COMPREHENDING A NARRATIVE THROUGH STRUCTURE: A NARRATOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF TALAT ABBASI'S SHORT FICTION

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Abstract

Pakistani literature in English, specifically women's narratives, has been in the spotlight in the glocal literary landscape for the past few decades. Researchers and academics passionately explore feminist elements and mechanics of women's narratives. The present study aims to study the short fictional narrative of Talat Abbasi using the Barthesian narratological model as a research framework. The researchers conclude that Barthesian codes help comprehend Pakistani women's narratives. Exploring and understanding Pakistani literature in English, particularly through women's short narratives, holds significant value and insight. This research makes a substantial and valuable contribution to the current academic literature. It enhances our understanding of how Barthesian codes can be used to analyze and interpret literary works, adding depth and insight to existing scholarship.

Keywords

Pakistani women's narratives, Barthesian codes, Talat Abbasi, Mirage

Introduction

Narratology has been serving a significant purpose in analyzing literary works since its emergence as an artistic and literary theory. The evolution of narrative literature, expressed through stories, poetry, and novels, continues to progress with various forms and structures up to the present day. These narrative forms, structures, and models have undergone critical examination, comprehension, and interpretation within the field of narratology.

This study seeks to uncover the narrative elements present in the short story *Mirage* written by one of the Pakistani short story writers Talat Abbasi. Abbasi has released a compilation of her short stories titled "Bitter Gourd and Other Stories" (Oxford University Press, 2001), featuring the story "Mirage." Her short fiction predominantly unfolds in Pakistan, delving into themes of class and gender. Many of her writings have been frequently featured in U.S. college literature. *Mirage* emerged triumphant as the distinguished recipient of the BBC World Service short story competition in 2000. The short story is presented through a first-person narrative, with the narrator explicitly addressing the reader as an addressor. The narrator effectively conveys the emotional struggle of leaving a child in a boarding house.

Background of the study

The story is included in the curriculum of universities in Morocco, Germany, China, and India. (Shamsie, 2007, p. 277; Siddiqui, 2014, p. 215). The narrative has frequently been examined through the lens of patriarchy (Siddiqui, 2014), yet there has been limited analysis using the

literary code system. In S/Z (1974), Barthes defines code as"… [it] is a mirage of structures … the sign of virtual digression… one of the voices that can take over the text … one of the voices out of which the text is woven"(p. 20-21). According to this definition, the author illustrates that the fundamental purpose of code is to unveil the concealed messages, meanings, and voices that are naturally present in literary language.

Theoretical Framework:

The study is grounded in the narratological approach towards fictional narratives. There is a superabundance of narrative theories in the structuralist domain. However, this study takes Barthesian categorization of codes for analysis of the selected short story. Barthes codes are:

Theory of Five Codes

Barthes points out that all narratives incorporate one or more of the five codes, serving as the "weaving of voice" (1974, p. 20) within the narrative (Lashari, 2013, p. 118). These codes include the proairetic, hermeneutic, the semic, symbolic, and cultural code (Barry, 2002, p.151).

The Proairetic code

The concept of "narrative code" (Eagleton, 1993, p. 120) encompasses the elements within a narrative that is responsible for creating tension in its plot. These suspensive elements serve a dual purpose in a text. Firstly, they indicate that something is about to happen; secondly, they engage the reader and prompt them to resolve the tension. In this context, the reader actively seeks to gain a deeper understanding by contemplating potential reactions to specific actions through the process of asking thought-provoking questions.

The Hermeneutic Code

The hermeneutic code, often referred to as the "code of enigma" by Selden, Widdowson, and Brooker (2005), encompasses those intriguing, cryptic, and mysterious aspects of a text that ignite the reader's desire to unravel their secrets. Here, through a series of targeted questions, the reader will feel compelled to divulge personal insights and secrets based on their knowledge such as "what is happening and why is that happening? What is the obstacle?" (p.152).

Barthes effectively employs distinctive terms to articulate these elements as "snare", "equivocations", "partial answers" and "jammings". The term snare implies "deliberate evasion of truth", the word equivocation refers to the "mixture of truth and snare" and the term jammings stands for "acknowledgement of insolubility" (Felluga, n.d.). The terms mentioned represent the subordinate codes and elements of the hermeneutic code. They are used to signify various situations and actions within the narrative. About these two codes, Barthes mentions that "… dependent on…two sequential codes: the revelation of truth and the coordination of the actions represented: there is the same constraint in the gradual order of melody and the equally gradual order of the narrative sequence" ("Bathes' Five Codes", n.d.). These two codes work together to develop the plot of a narrative. The proairetic code helps the reader understand the chronological sequence of an action and its reaction, while the hermeneutic code enables the reader to resolve puzzling and ambiguous scenes. Implementing these two codes allows the reader to recognize the essence of the plot.

