

# The Woman as a Sufi Motif in Modern Arabic Fiction

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**Abstract:** The woman has been so intensely described in modern Arabic fiction that she has accomplished new fashionable connotations. She is often depicted in connection with a number of settings, especially the Šūfī one. In this context, the woman appears as a comprehensive representation that helps the male protagonist accomplish huge goals. This notion is copied from medieval mystic writers who considered the woman as a chief foundation of their practices which concentrated on love and yearning. Through the woman, or their earthly mistress they believed they could realize their supreme lover, God. Šūfī conventions have overwhelmingly jammed modern-day Arab writers. For the purpose of focus, this study will examine the manifestation of women in Al-Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North*, Elif Shafak's *The Forty Rules of Love* and Hasan Alwan's, *A Little Death*. Although Al-Tayeb Salih does not use real šūfī characters, he floods his work with nice-looking women who are enchanted by and enchant the hero's mysticism exactly like the beloved ladies of šūfī dignities. Furthermore, Salih packs his novel with references to šūfī celebrities, traditions and ideas to increase the mystic environment. Moreover, his protagonist, Mustafa Sa'eed discloses that his strategies in tempting women hang on the suspicious life style, abstruse philosophies and homoerotic verse of Omar al-Khayyām and Abū Nuwās. Instead of evading straight reliance on real Šūfī figures, Elif Shafak revives the old-fashioned šūfī customs and urges the present world to endorse mystic morals. Her aim is to propose answers to modern man's complex problems. Through her female protagonist, Ella Rubenstein, Shafak gives forty Šūfī orations, epitomizing Rūmī's notion of the šūfī viewpoint. These guidelines are assurance that purify men and women from all hardships. Like Shafak, Hasan Alwan centers his novel on the life of Iben 'Arabī, a factual mystic figure. But, while Shafak aspires to prompt Šūfī ideas to settle modern man's problems, Alwan is attracted to Šūfī free-thinking, travelling and style of life. Similar to Shafak and Salih, Alwan crams his novel with women within Šūfī settings. Our goal is to discuss what these writers attain through the employment of Šūfī practices assuming that the Šūfī treatment of women in modern Arabic literature provides new insights into the dynamic potential of the motif and a new critical approach.

**Keywords:** Woman as Šūfī Motif, Al-Tayeb Salih, Elif Shafak, Jalāl ad-Dīn Rūmī, Hasan Alwan, and Iben 'Arabī

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## 1. Introduction

The woman has been so strongly depicted in modern Arabic fiction that she has achieved new contemporary meanings. She is often portrayed in association with various contexts, the most important of which is the Šūfī one. In it the woman emerges as an all-inclusive symbol playing an effective role that helps the male protagonist attain great ambitions and change the world around him. This contemporary image is borrowed from medieval Šūfī writers who regarded the woman as one of the major foundations of their writing. Consequently, they would select their female

characters, give them glamorous names, and make them the target of their writings. The content of the Šūfī practices centered on love and craving. They considered that created woman their earthly mistress who helped them reach their supreme lover, God.

These Šūfī rituals have profoundly impacted modern-day Arab writers. For the sake of concentration, our work will discuss the reflection of women in novels written by Al-Tayeb Salih, Elif Shafak, and Mohammed Alwan. We seek to discuss what these writers attain through the employment of Šūfī practices assuming that the Šūfī treatment of women in modern Arabic literature provides new insights into the dynamic potential of the motif and a new critical approach.

## 2. Al-Tayeb Salih

Although Al-Tayeb Salih (1929 –2009) distances himself from direct employment of real Šūfī figures surrounded by female figures in *Season of Migration to The North* (*Mawsim al-īrah ilā al-Shamāl*), nonetheless, beautiful women who are fascinated by the hero's Oriental mysticism and fascinate his mind in the same manner as the beloved ladies of Šūfī notables like Nazzām or 'Ayn Shams are abundant. In addition, references to Šūfī dignitaries, customs and ideas are opulently arrayed. Mystical people who are enclosed with secrets, travelers leading a weird way of life, and figures who leave modern cities and sophisticated societies with their dazzling life, sensual practices, and material assets to commit themselves to ethical missions and ascetic lifestyles are far and wide in the novel. And, mystic language like "spiritual yearnings," "longing," "self-obliteration in the Devine love," "elation," saints, dervishes, wanderers, wine and water etc. is scattered throughout. The most central excerpt which reflects all these Šūfī references occur in the lecture of Mustafa Sa'eed, the protagonist of the novel, on Abū Nuwās in Oxford, where he declares his strategies in attracting his women. He says,

I told them that Omar Khayyam was nothing in comparison to Abu Nuwas ... In the lecture I said that Abu Nuwas was a Sufi mystic and that he had made of wine a symbol with which to express all his spiritual yearnings, that the longing for self-obliteration in the Devine – all arrant nonsense with no basis of fact. However, I was inspired that evening and found the lies tripping off my tongue like sublime truths. Feeling that my elation was communicating itself to my audience, I lied more and more extravagantly [15].

The quote full of Šūfī terms and implications is of supreme import. First, it mentions two famous mystic figure: Omar al-Khayyām, a 12<sup>th</sup> century Persian scientist, philosopher, and poet known to English-speaking audiences through his *The Robā'iyāt of Omar Khayyām* (1859) translated by Edward FitzGerald and Abū Nuwās (756-813), the most celebrated Arab poet of the 'Abbāsīd period, acknowledged for his extravagant style which echoed meticulously the profligate conducts of the higher classes of his era. Significantly, while some critics regarded them as Šūfī celebrities whose poetry soaked with sensual indulgences in pleasures is allegorical indications of deep spiritual connotations, others asserted their engagement in mundane pleasures. Among critics who asserted Omar al-Khayyām pessimistic, nihilistic and agonistic viewpoint noting that his Šūfī terminology such as "wine," "Saqi" and "tavern" are literal and concomitant with momentarily pleasures are George Sarton and E. Ross [16, 14]. On the other hand, scholars like C. H. A. Bjerregaard and G. Albano described him as a mystical Šūfī whose talk about wine and drinking should be understood as a metaphor for the liberal condition or divine ecstasy of *baqā'* (survival) [5, 2]. Similarly, Abū Nuwās received the same contrasting attitudes. Some people highlighted his allegorical indications of deep

spiritual connotations while others maintained that he chiefly wrote about panegyrics to his patrons, wine and pederasty not as a metaphorical representation, but to display the grandeurs of depravity, dissipation and degeneracy [21, 9, 4].

Now, Saeed's comparison between the two, and behind him Salih's, indicates that Abū Nuwās's questionable life style, ambiguous philosophy and homoerotic poetry were more dangerous than Khayyām's though the latter is more widely famed for engagement in secular indulgences. Moreover, Sa'eed deems key Šūfī practices such as drinking wine, indulging in sensual love represented as "spiritual yearnings," displaying ecstasy or "elation" and claiming to have been self-obliterated in the Devine groundless, fallacious and forged. Moreover, Sa'eed may also be referring to the principle of esotericism, which the Šūfīs use to protect themselves. When they are threatened by other religious groups, Šūfīs resort to fabrications and endorse the prevailing religious and political system for protection. Alternatively, Sa'eed could be hinting at the Šūfī practice of restricting their philosophies to elected people. Similar to many people, Sa'eed maintains that their techniques are acts of fraud proposed to deceive people. This attitude of Sa'eed is considered a severe criticism of the notable Šūfī figures presented by Shafak and Alwan.

