of every hue and caste am I, of every rank or religion,  
 A farmer, mechanic, artist, gentleman, sailor, quaker,  
 Prisoner, fancy-man, rowdy, lawyer, physician, priest.  
 (30)

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77 For a discussion of ‘placelessness’ see Wilbur C. Rich, *The Post-racial Society is Here: Recognition, Critics and the Nation-state*. Rich describes placelessness as a “world of everything and everybody being at home everywhere” (Rich 7). See also William Knoke, *Bold New World: The Essential Road Map to the Twenty-first Century* (1996).

Massud Farzan claims that the reported extract from “Song of Myself” has been inspired by Rumi’s poem “Why think thus oh man of Piety,” appearing in the first column (Farzan 597). Having stated his condition of rootlessness, the speaker’s individuality fragments into a series of figures that might compose the variegated texture of any society were it not for the reference to Quakers, who locate the speaker’s multifarious embodiments in a Western, Christian context. As the second column demonstrates, *Forty Rules* displays a similar fragmentation or dispersion of the Sufi author. The reported lines are uttered by Shafak’s fictional Rumi, and they echo Sham’s explanation of the wondering dervish condition: “In this state I roam east and west [...] having roots nowhere, I have everywhere to go” (39). While Whitman’s poetic persona conducts his metaphysical roaming prominently within the American territory, Shafak’s Sufi writers embrace a larger dimension. While Whitman’s North and South correspond to the American North and South, as the speaker claims to be at home in Vermont as well as in Texas, Shafak’s East and West delineate a global perspective.

In *Forty Rules*, the mission of the Sufi writer is to release a universal message that may speak to East and West simultaneously, in fact, Rumi is referred to as the “great scholar of East and West” (155).<sup>78</sup> The discourse on the Sufi writer, whose mission is to spiritually unite heterogeneous or even conflicting cultures, is concomitant with a more general discourse on literature. Aziz is of the opinion that one of the strengths of good literature is “connecting people to distant lands and cultures” (*Rules* 13) and “sincerely believe[s] that [his novel] cuts across countries, cultures, and centuries” (14).

The ocean, besides being a prominent trope in the Sufi symbolic universe, assumes further relevance in Shafak, as her Sufi author is not simply concerned with producing universal literature, but attempts to engage two hemispheres in a transatlantic dialogue. In Sufi poetry, the ocean is often a symbol of self-dissolution in the vastness of the divine. My contention is that this image has acquired special relevance in the American discourse on Sufism, and in Shafak in particular, as the latter has devoted much of her written production to the constitution of a transatlantic dialogue between Turkey (not coincidentally the place where Rumi spent most of his life) and the United States.

In *Forty Rules*, the ocean appears as a space of reconciliation, where dualities cease to exist: “If you and I can play even a minute role in helping two rivers meet

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78 In *Forty Rules* ‘East’ and ‘West’ are unevenly capitalized. In his translation of Rumi’s *Mathnawi*, Jawid Mojaddedi used capital letters “when reference is made to God” (Mojaddedi xxvii). A similar criterion might be applied in *Forty Rules*, but this hypothesis is difficult to prove.

and flow into the ocean of the Divine Love as one single watercourse, if we can help two good friends of God to meet, I will count myself blessed” (69). Even though, in this case, the “two rivers” bound to meet are Rumi and Shams, the image of the ocean easily transports the metaphor on a cultural and territorial level, as does the reference to “two friends of God,” which could potentially apply to Turkey and the U.S. as two nations in which the religious dimension plays a fundamental role. The ocean between two continents loses its divisive quality to symbolize the synthesis and reconciliation of two continents. The ocean is also employed to support the concept of the threshold homeland, which is especially dear to Shafak. “The water that scares you rejuvenates me,” Shams declares, defending his vocation to Sufism and to the life of wandering dervishes, “for unlike you I can swim. And swim I shall. The ocean is my homeland. If you are with me, come to the ocean” (*Rules* 39). Once more, the potentially terrifying nature of the ocean turns into an inviting vision of home, and a legitimate, although unconventional, space of belonging. This theme resurfaces in Shafak’s journalistic articles, where she interrogates her reader on Turkey’s ambivalent location in the geopolitical scene, wondering if it is possible “to take up one’s abode in a threshold” (“Making Sense of Irrationality” n.p.). By defending his life choice, Shams grants legitimacy to the condition of living in-between worlds and nations, opening up to a post-national perspective. The image of the ocean, in conclusion, has a deep, multilayered significance in the novel. First, it indicates Sufism as a way towards the reconciliation between East and West on the grounds of what triggered their supposed ‘clash’: Islam. Second, it anticipates that, for all the American credentials of Shafak’s approach, Sufism has a deep political and cultural relevance for Turkey as well.

Whitman’s and Shafak’s use of Sufi theories of authorship adds further evidence for the existence of an American literary discourse on Sufism: an undercurrent that emerged in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and resurfaced in the 1990s with what has been termed the “Rumi phenomenon” (El-Zein 71). This section has proposed that both Shafak and Whitman drew on the understanding of authorship in Sufi poetics, subscribing to different extents to its criteria. Like Shams and Aziz, the persona of “Song of Myself” is close to Frishkopf’s definition of inter-author, aware of his partaking in a vaster textual system. Whitman’s author voices the heterogeneous American multitudes and thus enables the rise of a national literature. The 19<sup>th</sup> century witnessed the involvement of American intellectuals in the definition of a national literature and Self, unencumbered from mannerism and the legacy of the European canon. Both Emerson and Whitman worked towards the establishment of a genuinely American literary sensitivity and both of them resorted to Sufism to assist them along this path. In this light, Whitman’s

speaker emerges as an example of Frishkopf's inter-author, but also as Foucault's "transdiscursive author" (Foucault 10), who witnesses the beginning of a national literary tradition. Transdiscursive authors, Foucault explains, "are unique in that they are not just the authors of their own works. They have produced something else: the possibilities and the rules for the formation of other texts" (ibid).

In a similar way, Shafak's Shams and Rumi appear as 13<sup>th</sup>-century pioneers of transnational literature. *Forty Rules* is a plea to follow their example and indulge in "good literature" that "cuts across countries, cultures and centuries" (*Rules* 13–14). It is remarkable that the aesthetics of Sufism, in Whitman, contribute to the ongoing delineation of a national literature. In Shafak's case, instead, they point towards the creation – or intensification – of a transnational, transatlantic, and post-national one.

### Sufi Selves in comparison

The last section has touched upon the ways in which Whitman and Shafak incorporated Sufi doctrine and aesthetics in their work. One is certainly the notion of authorship, generating an incompatibility between the marginalization of the author in Sufi poetry, its complete de-individualization, and the overwhelming centrality awarded to author-figures in Whitman and Shafak. These two tendencies coexist in the speaker of "Song of Myself," who pronounces himself a divine messenger and voice of a nation, and in Shafak's Sufi authors Rumi and Shams. A similar duality emerges with regards to the Self. Frishkopf exhaustively describes the Sufi approach to the individual Self, and characterizes the Sufi way as a process that culminates in the "*fana' al nafs* (annihilation of the base ego), and *baqa'* (abiding in God). More modestly, the Sufi aims for some degree of self-dissolution" (Frishkopf 87). "Sufi ritual, social structure and doctrine," Frishkopf adds, "provide a strong formal basis [...] to undermine or replace the notion of an individualized self" (88). At first reading, it is striking that a doctrine whose final goal is the dissolution of the Self found its way into American romanticism and Whitman, famous for celebrating and singing the Self.

The following pages will shed light on the notion of the Self in Sufi poetry and its American and Turkish American manifestations. In order to do so, I will attempt further comparisons between Whitman's and Shafak's work and present their parallel negotiation of Sufi themes. Whitman's poems "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" and "As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life" – both part of a section of *Leaves of Grass* entitled "Sea-Drift" – will serve as an introduction to Sufi themes such as the disappearance of the Sufi author and the search

for the Beloved in *Forty Rules*.<sup>79</sup> My argumentation tests the hypothesis that Whitman's legendary individualism does not amount to an open contradiction of the Sufi doctrine; on the contrary, the two lines of thought coexist side by side in Whitman's works. Shafak's 'Sufi novel,' instead, substantially deviates from the Sufi understanding of the Self in its American subplot.

