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Usage of Religious Symbols in Fiction by Pakistani Women Writers

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Abstract

This paper is concerned with usage of religious symbols by seasoned women fiction writers of Pakistan. These writers have indulged in using significant symbols, metaphors and archetypes in their texts. Exploring the source of symbol is a meaningful study. In the current paper, it is seen how religion becomes a major source of symbols in literature. As far as religion is concerned, the usage of religious language is not seen in respect to its structure and function, rather it is understood by the context and pattern of text. It is also explored whether the traditional usage of these symbols is being retained by Pakistani women fiction writers or they have used symbols in newer meanings and connotations. Qualitative research methodology is applied in this current study. Thematic networks analysis is used and basic themes are extracted from text, which are in turn grouped under organizing theme, connected later with global theme.

Keywords: Religious symbols, Pakistani fiction, women fiction writers, religion, symbolism

Introduction

To understand the religious symbols, it is inevitable to recognize the importance of the understanding of religious language. Along with the study of the structure and function of religious language, it is more important to understand the context and pattern of the texts. This research is more concerned with the later. There are countless examples in the writing of women fiction writers where they have used symbols from religion or religious texts. These symbols have emerged from different religious texts and their peculiar connotations add to the understanding of stories and characters. When we talk about religious symbols, sometimes they come from a singular religious tradition and at other times they are inferred from all religious traditions collectively. For example, the story of Adam and Eve is part and parcel of nearly all religious traditions. Adam and Eve are used in these texts as symbols of varied forms and by many writers. In a novel by Qudsia, main character of the story spent life in a self-imposed exile and it was symbolically put by Qudsia¹ in these words, “What could I tell anyone that when Adam accepted what Eve said; he was left with no choice other than exile.” Though the story of Adam and Eve is part of the narration of all descended religions, the depiction of this

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¹Bano Qudsia, *Hasil Ghaat* [The Ferrier at Hasil] (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel, 2003), 336.

notion herein is Christian notion of Eve being responsible for the exile of the pair from Heaven. It is a popular notion, based on Christian religious tradition, that Eve had actually convinced Adam to eat the fruit from the tree of Heaven about which God had forbidden, and because of her, Adam had to exile along with her. There are many verses in the Qur'ān about Adam and Eve throughout the text and in detail at three places i.e., in *al-Baqara* 2:30-39,² *al-A'raf* 7:11-27³ and *Ta-ha* 20:115-134.⁴ As far as the responsibility of Eve as regard to the expulsion of both of them from Heaven is concerned, there is no mention of this solo responsibility of Eve in the Qur'ān. They both are addressees. It is written, "O Adam! Verily, this is a foe unto thee and thy wife. So, let him not drive you out of this garden and render thee unhappy."⁵

2. Methodology

Qualitative research method is mainly applied in this research. Thematic networks analysis is used and basic themes are extracted from texts. The global theme is 'Traditional Symbols' and 'Source of Symbols' is the organizing theme. The basic theme herein is one source i.e., 'Religion' and religious symbols are taken out from literary texts and then categorized under the organizing theme i.e., 'Source of Symbols.' For the analysis of data, grounded theory is used as the inductive conceptualization of themes was the purpose of the study.

Women fiction writers were selected by setting basic criteria i.e., they should be Pakistani nationals and residents of Pakistan when their works were published. They should be 'A' category published authors with at least two publications and that they must be published in 'A' category literary journals by esteemed editors. The writers writing popular fiction were not taken into account. The selection was further refined through snowball sampling wherein the usage of religious symbols was a basic criterion for selection.

3. Findings and Discussion

Apart from the story of Adam and Eve mentioned earlier, there are other symbols from Christianity used in the texts of writers. Symbol of cross as the symbol of sacrifice emerges again and again in the stories of several authors. The female self, as bound in shackles of constraint and living under the dictates of patriarchy, is manifested as the symbolic cross of sacrifice from religious tradition. Given excerpt is from a Punjabi story by Riffat:

One Cross that was displayed on her table was carved by a wood carver and by showering flowers on it; Suzy made it her anchor for patience and peace. The second Cross was Suzy herself, who

²*Al-Qur'ān*: al-Baqara 2:30-39.

³*Al-Qur'ān*: al-A'raf 7:11-27.

⁴*Al-Qur'ān*: Ta-ha 20:115-134.

⁵*Al-Qur'ān*: Ta-ha 20:117.

was educated by her parents and was given the chair of dispenser and all her laughing desires were soaked in the smell and color of rotten flowers.⁶

In a similar fashion, Attiya Syed⁷ writes, “Sumbul perceived it as a *hujra* [chamber] of a *khanqāh* [shrine] rather a room, but a *hujra* went along with her mental condition...and Cross...the cross hanging near her bedside, was a symbol of her hanging on the cross.” First excerpt from Riffat’s short story is narrating about Suzy, a nurse who supported her family and never married because of this reason. She remained a picture of sacrifice, a pure form of feminine consciousness,⁸ and as the sign of cross is also a symbol of sacrifice, the writer skillfully highlights this notion through a visual depiction; rotten flowers at the foot of the cross become a symbol of rotten desires of Suzy. Second excerpt is talking about Sumbul, who is going through mental stress and views a cross hanging by her side and relates to it as a depiction of her own self. Syed, in her short stories, talks more of symbols of religious and mythological scenarios from around the globe. Most of her short stories are set in American and European countries. Basheer’s stories are also set in United States and occasionally in other countries, but they are mostly narrative style rather than symbolic. If we view the next excerpt from Syed’s short story, the girls that the narrator sees while travelling were reading their check books in the way one reads a bible, so the narrator inferred that they must be from the Israelites as they are trapped in the race of numbers, yet she symbolizes this trend of meaninglessness of repetition with the myth of Sisyphus as well.