Strangely, enough Sa'eed admits he has endorsed the Šūfī rhetorical techniques when addressing his audiences and that his extravagant "lies" can have the power of "sublime truths" and help attain "elation," a spiritual state which every Šūfī dreams to accomplish. His adoption of these techniques are most apparent in his relationship with English women depicted in the novel. These are Mrs. Robinson, Ann Hammond, Sheila Greenwood, Isabella Seymour and Jean Morris, who all hold a false image of the Oriental man. On the one hand, these women would surround the Oriental man with an atmosphere of mysticism because of his simplicity, naiveté and naturalness. On the other, they look down on him because of the same factors. Their conflicting position is received by Sa'eed's bulk of lies and shrewd conduct.

Mrs. Robinson, to start with, is the first English woman Sa'eed meets. When he is in secondary school, Sa'eed is introduced to Mrs. Robinson by her husband. The couple, especially the friendly wife, provide him with unconditioned love, care and advice. The epitome of their support is reflected in their sending Sa'eed to London, where he develops his character and education. He receives his PhD after which he is employed as a university lecturer. In helping him, Mrs. Robinson is reminiscent of the role of Fāṭima al Muthannā, Iben 'Arabī's spiritual mother and counselor in Hasan Alwan's *A Small Death*. Both women could discern the potentials in their fostered children and motivate them to accomplish the predicted goals. While Fāṭima's Šūfī intentions are distinct, Mrs. Robinson's Šūfī love is implied. She achieves it through love, commitment and kindness of soul. Unlike the other English women, Mrs. Robinson manages to attain harmony between the opposing Western and Oriental cultures in her personal life and expands it to the environment and people around her.

Sa'eed's treatment of her is built on clear sensual emotions. Re-counting his earliest encounter with Mrs. Robinson in Cairo, he states,

The man introduced me to his wife, and all of a sudden I felt the woman's arms embracing me and her lips on my cheek. At that moment, I stood on the station platform amidst a welter of sounds and sensations, with the woman's arms round my neck, her mouth on my cheek, the smell of her body – a strange European smell – tickling my nose, her breast touching my chest, I felt – I, a boy of twelve – a vague sexual yearning. I had never previously experienced. I felt as though Cairo, that large mountain to which my camel had carried me, was a European woman just like Mrs Robinson, its arms embracing me, its perfume and the odour of its body filling my nostrils. (19)

The extract is full of sexual connotations ascribed to a teenager's first physical touch with a European woman. Mrs. Robinson is chiefly held as an object of the boy's sexual desire. The excessive emphasis of her various body parts, i. e. her arms, lips, mouth, her breast and body, intensified by different acts of touch and paralleled by the stress on himself as an "I," or the male master and gazer is astounding. The boy treats Mrs. Robinson as a commodity or an object with total disregard to her personality or character [3, 13]. Moreover, the awareness of sensual touch magnified by an abundance of smell and completed by the camel image suggests bestiality and sex. Far from being metaphorical, these notable sexual reactions are the seeds that typify his fully sexual scenes with the subsequent English women. It has been the habit of Sa'eed to present himself as a representative of spiritual Orientalism blended with bestial imagery seeking love to attain internal harmony and ecstasy. He often feigns fantasies and tales about his own native country to enchant his women who have exotic pictures about the Oriental culture. His techniques prove effective because Sa'eed often seduces his girlfriends, but regrettably they eventually commit suicide. In this manner, Sa'eed displays a low image of man. The male hero gives a false picture of himself. He is a charlatan, a trickster, a liar, and a swindler who is conducted by animal instincts whereas women accept to be marginalized and transformed into of object of sex. Worse, they keep downgrading themselves till they absent themselves from life.

His first victim is Ann Hammond, an advantaged twenty-year-old student of Oriental languages at Oxford. Explaining her infatuation of Sa'eed, she tells him, "I love your sweat,.... I want to have the smell of you in full — the smell of rotting leaves in the jungles of Africa, the smell of the mango and the pawpaw and tropical spices, the smell of rains in the deserts of Arabia" (65). Undoubtedly, Ann sees in him an embodiment of a mysterious and dreamlike Africa. Furthermore, she associates Sa'eed with bestial odor imagery and Oriental mystical visions, thus objectifying herself and creating the environment that caters to Sa'eed's needs. Put differently, Ann takes the initiative to offer herself as an object of sex ready to absorb Sa'eed's excessive animal conduct incorrectly thinking, as Ariel Levy writes, that it is a

practice of female enablement and sexual liberty [11]. Aware of her deep enchantment, Sa'eed responds, "She was an easy prey" (65) and, thus, he resorts to his deceitful techniques to assure his domination of her. One new technique is acting. Sa'eed and Ann would create scenes where they play the roles of lovers living "in Baghdad on the banks of the river Tigris in the days of El-Ma'moun" (65). But, he knows he is a liar. Summarizing his wily habits of seducing Ann, he says that "I took her to my house, the den of lethal lies that I had deliberately built up, lie upon lie" (65). His simulated Şūfī manner masking his animalistic instincts is an accurate commitment to the master scheme he reveals in the Oxford speech.

Sheila Greenwood's fate is no better than Ann. She starts an affair with Sa'eed although she is sure her parents will vehemently reject her being "in love with a black man" (63). Again Sa'eed uses the same deceitful techniques to seduce her. She is "a simple girl with a sweet smile and a sweet way of speaking," from the outskirts of Hull (22). He lies to her about his origin supported by his "honeyed words." By inventing the environment of "magic and mystery and obscenities" and using "the smell of burning sandalwood and incense" (63), he becomes a predator who manages to daze his prey effortlessly.

Upon spotting Isabella Seymour, his third English victim, Sa'eed walks up to her affirming, "this was my prey" (23). Sitting next to her, he recruits animalistic motifs to describe the scene heightening the woman's sensual aspect. He "feels her warmth pervading" him, and breathes (in the odour of her body," reminiscent of Mrs. Robinson's. Walking together, he comments they have "become like a mare and foal running in harmony side by side" (23). He fabricates lies about his native country introducing it as a place teeming "with elephants and lions," and crocodiles that crawl along the streets during siesta time (24). The bestial imagery reaches its climax when Sa'eed hints at Isaiah's end-of-times peace prophecy (11:6) noting he will continue expressing himself in cruel manner "until the meek inherit the earth, until the armies are disbanded, the lamb grazes in peace beside the wolf and the child plays water polo in the river with the crocodile" (25). Although she is fifteen years older than him, has "had eleven years of happy married life," goes "to church every Sunday morning" and takes part in "charitable organizations" (64), she is taken in by his falsehoods so much that she upgrades him to the rank of godhood saying, "O pagan god of mine. You are my god and there is no god but you" (64). Beyond the element of exaggeration, Ann marginalizes herself. Instead of getting power and gaining protection, she deprives herself of power and will and surrenders to Sa'eed. That's why Sa'eed becomes full of triumph and declares his total victory in reaffirming the animalistic motif: "I felt the flow of conversation firmly in my hands, like the reins of an obedient mare" (24). What helps Sa'eed perfect his imaginary world is that he transforms his apartment into a miniaturized image of the East or "the fatal attraction of the mysterious East" to quote R. S Krishnan (1996 11) [10]. Failing to understand the real

image of the Orient, Isabella becomes another fatality in Sa'eed's apartment or the "den" (65).