"As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life" first appeared in 1860 under the title "Bardic symbols" in the *Atlantic Monthly*. It was subsequently integrated into the sixth edition of *Leaves of Grass* in 1881 (Oliver 36). Charles H. Morgan speaks of "As I Ebb'd" as a work that holds an extremely important place in Whitman's poetry as it represents one of the clearest expressions of an archetype of spiritual death and rebirth that, Morgan claims, traverses *Leaves of Grass* and constitutes a "structural principle" governing Whitman's poetry (Morgan 46, 41, 51). This poem is particularly relevant to my analysis due to the prominent role the ocean plays in it. Whitman makes frequent references to the ocean in his work (Oliver 37), but it has been previously established that the significance of the ocean increases when in concomitance with references to Sufi doctrine, both for Whitman and Shafak. The poem depicts a man melancholically walking on a beach, questioning his own ego, and ultimately contemplating suicide by drowning. Charles M. Oliver describes "As I Ebb'd" as a surprisingly pessimistic poem, considering the generally optimistic tone of *Leaves of Grass*. Oliver blames the dispirited tone of the poem on a tumultuous period in Whitman's life: "The author," Oliver explains, "shows his depression over what he sees as personal failure, perhaps the lack of public enthusiasm for his poems" (Oliver 37).

Oliver makes no mention of Sufism in his short entry on "As I Ebb'd" in *Critical Companion to Walt Whitman* (36–37), but Arthur Ford holds a different opinion. Ford states that the "central urge in every atom, [...] to return to its divine source" in "A Persian Lesson" – the text in Whitman's corpus that most explicitly references Sufism – echoes the yearning of the speaker in "As I Ebb'd" to "return to the Great Float or Mother of the Sea" (Ford 22). The ocean appears in fact in

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79 I am aware that the two poems examined in this section do not figure among the texts that most distinctively demonstrate Whitman's fascination for Sufism. "A Persian Lesson" or "Song of Myself" would be more indicative in this respect, and for this reason they have been covered extensively in earlier scholarly work, such as Massud Farzan's "Whitman and Sufism: Towards a Persian Lesson." "A Persian Lesson," for instance, presents an explicit tribute to Sufism, as it describes an open-air lesson held by a "grey-beard Sufi" in a "teeming Persian rose-garden" and expresses Allah's ubiquity and the need of every particle to merge with the divine (Whitman 371). The first two poems of "Sea-Drift" also display Sufi themes and techniques, only in a subtler way.

“As I Ebb’d” as a “fierce old mother endlessly cry[ing] for her castaways.” The parallel highlighted by Ford is an incentive to attempt a Sufi analysis of “As I Ebb’d,” as it would reconcile the glorious, overpowering idea of Self found elsewhere in *Leaves of Grass* with the Sufi search for annihilation in God.

Two different Selves can be detected in “As I Ebb’d”: an oppressive “electric Self” antagonizing a “real me,” holding it captive. The following quotation juxtaposes these two sides of the poetic persona.

I musing late in the autumn day, gazing off southward,  
Held by *this electric self* out of the pride of which I utter poems  
[...]  
But that before all my arrogant poems *the real Me* stands yet  
untouch’d, untold, altogether unreach’d,  
Withdrawn far, mocking me with mock-congratulatory signs and bows,  
With peals of distant ironical laughter at every word I have written,  
Pointing in silence to these songs, and then to the sand beneath.  
(Whitman 174, emphasis added)

To put it with Frishkopf, the Sufi doctrine teaches that the “ego’s self pride” stands as an impediment between the individual and his “true remembrance of origin as spirit” (100) and prevents the individual from “remembering the original Self” (86). This proves to be the case in “As I Ebb’d.” Here, the speaker acknowledges the presence of an authorial Self, the poet, who oppresses him and holds him captive, and of another Self, “the real Me [...] untouch’d, untold, altogether unreach’d” (174). The latter Self is reminiscent of Frishkopf’s “original Self,” unspoiled by the egotistic pride of the first Self – the creative genius, the Author-God. Through the intervention of the original Self, the speaker is thus confronted with the irrelevance of his verses and the unjustified pride in having written them, as the original Self “point[s] in silence to these songs, and then to the sands beneath.” Freed from the “electric Self,” the speaker acknowledges his own insignificance and, humbled, compares himself to “sea rubbish” (Morgan 47): “I too but signify at the utmost a little wash’d up drift,/ A few sands and dead leaves to gather” (Whitman 174). It is not by mere coincidence that the speaker contemplates drowning himself – “merge [him]self as part of the sands and drift” (ibid.) – as, at that point, the Self would be reunited with its originative source, the ocean. Agreeably a bleak version of a Sufi awakening, “As I Ebb’d” nevertheless reflects the path towards self-annihilation in the divine indicated for Sufi adepts.

What surprises Whitman scholar Charles M. Oliver is the collocation of such a pessimistic poem next to “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking,” which he evaluates as “perhaps the most optimistic and upbeat poem in *Leaves of Grass*” (Oliver 37). Morgan, too, reflects on the strangely disheartening nature of some poems in *Leaves of Grass*. While several scholars read the poetry collection as an autobiography and

attribute this phenomenon to a particularly traumatic period in Whitman's life, Morgan connects these "poems of despair" to the spiritual death and rebirth archetype (Morgan 41, 46). Seen from this perspective, which favors Whitman's mystical inclinations over the so called "crisis theory" (ibid.), the collocation of the two poems is not in the least surprising, since "Out of the Cradle" addresses a theme most dear to the Sufi: the search for the Beloved. For the Sufi, the Lover's longing and selfless search for the Beloved symbolizes the individual's search for God. Here, the speaker reports the affliction of a mockingbird who has lost his companion. "Loved! loved! loved! loved! loved!" (Whitman 172) cries the mockingbird, ceaselessly calling his lost companion. These words and the bird imagery compellingly call to mind Sufi atmospheres and symbolism. Considering that both "Out of the Cradle" and "As I Ebb'd" present Sufi themes, the proximity of these two poems in *Leaves of Grass* does not come across as surprising.

What is highly relevant for the goals of this section is that some passages of the mockingbird's song in "Out of the Cradle" are reminiscent of Shafak's Rumi, in particular of his anguish at Shams' disappearance. Both Shafak's Rumi and Whitman's mockingbird feel connected with their missing 'Beloved' across time and space, but both hesitantly wonder about the reliability of this perception. "You must know who I am, my love" (Whitman 171), the mockingbird says, while Shams, when still in search of his companion, wonders "will you recognize me when you see me?" (*Rules* 153). The Lovers in "Out of the Cradle" and *Forty Rules* seek their Beloved in nature, seeing them in a variety of natural phenomena even after their departure.

"Out of the Cradle"

That lagging, yellow, waning mood!

O, under that moon, where she droops  
almost into the sea!

[...]

O brown halo in the sky, near the moon,  
drooping upon the sea!

O troubled reflection in the sea!

O throat! O throbbing heart!

[...]

In the air – in the woods – over fields;

Loved! loved! loved! loved! loved!

(172)

*Forty Rules*

You see him in the drop of water that  
falls into the ocean, in the high tide  
that follows the waxing of the moon,  
or in the morning wind that spreads  
its fresh smell; you see him in the geo-  
mancy symbols in the sand, in the  
tiny particles of rock glittering under  
the sun, [...] in your throbbing vein.