The Semantic Code

The semantic code, also called 'the connotative code' (Barry, 2002, p. 151) refers to the elements of a written text which can easily be comprehended by applying their suggestive and connotative meanings. All narratives, as Roland Barthes views, have some certain "characters, places and objects" that connotatively help the reader to understand the theme(s) of the text (Eagleton, 1996).

The Symbolic Code

The symbolic code is also called an antithetical code (Barthes, 1974, p.19). Semic and symbolic codes share many similarities with antithetical codes making it difficult for the readers to distinguish between them. Felluga states, 'Barthes is not always clear in the distinction between these two codes' (Felluga,). It comprises antithetical and contrasted elements of the text employing which the reader (as a poststructuralist) tries to organise the text. (Barry, 2002, p. 151; & Seldon, et al., 2005, p. 152). With the help of this, the reader can focus on the binary polarities.

The Cultural Code

Barthes (1974, p.20) also calls this code the referential code. This code refers to those elements that have a common knowledge and understanding of the world. It is the focus of this study to identify common knowledge by analyzing the physical, physiological, medical, psychological, literary, and historical properties of the characters in the story. (Barthes,1974; & Felluga, n.d.).

To examine the significance of "codes" in understanding the story's thematic meanings, we will review Barthes' theory of five codes. It is possible for a reader to transform a simple narrative into a writerly narrative when using these codes. The distinction between readerly texts and writerly texts was made by Barthes (Barthes, 1974). He views a readerly text as the traditional text in which the main objective of the reader is to passively accept all that is already written. On the other hand, a writerly text is a kind of modern text in which the reader has full freedom to produce multiple textual meanings.

Research Methodology

This study is qualitative in nature and is based on the process of analyzing literature through the approach. The sequential method is a specific method used by Barthes in his work S/Z, where he divides a French novella into lexias and then uses five codes. In this study, the target text is not divided into lexias, but some other steps mentioned by Barthes are followed. First, the text (story) is carefully analyzed to determine the five codes of Barth's theory: ambiguity, mystery, symbolism, duality, and culture. In addition, the text is divided into five segments based on the characteristics of the five codes. Finally, this article aims to address data analysis in two ways. First, it provides the main theme of the story and second, it discusses the benefits of using five codes to comprehend the selected short fictional narrative.

Analysis and discussion

Short story writer Talat Abbasi (1942') was born in Lucknow and raised in Karachi. She was educated at St. Joseph's College, Karachi, Pakistan, and graduated from Kinnaird College, Lahore, before graduating from the London School of Economics in England. In 1978 she moved to New York, where she still lives today. She worked for the United Nations Population Fund until her retirement in 2004, researching gender and demographic issues across Asia. Abbasi published a collection of short stories, Bitter Gourd and Other Stories (Oxford University Press, 2001), in which "Mirage" originally appeared. Her short stories, mostly set in Pakistan, focus on issues of class and gender. They have been frequently used in American college textbooks. 'Mirage' was first broadcast in 2000 as the winner of the BBC World Service Short Story Competition.

In this story, Abbasi provides a moving account of a mother's heroic struggle to look after her severely handicapped child, and her complex emotions on leaving him in an institution. Abbasi says:

> The title *Mirage* was taken from [an] enduring image in my head . . . this shining pool of water on the road driving from somewhere to somewhere in Pakistan in blazing heat—spectacular until of course it turned out to be just that—a mirage. A promise ending in disappointment simply because you were temporarily fooled by the deception. A commonplace occurrence most people will have experienced is the tricks life plays on you. Nothing more, nothing less. (Shamsie, 2008)

Analysis of *Mirage*

The story is about a child who experiences a visit to a paediatrician along with his mother. Here is the application of Barthesian five codes on the selected story.

1. **The Hermeneutic Code/Enigmatic Code**

This code refers to mysterious elements of text in which the readers focus on enigmatic scenes and try to understand why they are occurring. The very title of the story "Mirage" is in itself an enigmatic effect. The title states that the protagonist, as the story begins, is having mixed emotions while she is going to hand her child over to Sister Agnes at Hope House. A situation, called equivocation; a mixing of snare and truth, can be found when the mother consciously leaves her child at Hope House.