Sa'eed's relationship with Jean Morris, his harsh, cunning first wife is the absurdist and most inexplicable. As soon as she meets him, she expresses her repugnance at his ugliness (21) and proves immune to his Oriental enchantment including his sensual lures. Yet she agrees to marry him to avoid his unremitting harassment. She says, "'You're a savage bull that does not weary of the chase,'" she said to me one day "I am tired of your pursuing me and of my running before you. Marry me"' (22). More willingly than intensifying the sexual imagery, the bestial imagery is intended to refer to animosity, aggression, and violence. Yet after their marriage, their life becomes "a theatre of war," and his "bed a patch of hell" (22). She feels happy to humiliate him as a suitor and to destroy his properties, and, in consequence, she has a troubled and riotous bonds with him. As for Sa'eed, it seems he cannot accept her rejection of his lies and sexual longings which develop into a driving desire to revenge. She provokes Sa'eed's patience as a man. He eventually kills her. Contrary to the other women, she refuses to be Sa'eed's meek prey or commit suicide. Absurdly, she is the only woman that he deeply loves in the novel and whose portrait he saves in his top-secret room in a place of honor above the fireplace in his house in Sudan.

Salih's notion of the Arab woman is completely different but far from being one-typed. Some Arab woman are represented as a major element that go into the structure of the Arab renaissance [22]. Moreover, Salih focuses on the woman's strength in his novel to indicate that she might have transcended her image as a representative of the Afro-oriental woman and has become the epitome of the new international woman [26]. Despite their relentless efforts to change their situations, the majority of his female figures still function within women's stereotypical image. Salih presents dozens of situations and examples depicting woman as a simple figure living a life of suffering and victimization from birth to death. To be more specific, Fāṭima Abdel-Sādiq, Sa'eed's mother, stands for the women's cause. Although Fāṭima is far coming close to her archetype, Fāṭima bint Mu ammad, the most vital character in Islam, she leads a tough and ascetic life. She lives under circumstances so tough that she is forced to create her own new world away from the influence of people, especially men. Describing their life when he was the boy, Sa'eed says, "We had no relatives. She and I acted as relatives to each other. It was as if she were some stranger on the road with whom circumstances had chanced to bring me" (17). Her decision implies a drastic movement from a position where she has entirely depended on man to protect her and provide for her into a world where she is in full charge of her own physical and spiritual affairs. Fāṭima appears as the new model of the Arab woman who can self-reliantly follow the course of her life, in the absence of spouse, father or any other supporter. She also strives to raise her son to be a solid and tough man who has no considerations for tears or emotions. This is clearly noticed when her child tells her about his decision to join school.

Both the mother and the child show restraint of emotions and allow the mind to reign. In so doing, she behaves like a typical Ṣūfī woman who does her utmost to let her child attain his mission. Paradoxically, her attainment of self-autonomy helps her child, the future man to accomplish his manhood more than he wishes but it weakens her status. Consequently, women activists would claim that the figure of the woman Salih portrays is a force serving the patriarchal rule and, accordingly, Fāṭima fights herself. She, as Patrocínio Schweickart would say, is recruited by man to maintain man's sovereignty [18]. Indeed, the woman's struggle to survive and provide for her child makes her lose her tender emotions as a woman. Her face is thickly masked showing no emotions. When he departs for Cairo, their farewell is conscripted to a short talk and a purse she gives to him: "That was our farewell: no tears, no kisses, no fuss. Two human beings had walked along a part of the road together, then each had gone his way" (18). In endorsing such a role, Salih's woman redefines the notions of femininity and masculinity. He fights traditional roles given to women or men and condemns the superiority of one gender to other. Perhaps Salih praises the traditional role of a mother sacrificing her life full of hardships and suffering hoping to give a better life for her own child.

Another type of women is embodied by liberal daughter of Bint Majzoub (Majzoub's Daughter). She is a figure of complex characteristics, who, in the manner of mystic figures, claims she is in harmony with herself. She is a rebellious woman who does not fear man's environment. She drinks, smokes constantly and socializes with men and speaks candidly about taboo subjects sex such as sexual intercourses. Nevertheless, she is a committed female personality who launches severe criticism against weak women content with minimal accomplishments. The following extract gives a concise account of her multifaceted character:

Bint Majzoub was a tall woman of a charcoal complexion like black velvet who, despite the fact she was approaching seventy still retained vestiges of beauty. She was famous in the village, and men and women alike were eager to listen to her conversation which was daring and uninhibited. She used to smoke, drink and swear on oath of divorce like a man. It was said that her mother was the daughter of one of the Fur sultans in Darfur. She had been married to a number of the leading men of the village, all of whom had died and left her a considerable fortune. (39)

So, Bint Majzoub is a symbol of the Sudanese African woman, who is free from the constraints of the Sudanese-African society [22]. It is very likely that Bint Majzoub derives her centrality from the fact that she is emasculated. She turns herself into a masculine woman who does her utmost to please the desires of man, maintain his authority and laws and severely fights her gender.

A third type of the new image of Sudanese women is represented by Hosna, Sa'eed's Arab and second wife. She is a beautiful, tall well-shaped and scented woman who doesn't put *henna* on her body. Distinct from the other women, she rebels twice against the impositions of her patriarchal society.

She ignores local customs and traditions, which constraint the choice of getting married to a relative or a man from her close society or village and gets married to Sa'eed, thus preferring an outsider as a husband with whom she leads a life devoid of lies, pretenses and phoniness. Hosna loves her husband so passionately that after his disappearance, she lives alone and cares for her two sons. She again rejects all proposed suitors. "I shall go to no man," (47) she tells the narrator. She resists being married to Wad Rayyes but after she fails to stop Wad Rayyes, she kills him harshly and commits suicide.

As a young woman she could have remained silent and accepted the obligations of the masculine rules on her and waited till her aged bridegroom dies, or feigned approval of tasks that delight man's wants like Bint Majzoub. She could have also behaved like Fāṭima and given herself up for the profit of her children and showed no emotions. She could also have followed the example of the English girls and killed herself silently. But, she chooses to shout loudly, to create an unforgettable scene that shakes the minds of her village.

Is Hosna a criminal who kills two people? Is she a selfish woman and mother who has preferred her own wishes to the future of her children? Perhaps yes but she is also a victim of Sa'eed, who provides her with city manners. She is also a quarry of the nameless narrator, who does not satisfy Sa'eed's will to marry her in the face of her consent and his inner wish to do so.

In presenting these two types of women, Salih undoubtedly draws the main features of the European woman and the new Arab woman pointing out their various roles. The first category are beautiful women who fulfill the protagonist's need to practice his sensual love, mundane indulgencies and deceitful acts presented as spiritual fantasies and metaphorical representations of godly love. These women are charmed by the hero's false embodiment of Oriental mysticism and deceitful adventures. In consequence, both the protagonist and the women give a tawdry image of the human.

The Arab women are split into two groups: the old who submit to man's world and simulate happiness; and the strong new woman, who acts out of her own will, loves as she pleases and whom she pleases following her own style of thinking. She is so determined that she does not submit to social customs and traditions regardless of the price!