(341)

In addition to the shared natural imagery that, in both cases, frames the search of the Beloved (the moon, the sea, the glittering of the rocks and waters), the common reference to throbbing hearts and veins is particularly poignant. It recalls in fact a passage from the Koran, reassuring believers that they are “closer to Him than His jugular vein” (Koran 50.16). This supports the hypothesis of a Sufi connection in “Out of the Cradle” and suggests that the Lover’s quest for the Beloved is comparable to the quest for God. The disappearance of Shams’ corpse into a well in *Forty Rules*, thrown by assassins who never hear the sound of the body hitting the water, the death of the mockingbird’s companion in “Out of the Cradle,” and the poet’s suicidal fantasies in “As I Ebb’d” point to a degree of dissolution of the Self that characterized Sufi doctrine and has found its way into American literature. The Sufi message, requiring the annihilation of the Self or at least the most egotistic part of it, has to a certain degree been met by the American discourse on Sufism. Paradoxically enough, Shafak’s carefully designed ‘Sufi novel,’ especially in its American subplot, detaches itself the most from the Sufi way. The story of Ella, a Massachusetts housewife who revolutionizes her life after beginning an affair with the Sufi novelist Aziz, seems to subvert not only the Sufi notion of Self, but also the Sufi notion of love. The adaptation of Sufi doctrine in *Forty Rules* points at the book as a product of the American discourse on Sufism, rather than of the Muslim one.

### ***The Forty Rules of Love: A Secular Awakening***

In *Forty Rules*, the fictional Rumi follows a path of spiritual awakening that unfolds from the relinquishing of his former Self – that of a renowned, wealthy theologian – towards the development of mystical poetic inspiration and the creation of a new Self. The new Rumi, the Sufi poet, loses the social approval and spotless reputation he had enjoyed all his life, as many of his fellow citizens deem the message of his spiritual poetry – including erotic imagery, drinking metaphors, and dancing – to be an abhorrent deviation from Islamic orthodoxy. The protagonist of the American subplot in *Forty Rules*, the “unhappy housewife” Ella (10), is presented as a Rumi figure, replicating the same trajectory in an American context and in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Although Ella’s ‘awakening’ is certainly an attempt to recast Sufism in American culture, it represents in fact the least spiritual of the Sufi trajectories examined in this chapter.

Ella is oppressed by a marriage that lost its vigor, by a man who confined her to a domesticity she found inspiring at first, but more and more dissatisfying with the passing of time. Like Rumi before his encounter with Shams, Ella is a role model for her community. Her husband’s professional prestige reflects on

her own reputation and her perfectly decorated house is the object of social approval. When Ella decides to accept a small job as book editor for a publishing house and is assigned the task to review Aziz Zahara's manuscript, she begins a journey towards a Sufi awakening. Yet, instead of the dissolution of the Self, Ella's goal is rather the reconstruction of a previously dissolved Self. Everything points towards Ella's lack of self-awareness as the cause of her domestic submission. Lacking will power and awareness of her capacities, Ella suffocated her vague, embryonic dream of becoming "a prominent book critic" (4) to marriage. After her encounter with Aziz's novel "Sweet Blasphemy," Ella starts to resent her choices and feels like "a cauldron whose lid ha[s] been lifted" (34).

To a certain extent, this process falls within the borders of the Sufi "pursuit of Self-knowledge" (Usher and Bano 5) and perception of the un-initiated as one who never entered his/her own heart (Usher and Bano 7). Usher and Bano argue that the Sufi pursuit of self-awareness has heavily influenced Emerson's work. Furthermore, Whitman's anguished discovery of an "untouch'd, untold, altogether unreach'd" real Self within a shell of authorial presumptuousness resembles Ella's "strangled self" (131). In the same way, the speaker of "As I Ebb'd" confesses that "amid all that blab whose echoes recoil upon me I/ have not once had the least idea who or what I am" (Whitman 174). As Ella's Sufi awakening progresses, and her self-awareness deepens, she discovers "a wiser, calmer, more sensible self" (*Rules* 173) and experiences the "withdrawal into a calm, private space of her own" which "strip[s] away the polite decorum behind which her marriage had slept undisturbed for many years" (176). This stage, paralleling Rumi's retreat from public life, is supposed to mark Ella's passage into a new stage of existence, which surprisingly entails no spiritual awakening. Her new Self is simply wiser, calmer and more sensible, and no reference is made to potential concerns for spirituality. On a practical level, Ella's passage into a new state of consciousness is marked by her fortieth birthday and by Aziz's peculiar birthday wishes.

Happy birthday! [...] did you know that in mystic thought forty symbolizes the ascent from one level to a higher one and spiritual awakening? [...] The flood of Noah lasted for forty days, and while the waters destroyed life, they also washed all impurity away and enabled human beings to make a new, fresh start. In Islamic mysticism there are forty degrees between man and God. [...] Jesus went into the wilderness for forty days and nights. Muhammad was forty years old when he received the call to become a prophet. Buddha meditated under a linden tree for forty days. Not to mention the forty rules of Shams. (115)

In the passage, Aziz provides an overview of the meaning of the number forty in different religions and the desire to bridge Islam and Christianity is obviously

kept center-stage. Her “most auspicious” fortieth year (115) also convinces Ella’s to finally defy social conventions and visit Aziz at his hotel in Boston.

At this point, the reader wonders if it is appropriate to define Ella’s Sufi journey a spiritual awakening, as Ella’s development appears to be a fully secular one. If one considers Rumi’s and Ella’s paths as parallel, Aziz’s death would correspond to the disappearance of Shams, followed by Rumi’s excruciating, definitive spiritual awakening to poetry and mysticism. Nevertheless, this spiritual climax finds no correspondence in the American subplot. Ella’s objectives after Aziz’s death are in fact rather mundane: “What was she going to do now?” Ella wonders, finally alone in Konya, “she didn’t have any money, and she didn’t have a job. But she could always give private lessons in English, work for a magazine, or who knows, be a good fiction editor one day” (349). “I am going to Amsterdam,” Ella resolves, after some thinking, “they have incredibly cute little flats there, overlooking the canals. I can rent one of those. I’ll need to improve my biking, I don’t know...” (ibid.).<sup>80</sup> The markedly un-spiritual ending of Ella’s spiritual journey calls for a reconsideration of the religious significance of Sufism in American culture. A manifestation of American Sufism devoid of religiosity creates a cleavage between Shafak’s use of Sufism and the Transcendentalists’ or the Romantics’, as in those earlier texts Sufi spirituality effortlessly flowed into Christianity. Shafak’s *Forty Rules* portrays an America that appears significantly less concerned with religion than the Transcendentalists’.

Ella’s dislike of religion – or “aversion” as she herself calls it (145) – provides more evidence of the secularization of Sufism in *Forty Rules*.

I know you’re a religious person, but I’m not. Though as a family we celebrate the Sabbath every so often, personally I don’t even remember the last time I prayed. [...] There was a time back in college when I got hooked on Eastern spirituality and did some reading on Buddhism and Taoism. I had even made plans with an eccentric girlfriend to spend a month in an ashram in India, but that phase of my life didn’t last long. As inviting the mystic teachings were, I thought they were too compliant and inapplicable to modern life. Since then I haven’t changed my mind. (ibid.)

Ella’s sullen, demotivated perspective represents religiosity as a mechanical family tradition, passively performed, a short-lived enthusiasm over a trend dismissed as part of the excesses of youth, or a bizarre bonding opportunity with

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80 As a matter of fact, Ella’s awakening is neither a spiritual awakening, nor a path towards gender awareness or emancipation. She is offered a small job thanks to her husband’s contacts and even that does not result in any substantial empowerment: it merely enables the encounter with Aziz (her first customer), providing her with the opportunity to pass from the influence of one male lover to that of another.

a long-forgotten “eccentric girlfriend.” As the previous paragraphs have demonstrated, the Sufi itinerary followed by Ella does not involve a significant deviation from this early statement. It is nevertheless remarkable how the novel is aware of America’s on-and-off infatuations with forms of “Eastern spirituality” (ibid.), and yet does not acknowledge that this might be the case with Sufism as well, especially if uprooted from its doctrinal specificity.