2. **The Proairetic Code/ Narrative code**

The Proairetic Code, also known as the Narrative code, by which the reader focuses on actions and specifies its reactions, situation and the characterization of the story. The major action in the story is to hand over a ten-year-old child named Omer to Sister Agnes who is the caretaker of Hope House. The story states the action as under:

> "He's lunging toward the forms to tear them up with his teeth. But Sister Agnes is quicker. Scores of children, after all, who have a taste for paper! There's nothing left but my face and to this he turns. I wince as he rakes my cheek, and grabs his hands. He bares his teeth but I'm holding him as far from myself as I can." (Shamsie, 2008)

The lines show the major action of the story. it is never easy for the children and parents to live separately. It is a hard act for both the child and the mother to part with each other.

3. Semantic code

The semantic code is very helpful for the readers to understand the story. The title *Mirage* denotatively refers to optical illusion whereas connotatively it refers to two perspectives; a mother's perspective and the others' perspective. Through the mother's perspective, one may see that the mother, after handing over the child, realizes that she has amputated her arm whereas others see the child as an embodiment of innocence and beauty.

There is a significant word "*MSG*" which needs to be elaborated. MSG stands for "Monosodium Glutamate". It's a flavour enhancer derived from L-glutamic acid, which is naturally present in many foods. However, in the context of the story, it is injurious to the child's health.

The author uses an analogy to make the readers understand that it is easy for her to move out. Just follow the sentence to know the intensity, 'Imagine being allowed to walk but in leg irons!' (Shamsie, 2008) The sentence shows that it was very difficult for the mother to move out.

4. Symbolic code

Symbolic code is also known as antithetical code that explains the polarities and the anti-thesis. This code helps the readers recognize tension in a simple binary polarity system. The readers and the writers because of its universality have adored the theme of motherhood.

The protagonist is the manifestation of the theme of motherhood and it is the motherhood that makes her reluctant to hand over Omer to Sister Agnes. The protagonist is a mother, her first persona and she is an individual woman is her second persona and this difference between these two personas is the symbolic code. The first persona is described in the text:

> "The taxi's brought us without incident to Hope House, Omar's home. But, "Omar's home" sounds wrong. How can he have a home apart from me? Am I faltering now? Maybe I am." (Shamsie, 2008)

These lines are a display of the protagonist's first persona. She, being a mother cannot think of considering Hope House as Omer's Home because kids are supposed to be with mothers.

The second persona of the protagonist is described by the author in the text as under:

> "I go to bed early and sleep right through the night because the lights don't suddenly go on, off, on again at one a.m., the taps don't run and flood the bath at three, and I have absolutely no fear that the stove will turn itself on. So in the morning I wake up, rested and at peace…" (Shamsie, 2008)

These lines display the second persona of the protagonist. She seems enjoying her freedom in the absence of her child. Everything goes to normal and now she living at her home like everyone in the neighboring does.

5. Cultural code/Referential code

The cultural code, also called referential code, refers to the elements that give common knowledge such as physical, physiological, medical, psychological, literary or historical knowledge. The present story has multiple references to portray the culture in which the protagonist dwells. There is the use of harnesses for kids in society and the story states it as under:

> "He won't need this anymore," she says gently, removing his harness and handing it to me. The harness goes into the garbage chute as soon as I get home."
> (Shamsie, 2008)

The use of harnesses is not part of the Eastern culture and the story shows the society in which mothers use harnesses for the kids to control and have an eye on the children.

Secondly, the author switches to another language while describing the way her child expresses his anger or hatred.

> "There's absolute hatred in his eyes. He cannot speak of it, he can speak only two words. One is *pani*, the Urdu word for water, which he learned late as a toddler in Karachi, where he was born. The other is *na*, which can mean both no and yes."
> (Shamsie, 2008)

The mother is living in a British society where the English language is spoken but it seems that Urdu is Omer's mother tongue and he can only speak two words of his mother-tongue. Omer's use of two Urdu vocabulary items also shows that Omer has an Urdu-speaking family lineage.

Conclusion

To conclude, it can be said that narratological analysis helps the readers understand a literary text and the Barthesian model of five codes does the same. All five codes have been traced in the text of the story and the structural schema has been made explicit. Categorization of the text with reference to the codes brings forth different dimensions of it. Thus, the analysis explicates the features of the narrative and provides a deep insight into understanding the structure and theme of the story.

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