### 3. Elif Shafak: The Impersonation of Rūmī

Akin to Salih, the Turkish writer, Elif Shafak, (born 1971), is one of the major writers who have seen the various rebellious merits inherent in mystic philosophy particularly its perception of the role of women. While Salih keeps distance from plain reliance on real Şūfī dignitaries in his novel, in her *The Forty Rules of Love* (2010), Shafak shows deep interest in Şūfism, especially in the figure of Jalāl ad-

Dīn Rūmī, a 13th-century Şūfī poet [12, 17], whose religious legacy and poetry were translated into a wide spectrum of languages [19]. The absence of real mystic personages from Salih's work is not total. His protagonist is time and again depicted in connection with different Şūfī settings, which help him establish his affairs with the woman charmed by mysticism. In spite of the fact that Salih's hero holds very negative notions of the practices of Şūfī grandees, he endorses their performances to attain his great ambitions. In contrast, Shafak tries to pass on Rūmī's Şūfī philosophy along with his spiritual journey with his teacher Shams ad-Dīn al-Tibrīzī to the modern world. By this means, she lends the antiquated Şūfī rituals a state-of-the-art prospect and endeavors to encourage the current world of the need to embrace mystic beliefs [23]. What motivates her to embark on this project is her solid conviction that modern man is crushed by lack of social, political and cultural justice and freedom. Wicked, autocratic, political, societal and religious systems still inflict their intimidating rules and prejudiced decrees on people. Consequently, Shafak calls for a Şūfī rebellion to eradicate these oppressive systems and introduce a new a Muslim community that is socially, politically, culturally and economically progressed. The standards, rules and settings of this ideal community were designed by Rūmī's philosophy.

Shafak's appeal for reform also entails an unrestricted incitement for man to emancipate himself from materialism, worship of lust, devotion to secularism and abhorrence of death [27]. To do so, man should connect between the self and ethical behavior and abide by the directives of his soul so as to reach God.

This implies that compared with Salih, Shafak has a wider message that is directed at modern man. She not only diagnoses modern man's problems but also offers solutions through the endorsement of Şūfī rules. In her novel, Shafak, the female author, employs a Jewish female narrator, by the name of Ella Rubenstein, who observes forty Şūfī orations, or tips of advice denoting Rūmī's compendium of the Şūfī philosophy. These tips compiled according to their Şūfī subjects, arranged by Tibrīzī, and, subsequently, endorsed by Rūmī, are a receipt to decontaminate this world from all adversities. This signifies that the novel advocates two different sayings by the same person: Ella's modern presentation and Rūmī's ancient speech. Although the two presentations are analogous on the intellectual level and temporally detached, Shafak manages to merge them in one intellectual voice which seeks to offer this world a tangible redemption in the same manner as the reform of Rūmī and Ella.

Moreover, the novel proposes the stories of two groups of women: those who live in 21st century North America and the female characters who lived in the 13th century Konya. Like Salih's women, Shafak's two groups consist of gifted women whose resourcefulness is blocked by the dictating doctrines of the patriarchal society. When a comparison is made between the two writers' groups or between Shafak's two groups, one realizes that all are discontent with lives,

especially the married women. These women have great expectations from the mystic people but they are let down and have tragic endings, as a result. They are like Salih's females. Yet Salih's women undergo severer experience and, in consequence, their disappointments take more disastrous courses. Shafak's females manage to get along against all odds. While the women of Konyā namely, Kerra and Kīmyā, choose to adjust to the prevalent situation, Ella Rubenstein, the modern woman, chooses to rebel in order to remedy her current problems. Likewise, Desert Rose, the harlot of Konyā, also defies the predominant patriarchal community, but Ella succeeds where Desert Rose fails.

Ella is a 40-year-old Jewish woman, an English graduate from Smith University, the wife of a successful dentist, and the mother of three children. Although she lives in a magnificent Victorian-style house where she and her family have all the comforts of well-established people, she leads a life packed with monotony and devoid of real pleasure, happiness and love. She receives the courtesy note on Valentine's Day as an obituary. Ella's condition reverberates the dilemma shared by abundant women in North America, who as C. Iannone states, reveal "frustration, insecurity, lack of fulfillment and identity [8]." As a matter of fact, Ella has been undergoing a combination of conditions which endanger the very quick of her life and, as a result, she finds herself looking for factors that can help her restore her self-value. One condition is related to her children. Ella feels her children have become adults and they do not need her anymore and since she does not work, her life is turned into a deadly routine. Worse, her husband has been having an affair with another woman [20]. What jiggles her is her argument with her daughter, Jeannette, who reveals her plan to get married to her boyfriend, Scott. The argument develops into a fight. In the process, Ella ironically rejects her daughter's commitment to a man following eight months of dating, refuses the idea of love in general and delegitimizes the notion of loving one from a different sect. The argument reaches its climax when Jeanette shouts, "You're jealous of my happiness and my youth. You want to make an unhappy housewife out of me. You want me to be you, Mom" (14). Jeannette's answer sends a shiver down Ella's spine.

In an endeavor to help his wife get out of boredom and routine, David finds her a job as an editor. While editing her first manuscript, she becomes fond of the author, 'Azīz Zahar, an unknown author who converts to Islam. 'Azīz and Ella do not live in the same city or on the same continent. Nor do they share analogous attitudes or have similar characters, yet she is engulfed by love before she can take precautions. And, she is attached to the content, which is the strong bonds between Tabrīzī and Rūmī. The book, *Sweet Blasphemy*, which as 'Azīz, says, "cuts across countries, cultures, and centuries" (17), makes Ella take practical steps to change her paralyzed situation. Ella is spellbound by Tabrīzī's role in transforming Rūmī from a successful but unhappy cleric to a committed Ṣūfī poet.

How could I possibly make my family and friends see what I see? How could I describe the indescribable?

Shams is my Sea of Mercy and Grace. He is my Sun of Truth and Faith. I call him the King of Kings of Spirit. He is my fountain of life and my tall cypress tree, majestic and evergreen. His companionship is like the fourth reading of the Qur'an—a journey that can only be experienced from within but never grasped from the outside. (128)

Their teaching is often received by aggressive congregates who do not comprehend their Ṣūfī ideas. Terrified by Tabrīzī's tragic murder, Rūmī converts into an emotional poet who embraces an interesting philosophy which demolishes barriers between people and countries, cultures and religions and centuries and emphasizes the presence of love in every human being.

Ella becomes gradually more conscious of the absence of love in her life matched by the love experienced by the characters in the book and realizes that Rūmī's story offers her a solution to her confused life. Just as Tabrīzī shows Rūmī the light to attain divine love, so 'Azīz has come to steer her towards freedom. Subsequently, she begins to review her life negatively and decides to change it. So, she forsakes everything and joins 'Azīz ironically doing what she warns her daughter against. Thus, the encounter between Tabrīzī and Rūmī is mirrored by the meeting between Ella and 'Azīz in the United States. Both are very crucial in the development of the characters' lives and the advance of the novel. Subsequently, the woman who refuses her eldest daughter's ties unleashes a human journey of love that mocks her bourgeois class marked with social hypocrisy and moral indifference.

The resolution to leave her family, husband and country does not change even when she discovers 'Azīz is sick with cancer and has a short period to live. The couple move to Konyā, Turkey, where 'Azīz dies of skin cancer and is buried next to Rūmī's tomb. Even after 'Azīz's death, Ella is convinced of her attitudes indifferent to her loss of her home, husband and sons under the pretext of adhering to the rules of love.

Ella's attachment to 'Azīz is, *ergo*, corresponding to Rūmī's love to Tabrīzī. Both Ella and Rūmī are quiet, intelligent, self-absorbed, and relentlessly search learning, wisdom and truth. Their worldly achievements do not stop their complaint about boredom, routine and void that turn their seemingly happy life into misery. The emergence of Tabrīz in Rūmī's life is paralleled to the appearance of 'Azīz in Ella's. Both Shams and 'Azīz provide Rūmī and Ella respectively with the missing elements they desperately need to conduct a life characterized with energy, intuition, beauty, love, liberty and fondness of spiritual wealth. Put differently, these two clusters of characters have conflicting attitudes that cannot be settled in isolation from each other. Both sides bear contradictory traits that charm and round out each other. Each side suffers imperfection that cannot be perfected unless the other side supplies it. To attain the ultimate goal of coherence, both parties should unite and co-exist in one harmonious link.