## Of Material Love and Ornamental Sufism

The title *The Forty Rules of Love* anticipates the novel’s strong emphasis on love. In fact, Ella’s awakening can be confidently defined as an awakening to romance, rather than to Sufi spirituality. Romantic love is another element that exposes Ella’s trajectory as a secular one as well as Shafak’s definitive departure from Sufi doctrine. The Sufi’s unbridled, inebriating exaltation of love as mystic longing for God or for a spiritual companion had a strong impact on Transcendentalism. To put it with Rishmawi, the “main force which drove some of these writers towards the East was [...] the desire to free themselves from the confines of their exacting religious background, which looked at sex or sexual intercourse as sins to be avoided, or suppressed” (Rishmawi 148–149). Emerson was nevertheless cautious in his approach to the sensuality of Sufi poetry, distancing himself from the “erotic and bacchanalian tone” of certain texts (Rishmawi 145). Finally, Whitman’s reference to love as the “kelson of the creation” in “Song of Myself” (23) is reminiscent of the Sufi notion of love as the element creating cohesion in a universe pervaded by ardent pantheism, where all creatures are made equal by the act of loving God or each other.

In *Forty Rules*, love is stripped of most of its mystical resonance to embrace an erotic and materialistic dimension. Ella concludes the novel by saying: “Don’t ask yourself what kind of love you should seek, spiritual or material, divine or mundane, Eastern or Western [...]. Love has no labels, no definitions. It is what it is, pure and simple” (Shafak 350). As the novel nears its end, it opens up to undifferentiated kinds of love as equally valuable paths to awakening or self-awareness. Nevertheless, the reference to “material” love as equal to “spiritual” love is highly ambivalent and not necessarily a statement the Sufi would have subscribed to. Ella’s understanding of Sufism appears in fact closer to a ‘whatever works’ approach that mystifies the nature of Sufism as an outgrowth of the Islamic doctrine and nevertheless the very “heart” of that religion (Rishmawi 150). When Aziz presents Ella with “a necklace of turquoise and red coral balls with a silver whirling dervish” (*Rules* 303), the reader receives the inevitable confirmation that Shafak’s Sufism may be mostly decorative and ornamental but much less spiritual.

The previous pages amply discussed the Sufi imperative of relinquishing the Self in order to successfully attain the union with God. In *Forty Rules*, the extramarital relationship between Aziz and Ella is far from symbolizing the Self's passionate desire to dissolve in the divine. At least for Ella, the relationship with Aziz is tantamount to the carnal possession of a heterosexual object of desire:

Aziz reached around and pulled the pin holding her bun, letting her hair loose. Then he gently moved her onto the bed [...]. While his hands caressed every inch of her body, his eyes remained firmly closed and his lips prayed for her. It was the most spiritual thing she had ever experienced. And although she kept her clothes on, and so did he, and although there was nothing carnal about it, it was the sexiest feeling she had ever experienced. [...] With that feeling she put her arms around Aziz, ready to go further. (303–304)

The non-carnal nature of their intimacy is short-lived. The Sufi notion of mystical and selfless love swiftly transforms into an egotistical desire to possess the lover. In that same way, the entire work, presenting itself as a 'Sufi novel,' gives in to romance. It comes as no surprise that, among the keywords on *Forty Rules'* copyright page, "Housewives – fiction" appears first, and "Sufis – fiction" follows in the third position. The novel fails to convey a convincing portrait of Sufism as it embodies the dangers and pitfalls of cultural translation.<sup>81</sup> Nevertheless, the novel still represents a valuable attempt to build a transatlantic dialogue between the American and the Turkish traditions along the lines of Sufism.

### **The Road to Baghdad Leads Somewhere: the (Ir)relevance of Sufism in Güneli Gün's *On The Road to Baghdad***

The previous section has shown that Sufism holds an important place in American literary history and thus provides authors of Turkish American literature with an important resource to establish an intercultural dialogue between America and Turkey. My concern in the following pages is with the work of Güneli Gün, a Turkish American author based in Ohio, and her 1994 novel *On the Road to Baghdad*. This 'Sufi' novel simultaneously positions itself in the traditions of Sufism and postmodernism, as Gün was a student of John Barth's and her work was significantly influenced by her acquaintance with this American postmodernist author. Yet, Gün reinterprets American postmodernism by infusing it with elements from her own Turkish cultural background, drawing inspiration from Ottoman folklore and spirituality. One can confidently affirm that *On the Road*

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81 See also Furlanetto, "The 'Rumi Phenomenon,'" 208.

to *Baghdad* is a unique, remarkable novel which effectively synthesizes the post-modern tradition, in its North American manifestation, with the Ottoman one.

*On the Road to Baghdad* narrates the adventurous journey of an Ottoman girl, Hürü, across the territories of the empire. The girl is abandoned by her brother as the family travels to Baghdad, an event that will mark the beginning of her long journey to be reunited with her parents. During this journey, Hürü embarks on a series of adventures that will involve, among other things, her training as a Sufi, her marriage to a Sultan, her marriage to a woman, and a tormented friendship with legendary writer Shahrazad. Rich with supernatural beings and circumstances, fabulistic digressions, time travels, and embedded narratives, the novel is an unusual fairytale drawing from the Ottoman storytelling tradition as well as from postmodern narration techniques. I am convinced that the novel offers one more example of how Sufism may represent a surface where the Turkish/Ottoman and American cultures can be successfully reconciled, even, and perhaps especially, within the iconoclastic severity of postmodernism.

Kader Konuk and Gönül Pultar question the relevance of Sufi symbolism in *On the Road to Baghdad* with regard to both its pertinence to the novel and its transnational potential. Konuk describes Gün's text as "situated between two *irreconcilable* positions: postmodernism's call to demystify the 'I' and the task of salvaging her own cultural heritage in the postmodern world" (Konuk, "Sufism and Postmodernism" 99, emphasis added). Konuk posits the adherence to postmodernism and the retrieval of the Ottoman cultural heritage as mutually exclusive categories, superficially and deceptively brought together by the image of the Sufi journey towards self-effacement. Konuk, who sees a correspondence between the fictional Sufi journey in the novel and the search for a "spiritual homeland," argues that "the dissolution of the self into the other is the task not only of the Sufi, but a demand [Gün] imposes on herself – an author of non-western origins who sees herself as a transmitter and conveyor of her own literary language" (100). Here, Konuk implies that the demand Gün imposes on herself would be her own dissolution, as a non-Western author, in the otherness of American literature. Pultar, although more positive about the novel's transnational appeal, is extremely critical when it comes to assessing the role of Sufism in *On the Road to Baghdad*. According to Pultar, the novel's confidence in Sufism as a source of personal salvation "cannot be taken seriously," as it remains "a mere anachronism and part of the absurdist paraphernalia of the novel." "The road to Baghdad," Pultar concludes, "leads nowhere" ("Travelling Biculturalism" 59).

The reason for Pultar's disenchantment with the novel's Sufi digressions is the very framework of the novel, which she defines "fantastic" and therefore liable

of divesting Sufism of any “gravitas” (ibid.). What further deprives the novel of spiritual authority in the eyes of Pultar is the present status of Sufism in Turkey, which is reduced to a “mere tourist attraction [...] emptied today of any significance [...] by obliging whirling dervishes” (ibid.). Thus, both scholars discourage the reader from taking Sufi symbolism in the novel too seriously. The Sufi way may in fact offer no convincing path to salvation, as the book enigmatically ends with the disappearance of the two female protagonists, Hürü and the legendary Shahrazad, in a flash of blue and green light nearby the sacred city of Konya. Nevertheless, I propose that the significance of Sufism in *Baghdad* and the central role it plays in locating the novel in a Turkish American frame can be revisited. *Baghdad* is representative of Turkish American literature as it triggers a successful cultural dialogue between the Turkish and the American spheres, and does so by resorting, once again, to Sufism as a salient cultural component of Ottoman Turkey.