After 'Azīz passes away, Ella has become a solid believer in the usefulness of love and the value of the changing

people's natures and perceptions and creating a horizon of hope for all people. Somehow, Ella becomes a Şūfī figure who not only overflows with the rules of love, but also addresses the public so that people can realize the reality of love and avoid the pitfalls of cultural, cognitive and aesthetic apostasy.

Bordering on her, Kerra and Kīmyā from Konyā fail to get their husbands' courtesy and warmth, and, subsequently, both submit miserably to their prior situations. Kīmyā's despair causes her death. Desert Rose's case is more serious than Kerra's and Kīmyā's. To be more specific, Kerra, Rūmī's second wife who converted to Islam from Christianity, plays the role of the nonconformist woman. When she first appears, she launches severe criticism against her society which treats women badly. Her major complaint is that women are not given "books to open their eyes" (112). Kerra and Rūmī have had arguments before the arrival of Tabrīzī. Still, Kerra is satisfied with her matrimonial status until she meets Tabrīzī, who captures Rūmī's heart and, like Ella, becomes aware of the old bitterness which she has been preoccupied with but concealing inside herself. Eventually, when Kerra learns to adjust herself, albeit passively, to live under the same roof with Tabrīzī, he disappears. Just as 'Azīz's departure does not devastate Ella so Tabrīzī's vanishing does not shatter Kerra's existence. Both are self-emboldened and know how to go on.

Kīmyā is another example of a woman who rebels against the dominant patriarchal mores of her time. Having noticed the extraordinary abilities of this twelve-year-old girl, Rūmī decides to coach her in his own house with complete negligence to the gender standards of the 13th century Islamic society. Rūmī's adoption of the girl does not imply that Rūmī, the rebellious Şūfī figure, totally favors Kīmyā's schooling. To the contrary, he is by hook or by crook skeptical about women's education: "But you are a girl. Even if we study intensely and make good progress, you'll soon get married and have children. Years of education will be of no use" (114). Worse, the girl herself expresses her desire to learn the *Qur'ān* to please her father and Rūmī, agent of the male society. At Rūmī's place Kīmyā meets Tabrīzī, and they gradually fall in love with each other and get married. Tabrīzī also enriches her educational horizon. In one meeting, for example, she inquires about the interpretation of the thirty-fourth verse of *Al-Nisā'* [Women], the fourth Surah, one of the most controversial verses of the *Qur'ān*. The verse seems to define the role of women as being subjugated by men. The truth, as Tabrīzī maintains, is that the verse seeks to explain to man that he is no better than his spouse in rank. Rather, it defines the role of each. While man should provide for the woman, the woman has a free hand in the household.

Tabrīzī adopts these two entirely contrasting elucidations affirming his enigmatic and paradoxical nature manifested in his relationship with Kīmyā. Despite his fervent talk about freedom and love, his marriage to Kīmyā does not drastically promote her as a woman. Nor does it reflect the practical aspects of his theoretical philosophy. All through their brief married life, Shams shuns Kīmyā, who complains that "he hasn't slept with me as my husband even once" (202). So,

Tabrīzī's failure to notice his bride's emotional, psychological, and social needs deeply hurts Kīmyā and his indifference eventually precipitates her death. In addition, he does not attempt to acquaint her with his spiritual beliefs. Worse, he misjudges Kīmyā's aptitudes as excessive self-confidence and emancipation.

Reminiscent of the other women, Desert Rose is beautiful and smart, and has a fondness for learning and study. She is also a rebellious woman, who, thanks to the help of Tabrīzī, manages to save herself from the mire of wretchedness. Describing her search for faith, she says,

To refer to my barrenness, [my patron] named me "Desert," and to embellish that name somewhat, she added "Rose," which was fine with me, as I adored roses.

Which is how I think of faith—like a hidden rose garden where I once roamed and inhaled its perfumed smells but can no longer enter. I want God to be my friend again. With that longing I am circling that garden, searching for an entrance, hoping to find a gate that will let me in. (80)

She is originally rendered as a vulnerable girl whose deterioration in the sludge of prostitution is so steep that her situation is considered to be irredeemable. Still, she is sure that her firm belief in God entwined by her determination will aid her to achieve what she desires in the face of the obstacles associated with her potential alteration.

Hence, she, indeed, opts to struggle for the liberation of her soul though it is ostensibly more at ease for her to continue living as a prostitute. Her obtained liberty proves costly as she expects, but she is not daunted. To the contrary, she attends Rūmī's preaching even after she knows that following him is highly risky. Listening to Rūmī provides her with "a cloud of tranquility," which is "as delightful and soothing as the sight of my mother baking bread" (81).

She is primarily harassed by Baybars, one of Konyā's security guards who regards himself as an epitome of virtue and integrity. Desert Rose's response to the brutal treatment she receives from Baybars and society is of paramount significance. She asks,

Why is it that although people say they hate seeing women prostitute themselves, the same people make life hard for a prostitute who wants to repent and start life anew? It is as if they are telling us they are sorry that we have fallen so low, but now that we are where we are, we should stay there forever. (78)

Clearly, Desert Rose inveighs against the phoniness of people who express their abhorrence of seeing women slope into prostitution but do their utmost to prevent these fallen people from obtaining their redemption. Unable to obtain social recognition of her repentance and transformation into a decent person, Desert Rose surrenders to misery and re-endorses the identity imposed upon her by her environment.

It seems that Shafak's novel contains its antithesis within its folds. Shafak's ideal Şūfī notable characters, i. e. Shams, Rūmī and 'Azīz act as pure agents of male domination. Kerra is married to Rūmī, Kīmyā to Shams, Desert Rose is related to Rūmī and Shams, and Ella to 'Azīz. These are intelligent women pushed by driving ambitions to attain freedom,

education, knowledge and love. Nevertheless, their ambitions are obstructed by the very figures who launch philosophies that show women the right course to promote their daily life through endorsing mystic rules specially love and freedom. Unfortunately, all these women openly complain about ill treatment they get from their spouses. Even Ella does not upgrade her situation despite her claims otherwise.

It can be assumed, therefore, that Shafak's vision suffers a number of deficiencies. Contrary to Salih, who pays special attention to the clash between cultures, Shafak disregards the importance of cultural differences and presents characters who start complex relationships. In Salih's novel, these intricate ties are tragically concluded while in Shafak's failures of these connections are ignored. In point of fact, Shafak's Western characters establish relationships with Eastern ones, Armenian with Turkish and Jews with Muslims. The result is that women in all cases, as already discussed, are absented and left to suffer silently. In Salih's work, women are deceived by a fake mystic, a charlatan, and a swindler who, ironically, knows how to respect the marital bonds when he gets married to a Sudanese woman. In Shafak's novel, women are frustrated with real Şūfī figures who fail to liberate their souls or promote their social and educational conditions. On occasions, these mystic personages fail to consummate their marriage. Mustafa, Salih's protagonist, however, manages to upgrade the level of his Sudanese wife's mentality so much that she can fight her society and pay her life as a cost.

Additionally, although Shafak is a woman who employs a female protagonist and female characters who narrate their own stories (Kerra, Kīmyā and Desert Rose), she downplays the crucial impact of social factors on the formation of the women's characteristics. Worse, she takes no notice of the woman's psychological tendencies which are naturally inherent in a woman's personality and decisions. In addition, Shafak does not consider the fact that the essence of an individual is perhaps something that men and women do not initially understand. As time passes people are very likely to explore their motives, tolerate their partners and learn to adjust to each other's vision and framework. It looks as if Shafak through Ella regards the institution of marriage as a battlefield where married couples fight each other until the victory of one partner is attained. This explains why Ella leaves home and tries to find a solution for her difficulties outside this institution. Thus, Ella confuses the traditional notion derived from long human experiences and confirmed by all religions that the institution of marriage is a human guarantee retaining the reliability of the mutual relations.

Readers also see Shafak present the relationships of her women characters in such a way that demonstrates that social roots and norms are shifting and tentative without offering any firm alternative. Ella takes decisions which eradicate family connections and roots but when confronted with serious problems she is obliged to return either to the experience of the mother or grandmother. In other words, the heroine resorts to her society where the male factor is still active. Therefore, Shafak has not managed to create a version

of a pure female society in isolation from the other gender. In other words, Shafak doesn't make the woman independent of the natural situation even when she changes time and space to solve the problems of her heroine. Ella physically moves to Konyā the hometown of Rūmī and Tabrīzī and spiritually lives the events of 'Azīz's *Sweet Blasphemy*, but these steps do not settle her problems. Shafak's story does create suspense and excitement as a work of fiction, but when it comes to reality the core of problems is not eliminated. In resorting to transference in place and time, Shafak has transferred the problem but has not confronted it or settled it.

Consequently, women as presented by Shafak are not free and they all fail to attain personal freedom and have self-realization. The woman she creates is absented both as an individual and as a person. The type of woman presented by Shafak reflects a tendency towards aloofness and isolation. Despite the fact that the women characters are placed within the framework of divinely love and exciting ties under the direct auspices of notable mystic figures, none manages to drastically promote her character. When Ella is examined, readers will notice that she enjoys a good economic, social and cultural situation. Still, she suddenly becomes an impulsive, emotional figure who draws conclusions without considering her rich experience in life. Her resolutions become acts meant to satisfy her instinctive needs and whims. Away from her home and amidst the mystical environment, she leads a primitive and chaotic life typified by ideas detached from natural laws and norms. Put differently, far from being built upon clear visions, Ella's decisions are instant responses to psychological conflicts or an escape from them.

Instead, there should be a well-planned proposal that promotes coexistence with the others even when they ideologically, religiously and ethnically differ. It should emphasize the others' human dimension as a common factor of human coexistence, and this difference creates a vision entailing that humanity has a lofty goal to attain. Such a proposal should also refine differences and not contain them but it should reject certain ideas and actions that do not advance the human society.

#### 4. Mohammad Alwan: The Resurrection of Iben 'Arabī

The works of Salih, Shafak and Mohammad Hassan Alwan have achieved stupendous success in recording the most tested and mature experience at the level of the narrative fiction in employing Şūfī thought. While Salih's work is saturated with Şūfī motifs and imagery, Shafak and Alwan are based on the life of true mystic figures. Yet, unlike Salih, who employs mystic ideas, motifs and images to beautify his novel and prompt the conflict between the characters, and unlike Shafak, who aims at promoting Şūfī notions as methods to settle distresses of modern man, in his *A Little Death*, Alwan is attracted to Abū 'Abdallāh Muhammad ibn 'Alī ibn al-'Arabī al-Tā'ī al- ātimī and his liberalism,



wandering and style of life. As a matter of fact, Alwan is more candid than his colleagues when he openly maintains that he falls back on the Šūfī motifs to grant his novel a modern aspect. In an interview with Nathalie Farah, Alwan states that his interest in Ibn 'Arabī is chiefly related to the latter's constant travels: "I began to wonder what did he see during his travels? Norms, sights, sounds — these were more interesting for me than the Šūfī aspect of his life [7]." Thus, his novel narrates the biography of Ibn 'Arabī, his Šūfī experience and epic journeys from Muslim Spain to Tunisia then back to Spain [1] and once again to Morocco, Egypt, and Mecca the Hijaz [6]. He also visited Syria, Iraq, Turkey and Azerbaijan. The path of his journeys displays a man with a subtle nature, who tussles with internal tumult and a saint who undergoes vicious military wars, passes through various several cities, learns about many cultures and faiths, and meets numerous people with variant attitudes. While tracing Ibn 'Arabī's biography, the author highlights many other subjects and stations such as his connection to the caliphs, attending lessons by famous scholars, and his attachment to luminaries with miracles.

Still, the novel's language and orientation constitutes a shift at the level of qualitative Šūfī employment. It presents the Šūfī milieu in a more simplified way than Shafak. In spite of its pure Šūfī tendency, the language of Alwan's work is freer than Shafak's of composite beliefs, and is remoter from the intricacies of bizarre terminology and vague ideas that distinguish Shafak's work or the Šūfī philosophy in general and mystic ideas of Ibn 'Arabī in particular.

And the three writers pack their novels with women characters described in Šūfī environments. Despite minor differences, in all three novels, women play efficient roles that help the male characters realize great goals and modify the sphere around them. Their own status hardly changes. Contrary to Salih, whose characters are a blender of modern Sudanese and European women, Shafak's female characters are an assortment of medieval characters paralleled by modern ones. Alwan's women, however, are mainly medieval characters attached to Ibn 'Arabī, whose relationships and affairs with women represent significant successive stages in his development. Each has a weighty role that caters to the needs of the protagonist's life. In other words, each functions as a signposts that guides the protagonist to the following stage. Every woman's role evaporates with the emergence of the subsequent woman. These women can be grouped into two categories: First, there are the old women who function like mothers and provide the protagonist with his spiritual needs, like Fāṭima bint Al Muthannā, his nurse and "Pride of Women," *sheikh* Zāher al-Isfahānī's sister, his tutor; second, the beautiful young women who satisfy the hero's sensual desires like his first wife Maryam bint 'Abdūn; Nazzām, the daughter of his *sheikh* Zāher al-Isfahānī, essentially gratifies Ibn 'Arabī's craving then becomes his spiritual guide; Fāṭima, the wife of a man thought to be dead, and the widow of his friend Yaḳūb.

Fāṭima bint al-Muthannā, to start with, is one of the most significant characters in the novel. Like Bent Majzoub, she

represents the old generation that maintains traditions including the domination of men and provides tips for the future ones. But she is more inflectional and plays more crucial roles in the development of the protagonist. Not only does she draw the map for Ibn 'Arabī's life but also she lays the ground for the development of the plot. Upon his birth, she predicts that he will not follow his father's path. Carrying the baby to his father, she tells him that the position of the mole on the father's cheek implies "A son is born to promote your name and maintain your value [24]." She warns the father that the mole's position under his eye means the child will walk a path different from his father's.

She raises the boy to believe that he is going to be of paramount importance. When Ibn 'Arabī moves from Murcia to Seville at six, he wants to say goodbye to Fāṭima at the crossroads but she seizes the opportunity to give him the outlines of his life:

1. Come close to me, son.
2. Soon! I listen and abide by your request, mother.
3. In Seville there is a peg of your four pegs, no doubt.
4. Who are the pegs?
5. Four who save the earth from wickedness.
6. How do I know them?
7. They know you.
8. How do I find them?
9. They find you.