In her article “Güneli Gün on the Road to Baghdad: Travelling Biculturalism,” Pultar makes a strong case in favor of the novel’s capacity to integrate the American and Turkish cultures. She sheds light on the various elements that connect the Eastern matter of the book to the American literary tradition. Starting with the reference in the title, she claims that “the novel is in the vein of Jack Kerouak’s *On the Road* and many others that have followed suit” (58). The journey Hürü embarks on can also be read in an American framework as a search for freedom, to be found at the end of the Road. The search for freedom of “an American woman,” Pultar specifies, is “too adverse to an Ottoman *weltanschauung*” and more suitable to 20<sup>th</sup> century America (59). Ultimately, Pultar connects Hürü’s repeated attempts to ‘pass’ as a boy (52) to the issue of ‘passing,’ an important feature of American culture.

Pultar also underlines the transnational character of the novel, adding that “an understanding of the two cultures involved is necessary for a satisfactory appreciation of the work,” as the novel at hand is “neither Turkish, nor American, yet both” (49). The novel is a platform where both cultures function as “sites traversed,” in so far as they are equally transgressed and othered, but their interaction excludes the hegemony of one over the other as they undergo a process of reciprocal adjustment (ibid.). The aim of this chapter so far has been to demonstrate that Turkish American writers have used Sufism to create compelling parallels between the Turkish and the American spheres, opening a transnational or a “bicultural” dialogue (ibid.). I argue this is the case with *On the Road to Baghdad* as well: Sufism, too, finds its place among the elements that compellingly locate the novel in an American framework and, more specifically, in the framework of American postmodernism.

To begin with, Gün's choice to publish a novel that can be read as a Sufi tale is not surprising when considering the American and Turkish literary markets in the Nineties, where Gün's novel appears to be part of larger trends and needs to be contextualized. In her 2000 article "Spiritual Consumption in the United States: the Rumi Phenomenon," Amira El-Zein writes that "for decades, there has been a tremendous amount of publishing in the States on the work of [Rumi]" (71). Academic translations of Rumi have been available since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, but the late 20<sup>th</sup> century saw an enormous popularization of Rumi due to "non-academic" translations that significantly simplified the pre-existing ones in favor of non-specialist readerships (73). One of the most prolific interpreters of Rumi is Coleman Barks, who published his first adaptations in the Seventies, and in 1994, El-Zein reports, *Publishers' Weekly* announced that Rumi had become America's bestselling poet. By 2000, Barks' adaptations had sold more than 250.000 copies. From such a perspective, *On the Road to Baghdad*, published in 1991, appears as part and parcel of an American literary phenomenon that revolved around the popularization and domestication of Sufism. The extent to which Gün participated in this domestication will be clarified later. My concern now is illustrating how the representation of Sufism in the novel is not only deeply embedded in the American literary market, but in the Turkish one as well.

In 1990, Orhan Pamuk published *The Black Book* in Turkey. The first English translation by Gün followed in 1994, three years after the first edition of *On the Road to Baghdad*. Striking similarities emerge between these two representative works of postmodernism, the most relevant for the purpose of this analysis being that both trace the unfolding of an individual's spiritual quest and can be read as Sufi tales. In both novels, the Sufi path is identical with the search of individual and collective identities. Konuk describes *On the Road to Baghdad* as the promoter of a dialogue between the Turkish and the American literary corpora, able to convey the idea of cultures and identities in process (*Identitäten im Prozeß* 91). On a similar note, Brent Brendemoen speaks of an "identity" theme in *The Black Book*, which "slowly takes a turn in the Sufi direction" (Brendemoen n.p.). Like in *On the Road to Baghdad*, the search for the Sufi mystery in *The Black Book* gradually gains prominence and only towards the end of the novels does the reader realize that the trajectory followed by the protagonist corresponds to a Sufi path.

These and other references to the Ottoman tradition contributed to the problematic reception of the two novels in Turkey. "Turkish readers today," Brendemoen notes, "are so secularized and devoid of knowledge about Sufi literature that most of them would not be able to appreciate the Sufi aspects of the novel" without the

necessary explicatory paragraphs Pamuk introduces in the course of *The Black Book* (Brendemoen n.p.). Pultar makes a similar point when discussing the lack of enthusiasm with which Gün's novel was received in Turkey, blaming it on its distinctly Ottomanesque quality: "Turkish readers did not have much taste for the Eastern matter, preponderant in the novel, which they tended to identify with the paradigm they had formally left behind, first with the edict of *Tanzimat* in 1839, then even more vigorously with the establishment of the Republic in 1923" ("Travelling Biculturalism" 49). Pamuk and Gün infuse their postmodern novels with Ottoman culture and spirituality, which the Turks had learned to associate with "lack of rationality, [...] downright ignorance or primitivism" (ibid.) in the last decades of the Ottoman Empire and the Kemalist era.

Finally, neither Gün nor Pamuk hesitate to address the issue of plagiarism. The continuous references to other works of literature, Brendemoen argues, make *The Black Book* a "metanovel" (Brendemoen n.p.), adding that the book is permeated with a profound discussion of the theme of plagiarism, considering that one of the main characters, the columnist Celâl, "has taken (or 'stolen') the themes of most of his articles from Sufi poets" (ibid.). The word 'stolen' figures prominently in *On the Road to Baghdad*, whose subtitle is *A Picaresque Novel of Magical Adventures, Begged, Borrowed and Stolen from the Thousand and One Nights*. In his article "Authorship in Sufi Poetry," Frishkopf insists on how central an intertextual "fabric of quotations" is to Sufi authorship, where the individual author renounces his/her creative autonomy by purposefully drawing from a vaster, interconnected textual repertoire.

On the whole, Gün's and Pamuk's novels similarly engage with Sufi spirituality, which gains paramount importance on the levels of content, reception, and authorship. Viewed from such a perspective, the Sufi elements in *On the Road to Baghdad* simultaneously anchor the novel in an American context and in a Turkish one. On the one hand the enormous interest for Sufism awakened in the U.S. by a new wave of Rumi translations, which reached its peak in the Nineties, strengthens the American frame around Gün's Sufi novel. On the other hand, the clear connections between *On the Road to Baghdad* and *The Black Book* ground it in the Turkish literary market. The different reception and understanding of Sufism in Turkey and the United States in the Nineties also deserve to be emphasized. While, as mentioned earlier, a Sufi novel published in the United States in the Nineties could hope to ride the wave of the Rumi phenomenon, Turkey's reaction to a romanticization of Islamic mysticism such as the one offered by Gün would be far less predictable and much more discordant. As I mentioned earlier, the Kemalist ban on Sufi schools and lodges had translated into the rejection of

Islamic mysticism as backward superstition, but at the same time the cultural and political movement of neo-Ottomanism attempted to restore the dignity and prestige of the country's Islamic tradition.

Having clarified the relevance of Sufism in establishing *On the Road to Baghdad* as a transnational Turkish American work, I shall now focus on how the novel secularizes Sufism for American readerships and explores the specific connection between Sufism and American postmodernism. By so doing, I hope to mitigate the irreconcilability between Sufism and postmodernism, showing that Sufi elements contribute, along with other aspects, to locating *On the Road to Baghdad* in the American cultural context.

### **Secularized Sufi elements in *On the Road to Baghdad***

In the initial part of the novel, the domestication of Sufism for 20<sup>th</sup>-century American readerships goes hand in hand with irony. Disguised as a boy, Hürü becomes a page at the court of Sultan Selim. Her permanence at court is described through the terminology of American higher education. Activities such as music and wrestling appear as subjects on Hürü's schedule: "she never received more than a passing grade in physical education, for which she expected Selim to thrash her" (50). Additionally, Hürü studies horticulture at the "Mevlana Institute," where she is eventually offered a "fellowship" (52). There, Hürü learns the art of cabbage farming from an elderly dervish who functions as a confidante and with whom Hürü discusses her love issues like any college girl would. It is important to mention that Sufism in *On the Road to Baghdad* mostly revolves around the figure of Rumi. Other mystics are mentioned in passing, but Rumi's teachings are presented as general guidelines for Sufism as a whole: "The dervishes, whether wandering or sedentary, lived in accordance with Rumi's admonition: If you desire to increase your perception, then increase your necessity" (68). Rumi's centrality in the novel's Sufi architecture is no secondary detail, considering that the Rumi phenomenon was at its peak.