(42)

The dialogue reveals the power of Fāṭima, her wisdom and education, and the extent of respect and obedience the child has for her. As his nurse, or his spiritual mother, she tells him that he has to find four pegs (*awṭād*), residing in the corners of the earth. In order to find them, he must cleanse his heart. Pointing at his heart, she instructs Ibn 'Arabī "Cleanse this... Then follow it and only then your peg will find you" (42). The task of locating the privileged pegs that hold his heart throughout his mystical journey remains the path that dictates his every move. His mission necessitates continuous travel in different parts of the world, where he meets different people and encounters various cultures [25].

So, Fāṭima sows the seeds of divine love within the child and guides him to the path he has to undergo in order to attain it. This dreamy and ambitious woman has two major roles in the novel. On the thematic level, she coins the character of the protagonist and creates the Šūfī atmosphere the surrounds him. On the structural level, she sketches the framework of the plot. Her role is attached to the development of the male character. She does not perform any deed that upgrades her own role as a woman.

The next lady in the series of succession is Ibn 'Arabī's first wife, Maryam bint 'Abdūn. The novelist presents her in a direct manner and accurately depicts her changing psychological and physical aspects. She is described as "a dutiful, well-mannered, talented and beautiful [woman]" (163), who gives birth to Zainab. In a way, she is reminiscent of Hosna, Mustafa's Sudanese wife and all the married women in Shafak's novel including Ella. They are all cast in the role of the traditional house wife. When they try to rebel,

they face terrible consequences. Some encounter tragic ending, some submit silently while others, like Maryam, choose to have their own path of rebellion.

To give more details, Iben 'Arabī leaves no opportunity to talk about Maryam's various skills and qualities especially her physical beauty. Actually, he presents her in such a sensual manner that contradicts religious ethics. On one occasion, Iben 'Arabī confesses that "I loved Maryam's sharp chin, her bouncing eyes, her body inclined to plumping and her fat palms, which she was ashamed of" (164). On other occasion, he is so astounded at her physical beauty that he cannot conceal his sensual attraction. He says,

I drew her close to me and started to kiss the upper part of her neck then went down. Then, she bent towards me and we went into deep love!... How beautiful Maryam's body is! How soft and how pure!... Her body is filled with light fatness that I like.... And if she is overwhelmed by love and gets excited..., she will steal my mind and explode my desire... (169-170).

As for her other skills, Maryam helps him locate al- assār, the math scientist, who is supposed to guide him to Mecca. In the context of an intimate talk with Maryam, Iben 'Arabī tells her about his dream in which he is supposed to be taken to Mecca. To his surprise, she reveals to him that she has known the man for four years but she has not recognized her husband's plans (259). Apart from this contribution, Alwan never shows us how the protagonist's literary and scientific life is enriched by Maryam's different competences. Worse, soon after the death of their only daughter, their relationship witnesses a drastic drawback. In their first seclusion as a husband and wife in Mecca, the former is shocked at his wife's figure. Repelled, he says, "I finally had a moment of intimacy with her; I was astounded to find out she had changed! Her fatness increased as if she had not travelled or got bereaved" (308). More important, he accuses her of being responsible for their separation: "She came out of my heart and I came out of hers without saying goodbye. That's how God willed. And so did Mecca!" (315). His position does not change even after he learns about her death sixteen years afterwards. She is reduced to a passing event in her husband's life: "I no longer saw Maryam save in dreams!" (316).

It seems the tragic death of their daughter might have affected their love very intensely. Their constant travels and movements away from their home country might have contributed to the drought of their strong love. As Iben 'Arabī says, "Some love does not grow except in certain countries.... And our love was a fountain whose water does not flow save in Andalusia. When it is departed, its water retreats until it totally dries in the heat of Mecca!" (315). But it is very likely that she becomes aware of her husband's love affair with the next woman, Nazzām. With the emergence of the new woman, then, Maryam has felt she has to make way for her. She prefers to have her own path of life where she is a silent, free and independent woman

Iben 'Arabī's connections with Nazzām the daughter of his *sheikh* Zāher al-Isfahānī reveal different aspects about his life and supply him with fuels he urgently needs to continue his

path. One such aspect is the portrayal of Iben 'Arabī as a man who is indulged in the life of pleasure away from Ṣūfism or religion. Upon seeing her, he falls in love with her in such a manner that he loses all powers. He says,

Nazzām ignited in my chest a lamp whose light allowed me to see corners of this heart which I have never seen before; dismal corners, locked rooms and cellars in which feelings that could not go out to the life that I live accumulated. She resided in my imagination every moment of my day and my night. (312)

As their love deepens, it is integrated with sensual practices that do not fit any married man let alone a Ṣūfī figure, placed in Mecca, circumambulating the holly *Ka'ba*, while seeking his *watad* who will qualify him to be a notable mystic figure! In so doing, Alwan indirectly gives a vote to Salih's criticism of Abū Nuwās and Khayyām.

His love to Nazzām makes him enter a spiral of love where he loses his conscious mind. His love is so powerful that he circumambulates *al-Masjid al- arām* on the same day that is dedicated to women's circumambulation without being aware of it. Worse, instead of chanting the well-known prayer during that ceremony, or praising *Allah*, he circumambulates more than a thousand time while unintentionally repeating lines of poetry unfolding his deep craving. He says,

If only they had known which heart they had owned;  
And my heart had known which path they had walked;  
If only I knew they had survived or they had perished!  
People of love were dazzled in love and confused! (317).

He does not regain his consciousness until he feels the light patting of Nazzām on his shoulder and realizes he is the only man to be there with all women's gazes directed at him (318).

Interestingly, he meets Nazzām while attending the lessons of her father, *sheikh* Zāher al-Isfahānī, who is helped by his sister "Pride of Women," an elderly woman and scholar. From her Iben, 'Arabī receives a lot of knowledge. In her lesson, he also exchanges with Nazzām admiration, kisses and hugs. He writes,

The poor old woman was preoccupied with me and I started to read to her books I had read before, but she didn't know because she forgot. I winked at Nazzām as she at me. We would start a new book that we knew it would take us a week, a week during which I like a lost bird would soar in the gleaming forehead of Nazzām. (313)

Bizarrely enough, when Iben 'Arabī proposes to Nazzām, she rejects him even with her intense yearning. In response, he writes his renowned *Turjumān al-Ashwāq: A Collection of Mystical Odes*, in which he discloses his strong passion and extreme longing. In effect, in his volume, Iben 'Arabī imitates the style of the poets of *al-Jāhilīyah*, the period preceding the emergence of Islam. Such a style implies that poems often start with the poet's weeping at the ruins of his beloved and expressing his suffering due to the loss.

During his stay in Damascus, Iben 'Arabī receives a letter from Nazzām's father, who complains against the appearance of his daughter's name in the poems. Overwhelmed by disgrace, al-Isfahānī is forced to leave Mecca with his

daughter for Baghdad. Later, Ibn 'Arabī rewrites the *dīwān* with explanations that the poetry is religiously symbolic, and that the love poems are no more than gestures, symbols of divine imports and spiritual descends. His goal is to cleanse the reputation of Nazzām's father and exonerate him of shame.

Worse, the volume which arrives in Damascus before Ibn 'Arabī brings the Ṣūfī figure much shame. People defame Ibn 'Arabī in mosques, seminars and councils speaking against his relationships with whores. So, he leaves Damascus and emigrates to Egypt, where he meets his friends, al- arīrī and Khayyāt. But in Egypt he finds himself in prison after which he settles in Baghdad for three years. He loves the place especially because the people love him and greet him warmly. There, he conducts a teaching workshop in one of its mosques. One day Badr al-Habashī, his assistant tells him about a funeral that has just come out from a certain mosque and insists that Ibn 'Arabī should attend it because it is the funeral of *sheikh* Zāher al-Isfahānī. After the funeral is over, he manages to meet Nazzām, who has already become a devout mystic figure. Wearing a veil, she looks at him and sees years of longing, fear, and deferred love. They exchange confused glances and then she smiles and welcomes him, but she does not invite him to enter, because the place is reserved for religious women (427-8). After a passionate talk, he asks her:

So why do you refuse to marry me?

She extended her hand. Yes, she extended her hand while we were on a road frequented by people and touched my clavicle. Her smile was small and her eyes widened and she said as she looked at the place where her hand wandered on my neck:

Because I don't have that, my love.

Why?

Because I am your third *watad*.

...

And the *awtād* marries the land, my love.... And in Maltia is your *fourth* and last *watad* so go to it and hold your heart. (429)

With the disclose of her refusal to marry Ibn 'Arabī, Nazzām ends a crucial phase in the development of the novel and starts the subsequent one. Ibn 'Arabī accepts her decision and sets out from Baghdad for the new destination.

There are two other women or wives who perform the traditional role of a housemaker: taking care of the husband's needs, and bearing and rearing children. They do not directly enrich his intellectual or even emotional aspects of his life or alternatively their own. After he arrives in Aleppo (*Hallab*), Ibn 'Arabī's want for a woman to take care of him, gratify his needs and bring him children is greatly felt. So, his friend Yaqūb introduces him to Fāṭima, the wife of a martyr, and she gives birth to his boy, 'Imād al-Dīn. Ibn 'Arabī continues to travel in search of his fourth *watad*, and on one day he is surprised by a man who asks him to divorce Fāṭima because she is *his* wife explaining that he was not dead but a captive. Ibn 'Arabī agrees to divorce her on condition that she lives close to him so that his son can grow up while close

to his mother.

The last woman is Yaqūb's wife, Safeyyah, who approves of the marriage to Ibn Arabī remarking she has been fulfilling the will of her late husband. Soon after their marriage, she gives birth to another boy, Sa'ad al-Dīn. Thanks to his animal, which took him west ward, he ends up in the Bekā'a, where he has to work hard to provide for himself and family until he dies.

Women, as the novel points out, enrich Ibn 'Arabī's intellectual and emotional experiences. Moreover, they help structure the plot of the novel constituting of the journeys of Ibn 'Arabī to find the four *awtād* believed to help him in his quest to reach the divine love or the state of *wilāya* (guardianship) the place of the state, after a long journey to search for the four pegs, which constitute the greatest plot in the text. Unfortunately, they are created to help man develop himself, guard his rules and provide him with his physical and spiritual needs. Very few manage to promote themselves regardless of their close attachment to Ṣūfī ideas and celebrities.

## 5. Conclusion

Women are so extensively cast in modern Arabic fiction that they have acquired new functions. In the above-selected novels they are portrayed in association with Ṣūfī contexts. They emerge as wide-ranging factors that help the male protagonists accomplish elevated goals and modify the sphere around them. They are villains of men; their assets or shortcomings are evaluated in accordance with men's gratification and wishes.

While Al-Tayeb Salih does not employ real Ṣūfī figures, he saturates his work with attractive women who are captivated by and captivate the hero's oriental mysticism in the same manner as the treasured ladies of Ṣūfī notables. To step up the mystic atmosphere, Salih crams his work with allusions to Ṣūfī bigwigs, practices and notions. More central, in the lecture of Mustafa Sa'eed on Abū Nuwās in Oxford, he reveals that his tactics in enticing women rest on the dubious life style, abstruse beliefs, arguable philosophies and homoerotic verse of Omar al-Khayyām and Abū Nuwās. His espousal of these practices are most obvious in his connection with the English women who all embrace an erroneous impression of the Oriental man. These women are magnetized by the Oriental man owing to the atmosphere of mysticism they construct around him. Because of the same factors, they loathe him. The women's conflicting attitude perhaps causes Sa'eed to endorse his lies and tough conduct. Worse, it leads to their tragic ending.

In the vein of Salih, Shafak has discerned the numerous innovative virtues characteristic of Ṣūfī thinking chiefly its view of women. Rather avoiding direct dependence on real Ṣūfī worthies, Shafak admires Rūmī and tries to forward his Ṣūfī journey with his teacher Tibrīzī to the modern world. In so doing, she both resurrects the outmoded Ṣūfī traditions and encourages the current world to grip mystic ethics. Her goal is to offer solutions to modern man fatigued by injustice and inhibition. In her opinion, a Ṣūfī rebellion can eradicate

modern oppressive systems and introduce a just and peaceful community whose standards, rules and settings are built on Rūmī's philosophy. Within this community, man should liberate himself from materialism and abhorrence of death. To do so, man should also assume decent conduct and conform to the commands of his soul so as to reach God. Compared with Salih, therefore, Shafak sends an ethical message for contemporary man in general rather than for a narrow sect or community. Through her female protagonist, Ella Rubenstein, Shafak presents forty Ṣūfī orations, representing Rūmī's corpus of the Ṣūfī philosophy. These tips are a receipt to cleanse men and women from all adversities.

In the same way as Salih's women, Shafak's modern and medieval ladies are displeased with their lives. In both novels the wedded women are not happy with their conjugal lives. Although every woman responds differently in the two novels, they all have grand anticipations from the mystic people associated with them. Eventually, they are all disappointed by the male Ṣūfī figure. Whereas Salih's ladies go through harsher encounters and, as a result, their dissatisfactions take more devastating courses, Shafak's females manage to survive. The women of Konyā adjust to the prevailing situation while Ella protests against her dilemmas and espouse the mystic rules to remedy her current problems. Desert Rose, the harlot of Konyā, tires to follow suit. She challenges the dominating male-controlled society, but fails and re-surrenders to her former condition.

Identical to Shafak, Alwan bases his tale on the life of a true mystic figure. Yet, while Shafak aims at promoting Ṣūfī notions to settle problems of modern man, Alwan is attracted to Ṣūfī free-thinking, their travelling and style of life. Thus, his novel narrates the biography of Ibn 'Arabī, his Ṣūfī experience and epic journeys. Similar to Shafak and Salih, Alwan packs his novel with women depicted within Ṣūfī backgrounds. Again Alwan's women play active parts that aid the males to attain enormous aspirations. Their own status, however, hardly changes, in spite of the fact that these women are attached to Ibn 'Arabī, the fêted mystic celebrity.

In short, therefore, these novelists employ women in association with mystic motifs to abet their male heroes achieve his goals away from the conflict between genders rather than help women promote their own cause. Even Shafak's women have not succeeded in advancing their conditions. It seems that current writers are following the traces of Medieval Ṣūfī writers who regarded the woman as the key pillar of their writing. Akin to them, these modern writers pick out their female characters, grant them trendy titles, and render them the bull's eye of their works. In employing Ṣūfī thoughts and motifs, these novelists have attained astonishing feats in creating well advanced experiences at the level of narrative fiction. The employment of mystic ideas, motifs and images helps these novelists garnish their works, trigger the conflicts between the characters and allow scholars to tread new fields for academic assessment and critique.

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