In the previous chapter, the analysis of Sufism in Halide Edip and Elif Shafak showed how both emphasized the proximity of Islamic mysticism and Christianity by defining them as essentially different from orthodox Islam, and connoting the former as religions of love, and the latter as a religion of fear. Thus, not only does the cultural distance between the United States and Turkey shrink as the two nations are projected as compatible with one another on the grounds of religion, but the association of Islam with fundamentalism is dispelled. A similar attempt to Americanize Sufism appears in *On the Road to Baghdad*, where Sufism

is described as a non-violent creed and the spiritual dominion of free thinkers. Hürü's parents, in fact,

were attracted by ideas. Sometimes they thought they were the only free thinkers left in the world. They had retained from the past a certain influence that had always been empirical: Sufi thought. [...] The ancients had been thinking unimpeded before the Big Religions set in. So, neither the Physician nor his good wife held any commerce with unexamined beliefs. Nor did they practice religion that manifested itself in brutality against others. (309)

The quoted passage is of great significance on many levels. The association between free thinking and Sufism suggests that religion, in this case, does not interfere with men's and women's capacity to think critically. Gün's version of Sufism does not demand that its adepts renounce critical thinking, as the categories of spirituality and rationality are not perceived as mutually exclusive.

The multiple narrators of Shafak's *The Forty Rules of Love* also reassure the reader that Sufism promotes humanism and the centrality of the individual and it does so by renegotiating the controversial identification of Islam with Submission, implied in the literal translation of the term 'Islam.' In the book, the concept of Submission is dissociated from the idea of servitude and redefined as "peaceful acceptance of the terms of the universe" (*Rules* 55): an idea that lays no claim on individual freedom.

Skepticism about institutionalized creeds constitutes another shared secularization strategy in Gün and Shafak. Here, the "Big Religions" (*Baghdad* 309) appear as restrictive models imposed on communities that allegedly allowed unimpeded thought, opening possible scenarios of cultural occupation. Furthermore, the Physician is said to take "delight [...] in hostility towards mosque and clergy" (309). As noted by many,<sup>82</sup> the Rumi phenomenon in the United States builds on a certain diffused intolerance of established religions, and constructs Sufism as an all-encompassing form of spirituality unencumbered by the alleged abstruseness and rigidity of monotheistic religions. Coleman Barks, the author of *The Essential Rumi*, perpetrates this assumption by using Rumi himself: "[Rumi] says when [the mosque and the minaret and the school] are torn down, then dervishes can begin their community. So he wants us all to break out of our conditioning, be it national or be it religious or be it gender based" (Barks in Tompkins n.p.). Shams of Tabriz, Rumi's historical companion and one of the

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82 See, for example, Amira El-Zein's "Spiritual Consumption in the United States: The Rumi Phenomenon" and Ali Wajahat's interview with Seyyed Hossein Nasr "Professor Seyyed Hossain Nasr: Islam's Spiritual Science."

narrators in Shafak's *The Forty Rules of Love*, urges the demolition of religion, a hindrance to the individual's path towards God comparable to "fame, wealth, and rank" (*Rules* 290). The incitement to figuratively tear down the spaces of orthodoxy has been used within the Rumi phenomenon to legitimize the decontextualization of Sufi poetry in order to make it more palatable to a 20<sup>th</sup>-century American readership. To such decontextualization, Iranian philosopher and Sufi scholar Seyyed Hossain Nasr responds that "in the modern world [...] there is a hatred of religion, and there are certain sectors of modern society where there is an idea that you can take the spiritual teachings of a religion outside of a religion and practice them" (Nasr in Wajahat n.p.). With this remark, Nasr connects a widespread antipathy for established religions with the tendency to uproot certain spiritual practices from their precise doctrinal backdrop, as it happened with Rumi in the United States. "Christian mystics were also Christians," Nasr adds, "they also went to Church and followed Christian laws. Hindu mystics were practicing Hindus; [...] They follow the Hindu laws and so on and so forth down the line and Sufism is no exception" (ibid.).

I do not claim that Sufism did not voice the need to pursue a spiritual path that diverged from the one imposed by Islamic orthodoxy, but this aspect of Sufism is discussed with particular emphasis within the Rumi phenomenon in the United States, due to cultural characters that make American readerships particularly receptive to Sufi writings and teachings. "Creeds do not suit the American spirit," claims Harold Bloom in *The American Religion*, "the freedom we go on associating with solitude and with wildness does not easily assimilate with the otherness of historical doctrines" (Bloom 45). Gün's and Shafak's novels are consonant with this approach, with different intensity, but similar practices.

Another instance of domestication – or selective emphasis – is the stress on the non-violent nature of Sufism, as opposed to the aggressiveness of Islamic fundamentalism. The Sufi couple in the passage, as the narrator clarifies, stay away from religions that "manifested [themselves] in brutality against others" (*Baghdad* 309). In the same way, Shafak has Shams of Tabriz reassuringly distance himself and the Sufis from all forms of extremism and state that "Sufis don't go extremes. A Sufi always stays mild and moderate" (*Rules* 153). Shams also pronounces himself against "bigots," or Muslims who pursue a literal interpretation of the Koran:

instead of searching for the essence of the Qur'an and embracing it as a whole, however, the bigots single out a specific word or two, giving priority to the divine commands that they deem to be in tune with their fearful minds [...]. Those who have led a virtuous life will be rewarded with exotic fruits, sweet waters, and virgins. This, in a nutshell, is their notion of afterlife. (*Rules* 182)

The difference between the open-minded, all-encompassing spirituality of the Sufi and the “bigots” in *On the Road to Baghdad* is expressed by the intrusion of two “disgraceful permanent guests” (309) in the Physician’s house, namely, the Imam and Mistress Kevser, a retired school teacher. The “disagreeable couple” (ibid.) embodies a stale sense of religiosity, marked by uncritical acceptance of the established norms. The uncomfortable relationship between the two couples living under the same roof is clearly a symbol for the problematic coexistence, within Islam, of fundamentalist and moderate approaches to faith. The Physician’s description of the bigot couple is reminiscent of Shams’ portrayal of Islamic fundamentalists. “The Imam and Mistress Kevser,” the Physician reminds his wife, “are useful to us as agents of Chaos, lest we forget [...] the powerful force of ignorant beliefs” (ibid.). Shafak’s construction of Sufism as a religion of love and acceptance is easily identified as a response to post-9/11 Islamophobia in the United States. The narrator’s distaste for unequivocally hideous figures of Islamic fundamentalists throughout the book characterizes Sufism as an alternative to the widespread perception of Islam as a religion of terror and violence. Gün’s novel was published a decade before 9/11, but its insistence on Sufism as a non-aggressive form of Islamic spirituality is no less clear an attempt to fight a similarly destructive perception of Islam. America in the mid-Nineties was in fact very much affected by Islamic terrorism<sup>83</sup>.

The mutual antipathy between the Imam and the Physician connects to the debate between science and religion, and to discourses ingrained in Western cultures arguing for the supposed rationality of the former and irrationality of the latter. Sufism offers itself here as a middle ground. Sufi philosophy is presented as “empirical” (309) and compatible with free thinking. Moreover, the Physician and his wife refused to “[hold] any commerce with unexamined beliefs” (ibid), while the Imam and Mistress Kevser advocate “ignorant beliefs” (ibid.). On the one hand, Gün’s description of Sufism talks back to the Kemalist distaste for Islamic heterodoxy, which was dismissed as superstition. On the other hand, Sufism represents a surface onto which the American controversy between scientific and religious thought may be negotiated. This aspect, not as prominent in Shafak’s *The Forty Rules of Love*, greatly contributes to making *On the Road to Baghdad* a bicultural novel.

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83 The terrorist attack on the Pan Am Flight 103 in 1988, the bombing of U.S. embassies in Kuwait and Beirut in 1983, and the hostage crisis at the U.S. embassy in Tehran in 1979 are only a few example of terrorists attacks directed against the U.S. in the Seventies and Eighties.

Overlapping areas between Whitman's work and Sufism, and between modern Turkish American Sufi novels and Whitman, have been one of the foci of the previous section. *On the Road to Baghdad* presents another instance of this triangulation among Turkish American literature, Sufism, and Whitman. This becomes clear when examining the following passage, where Shahrazad speaks about herself as a writer.

"I am also the thousand-and-one persons I have hallucinated. I am Sinbad the Sailor. Yes, my mind has travelled to that splendid showplace of death called the City of Brass. I've seen kingdoms under the sea, kept company with vagrants, outcasts, criminals and rogues in contexts both dirty and clean, abandoned myself to a hundred love-deaths in Baghdad, to a hundred-and-one infidelities in Cairo. I've put demons and warlocks under control, been flown on *jinn* to China and back. I've been transformed into beasts, into Saints, Jews, Christians, into wags, ghouls, merchants both prudent and imprudent, into wastrels, hunchbacks, imps, into enchantresses with menageries of lovers, into kings whose reign is golden." (255)

Shahrazad's narration directly echoes of the all-hearing, all-seeing poetic persona of "Song of Myself," one that takes part, hears, and sees the world (or the nation) in its entirety. The passage, with its anaphora of the pronoun "I," evokes the catalogues of "Song of Myself," in which the poetic persona and author-figure is at one with the objects of his writing. The author figure in "Song of Myself" becomes all the contradictory voices he articulates: "I do not ask the wounded person how he feels," he affirms, "I myself become the wounded person" (Whitman 45). Here, Shahrazad produces an asyndetic list of literary incarnations she has encountered while writing the *One Thousand and One Nights*, and claims to be "the thousand-and-one persons [she has] hallucinated" (*Baghdad* 255). Like Shahrazad, Whitman's persona simultaneously inhabits a series of poetic objects, each one as accessible as "a change of garments" (Whitman 45).

Konuk also elaborates on this passage in her book *Identitäten in Prozess*. In Konuk's reading, this crucial excerpt connects the borderlessness of literature with the radical borderlessness of the self. Literature that is orally transmitted, like the tales of the *One Thousand and One Nights*, can hardly be anchored to easily traceable, easily localizable identities. By the same token, serial re-tellings of these legends are a substantial component of cultures that remain in process. Since Gün's novel is ostensibly based on borrowings and retellings, the identity she seeks to define in her work is also a fluid one (Konuk 151). What makes Konuk's argument particularly poignant is that, in Gün's case, the retelling of Ottoman legends that are at the basis of Turkish identity is carried out in English and within an American framework. The renegotiation of Turkey's Ottoman heritage is thus interwoven with elements from the American cultural tradition. This is

particularly evident in the reported passage about Shahrazad's borderless self, where Shahrazad's voice resonates with Whitmanian echoes.

The Rumi verses which Shafak integrates into her writing and which echo Whitman's identificatory catalogues, alluding to a contradictory and yet complete plural consciousness, confirm Rumi's ascendant on American literature and surface in Gün's text as well. Whitman's speaker claims to synthesize oppositions by appearing "of old and young, of the foolish as much as the wise,/ Regardless of others, ever regardful of others,/ Maternal as well as paternal, a child as well as a man,/ Stuff'd with the stuff that is coarse and stuff'd with the stuff/ that is fine" (Whitman 30). Yet, this does not prevent him from wondering "What is a man anyhow? what am I? what are you?" (ibid.). In the same way, Gün's Shahrazad does not discriminate among her incarnations, contradictory as they may be: she frequents "contexts both dirty and clean" and characters "both prudent and imprudent" (255); but she concludes her list of literary incarnations by asking herself "what's my mettle? My substance?" (245). While so far Shahrazad's inquiry into the authorial self ran parallel to Whitman's, her answer to the question of substance creates a stark contrast with Whitman's conclusion, and faithfully adheres to the Sufi path to self-annihilation:

"I long to exhaust all shapes of my being. As each tale falls away from me, so does another guise, another need, another dream. Someday the shell called Shahrazad will be so empty, I will see the face of God." (*Baghdad* 245)

In the quoted passage, Shahrazad longs for self-effacement, not necessarily as a human being, but certainly as an author. In other words, Shahrazad's conclusions are far from establishing the mythic and overwhelmingly powerful author figure that dominates "Song of Myself." If applied to the literary context of the Nineties, when *On the Road to Baghdad* was published, the Sufi's yearn for figurative death points instead to the postmodern concept of the death of the author. Such theoretical background will guide the following part of my analysis, aiming to locate *On the Road to Baghdad* in the context of American postmodernism.

## **Sufi Mysticism and North American Postmodernism: Barth, Barthes, Gün**

The net of intertextual references linking Gün's work with American postmodernism has been explored by Kader Konuk in her article "Sufism and Postmodernism in Güneli Gün's *On The Road to Baghdad*." Konuk describes Gün's novel as intellectually indebted to the work of postmodern author John Barth, her teacher and mentor. Djelal Kadir made a similar point in 1992, when he wrote that Barth

“admitted that he served as midwife in Guneli’s delivery upon our writing scene” (Kadir 63). Konuk argues that *On the Road to Baghdad* can be seen as a response to Barth’s novella “Dunyazadiad,” included in his 1972 novel *Chimera*. According to Konuk, the figure of Shahrazad in Gün’s novel and the narrator of Barth’s novella, Shahrazad’s sister Dunyazad, are similarly narcissistic. On the level of form, Konuk continues, both Barth and Gün’s emphasis on intertextuality, self-referentiality, pastiche, collage, and other open narrative techniques point at the exhausted state of literature (Konuk 98–99), cast as a feature of postmodernism in Barth’s 1967 essay “The Literature of Exhaustion.”

In her article, Konuk also addresses the theme of Sufism in *On the Road to Baghdad*, concluding that the Turkish author presents Sufism as “an answer to North American postmodernism” and its unrelenting deconstruction of the Self and literature as expressed in Barth’s “Exhaustion.” In *On the Road to Baghdad* the dissolution of literary forms and authorial figures supposedly goes hand in hand with the dissolution of the self in Sufi spirituality. Gün’s characters undergo a process of self-discovery within the spiritual context of Sufism which does result in a dissolution of the self – and yet it does not imply its negation or total deconstruction (Konuk 100). For this reason, in Konuk’s view, Gün demonstrates her ultimate rejection of (Barth’s) postmodern ideas. While postmodern literature “distinguish[es] itself from the traditional function of literature as a site for constituting meaning,” Gün “presents Sufism as the archetypical remedy for questions related to the meaning of existence,” positing that meaning can be found beyond deconstruction (Konuk 94). Konuk perceives Gün’s text as haunted by a “fundamental contradiction”: “on the one hand, indebted to postmodern narrative strategies and, on the other, motivated by questions relative to the meaning of existence” (100).

By affirming that there is a fundamental contradiction between Gün’s use of postmodern narrative strategies and depiction of Sufism, and by arguing that her “recourse to Sufi mysticism demonstrates a rejection of postmodern ideas” (100), Konuk points at a constitutive incompatibility between Sufism and American postmodernism – as the former aims to achieve meaning through deconstruction, while the latter deconstructs meaning. Yet, Gün’s novel may also be seen as an attempt to mediate between the Sufi and the postmodern deconstruction of the authorial figure: the former religious, the latter secular. On the one hand the Sufi strove to obtain self-effacement in a mystical sense, while the postmodern apply the idea of a mystical dissolution to literature and the demise of an overbearing authorial figure. It is my intention to build on the (dis)connection between Sufism and postmodern literature postulated by Konuk and suggest that

the Turkish American novel *On the Road to Baghdad* emerges as a site where the two practices are successfully integrated and work towards similar goals. In fact, in order to strengthen his argument, Barth makes frequent references to “the mystics” and their methods (Barth 70, 71). Gün’s portrayal of Sufism as a strategy to find meaning in and beyond deconstruction might not be a rejection of Barth’s conceptualization of literary exhaustion, nor of postmodern ideas, as Barth does not announce the total demise of literature, but its renewal in a different form.

Barth opens “The Literature of Exhaustion” stating that “the times of literature and the novel might have come to an end, but there is no necessary cause for alarm in this at all” (71). Yet, this did result in a certain measure of alarm. In the preface to a later edition of “Exhaustion,” included in *The Friday Book: Essays and Other Non-Fiction* (1984), Barth felt the need to respond to his critics by saying that his article, much to his discomfort, had been “frequently misread as one more Death of the Novel and Swan-Song of literature piece” (Barth 64). This led to the publication of a second essay, “The Literature of Replenishment,” which lays emphasis on a potential renewal of literary forms, rather than on their exhausted state. In “Replenishment,” Barth laments the fact that “a great many people [...] mistook me to mean that literature, at least fiction, is *kaput*: that there is nothing left for contemporary writers but to parody and travesty our great predecessors in our exhausted medium – exactly what some critics deplore as postmodernism. This is not what I meant at all” (Barth 205).

It is undeniable that, even in “Exhaustion,” Barth does point at new avenues of literary experimentation. More specifically, he suggests that, in order to continue to exist, literature should learn from Borges and from the mystics. “[Borges’] artistic victory,” according to Barth, lies in doing “what the mystics do,” in so far as he “confronts an intellectual dead end and employs it against itself to accomplish new human work” (Barth 70). This statement resonates with the possibility of producing meaning beyond annihilation, which permeates both Sufi mysticism and Barth’s understanding of postmodern literature. The parallel between the postmodern author and the mystics reappears one page later, again in reference to Borges. “[Borges’ work] illustrates [...] how an artist may paradoxically turn the felt ultimacies of our time into material and means for his work – *paradoxically*, because by so doing he transcends what had appeared to be his refutation, in the same way that the mystic who transcends finitude is said to be enabled to live, spiritually and physically, in the finite world” (Barth 71, emphasis in the original text). Like the postmodern author survives the “felt ultimacies of our time” (*ibid.*), among which his figurative destruction and burial by the hand of French philosopher Roland Barthes and others, the mystic acknowledges and

even accelerates the finitude of his mundane existence, and only then does s/he experience unity with God – the only life worth living.

When “the author enters his own death,” wrote Barthes, “writing begins” (Barthes 2), and it is hard not to think of the concept of self-denial in Sufi spirituality and writing. Frishkopf confirms the parallel between Sufi mysticism and postmodern literature, speaking of Sufi authorship as “postmodern”: “Authorship in Sufi poetry appears as surprisingly postmodern. [...] It [...] displays most clearly the literary attributes of postmodernism: reader determination of meaning; intertextuality; the decentering of the autonomous author” (Frishkopf 78, 79). There are powerful connections between Sufism and postmodernism, especially with regards to the marginalization of the individual author-God, and there is enough evidence to claim that the two currents are, if not connected, at least not incompatible. Konuk’s identification of Gün’s Sufism with a rejection of postmodern ideas is pertinent. It is necessary to specify whose postmodern ideas Gün is antagonizing by posing questions regarding the meaning of existence. My contention is that it is not John Barth’s avant-gardism that *On the Road to Baghdad* is objecting to with its use of Sufism, but rather Roland Barthes’ similar positions, positions Barth is also ideally contradicting.

Both Barth and Barthes, in their coterminous theoretical essays “The Literature of Exhaustion” and “The Death of the Author,” touch upon the three distinguishing features of postmodernism indicated by Frishkopf as leading to a triangulation with Sufi writing and spirituality: “reader determination of meaning; intertextuality; the decentering of the autonomous author” (Frishkopf 78, 79). What differentiates the two theoretical approaches to postmodernism is exactly the search for meaning, and its ultimate potential for deconstruction. On the one hand, in “The Death of the Author,” Barthes dreams of writing practices that ceaselessly and systematically evaporate meaning:

Thus literature (it would be better, henceforth, to say writing), by refusing to assign to the text (and to the world as text) a “secret”: that is, an ultimate meaning, liberates an activity which we might call counter-theological, properly revolutionary, for to refuse to arrest meaning is finally to refuse God and his hypostases, reason, science, the law. (Barthes 5)

Barth’s figurative killing of the author is the first element of a chain reaction that would lead to the erasure of ultimate meaning, of God, and of other categories that up to that point had been intended to offer meaning. On the other hand, Barth invites the postmodern author to survive his/her finitude and metaphorical death in order to “accomplish new human work” (Barth 70), and, like the mystics, access a different mode of existence where one’s ability to produce meaning would possibly be restored. Konuk is right when affirming that Gün

“posits Sufism as the archetypical remedy for questions related to the meaning of existence” that postmodernism dismisses (Konuk 99). Yet I propose that it is not “North American postmodernism” (Konuk 100) that Gün responds to by her use of Sufism, especially not Barth’s. On the contrary, Gün seems to approvingly “nod” to Barth (Pultar 55), using American postmodernism as a frame of reference onto which she grafts her transnational Sufi novel.

There is little doubt that Gün’s *On the Road to Baghdad* is an eminent representative of Turkish American literature as a transnational phenomenon. The novel presents its American readership with a domesticated version of Sufism, interspersed with more intricate references to Islamic doctrine and Ottoman folklore – the impenetrable “Eastern matter” (49) Pultar mentions as one of the causes for the book’s poor sales. Parallel to that, the book lays a strong claim for inclusion in the American postmodern tradition by entering a literary conversation with one of its seminal authors. This section offered an alternative reading of Sufism in *On the Road to Baghdad*, one that hoped to emphasize the relevance of the Sufi theme in the novel and argued in favor of its compatibility with the dictates of American postmodernism.

Sufism gains paramount importance in *On the Road to Baghdad* as a terrain of transnational convergences. The self-annihilation of the Sufi adept in God finds a close correspondence in Barth’s urge to do “what the mystics do” and embrace literature’s dead end to inject it with renewed life (Barth 70). Gün’s text participates in the postmodern debate over the death of the author by having her two protagonists and author-figures – Hürü and Shahrazad – disappear at the end of the novel in miraculous circumstances: “[Hürü] was changed [...] into an unbearably brilliant green light. And where Shahrazad stood, a blue light appeared, growing in intensity and brilliance until the two prodigious lights merged into one single blue-green fire” (Gün 353). Like Barth, Gün embraces a purposeful approach to the death of the author by specifying, in the novel’s conclusion, what follows his/her disappearance, namely, invisible feminine voices made visible. “Sufi knowledge,” a grandmother tells her granddaughter at the end of the book, “is as silent and secret as our woman knowledge” (ibid), and encourages her to hand down the story of Hürü and Shahrazad to “one of her granddaughters [...] the one who understands” (ibid.). Like Edip before her and Shafak after her, Gün hypothesizes the substitution of a male-dominated tradition of the written word with a strongly matrilinear history, supplements Turkish historiography with Ottoman folklore, and grafts mystic heterodoxy into a predominantly orthodox tradition. In *The Black Book* – an important interlocutor for Gün and a representative of Turkish postmodernism (Gökнар, “Ottoman Theme” 34, 35) – the narrator agrees with Barthes on “refusing

to assign to the text (and to the world as text) a 'secret' [and] an ultimate meaning" (Barthes 5), as Galip eventually becomes aware that his agitated search of Celâl, the secret hidden behind his writings, and a meaning behind the faces of his compatriots are mere delusions. By contrast, Barthes and Gün use mysticism to overcome the joint demise of literature and the author, pointing at different literary scenarios that are to follow.