Or these girls were from the Israelites’ who are trapped in the race of numbers in such a way that their interest is loss even if it is interest, or they have the curse of meaninglessness of repetition like Sisyphus.⁹

When we talk about the Israelites, one notion that emerged many times in literary texts was the concept of *Man-o-Salwa* (food descended for Moses and his companion while they wandered in Sinai Desert). Mastoor¹⁰ writes, “What next? When I convinced him that I will also eat up Pakistan as *Mano Salwa* just like him, all the nuisances that could fall on me were ended and I was freed.” Mastoor’s most powerful theme is partition of sub-continent and the problems that emerged thereafter. Her writings had a subtle tinge of Marxism and she discussed the issues of economic disparity and exploitation. In this excerpt also, the character is talking about the ways people ate the newly conceived country Pakistan; the way *Man-o-Salwa* was eaten by the Israelites; the food that was

⁶Riffat, “Ainak,” [spectacles] in *Batti Wala Chowk* [Roundabout with Signal] (Lahore: Idara Punjabi Adab te Saqafat, 2003), 33.

⁷Attiya Syed, *Hikayat e Junūn* [Tales of Wildness] (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel, 2001), 126.

⁸Ambreen Salahuddin, Ahmad Usman, “Beyond the threshold: Emancipation or Entrapment? The Feminine Archetypes in Pakistani Women Fiction Writers,” *Journal of Research (Humanities)* Vol III, (January, 2017): 15-29.

⁹Attiya Syed, *Shehr e Haul* [Dreadful city] (Lahore: Gora Publishers, 1995), 50.

¹⁰Khadija Mastoor, *Majmooa e Khadija Mastoor* [Collected works of Khadija Mastoor] (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel, 2008), 592.

earned without effort and hard work and without any considerations of merit and needs. In a short story by Qudsia, she also picks the same symbol of *Man-o-Salwa* as regards to the rich, though her story is strictly romantic tragedy. It shows how the rich, despite having all, yearn to find a sorrow of their own to stay happy; “Unless a sorrow keeps on injuring you from the inside, you cannot stay happy...you and me...and all the rich people like us...we are tired of eating *Man-o-Salwa*. We need sorrow to stay happy...”¹¹

The same symbol of *Man-o-Salwa* emerges again in Qudsia’s novel *Raja Gidh* [Vulture king]¹² where she has presented her theory of the lawful and unlawful food. Here in this excerpt, she is talking about a kind of food that is above these divisions of lawful and unlawful; the food for Prophets, Martyrs and *Man-o-Salwa* for Israelites. She has come up with her thesis that the food descended from skies by God bring revolutionary changes to their beings and since Israelites were bestowed with *Man-o-Salwa*, so they have super-intelligent genes and have excelled in this life.

Remember...there is another kind of food...distinct from being lawful and unlawful...which is given to the martyrs... acquired by the prophets... comes to sacred Mary...once Allah gave this food to His chosen nation of Israelites too. This food is neither lawful nor unlawful...and it generates a kind of self-awareness, gives birth to mystical learning. It is a kind of madness for an ordinary person. But it is not needed that one should understand this madness, nor can one understand it, because it is born by the food that descends from above. Due to which genes evolve in seconds instead of centuries...which can happen with a pure mutation of epochs. Can’t you see what super intelligent people are born in Israelites? This is the consequence of the same *Man-o-Salwa*.

It will take a lot of space to mention and discuss all excerpts bearing symbols from religion that have something striking and used in a meaningful manner. The sacred religious symbols are used in abundance in fiction. Sometimes the connotation is the popular context, and rarely there is an evolved shape. For example, Hashmi uses the symbol of the magician from Moses’ story to explain how meaningless it is for Mansoor Hallaj to try to find why the Nestorian woman knew of the unknown. The narrator calls it “Gabriel’s breath” and says that the “magician made its calf worthy of worship with a handful of dust” and “you are still wandering in search of why and how that Nestorian woman discovered this secret.”¹³ Riffat, while depicting the ways of people, uses the concept of the sacred holy water of *Zam Zam*: “You should keep in mind that people even put dirt in *Aab e Zam Zam* (the holy water).”¹⁴ There are many instances where original texts of religion, for example verses from Qur’ān are quoted in the text. Now, these quotations may be for a routine purpose of narration, but at times the connotations become symbolic. When Noor Bano, a character from Basheer’s short story is married to the Qur’ān as per the ritual of *Haq Bakhshwai*, a ritual of the Sindhi feudal lords, for the

¹¹Bano Qudsia, *Amar Bail* [Air Creeper] (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel, 2009), 97.

¹²Bano Qudsia, *Raja Gidh* [Vulture King] (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel, 1981), 281.

¹³Jamila Hashmi, *Dasht-e-Soos* [The Desert of Soos] (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel, 2007), 213.

¹⁴Riffat, *Ik Opri Kuri* [A Strange Girl] (Lahore: Saarang Publications, 1986), 48.

purpose of keeping the family property with them, she was devastated. She was expected only to read the Qur'ān with whom she was married. Now this verse is quoted and the whole scene is echoing with the ironic connotation of the verse and the whole scenario: “No doubt Allah is with the patient!”¹⁵ A hysteric scream was raised from the adjacent room and the thirsty deer was roaming in forest in search of water.”¹⁶

In another one of Basheer's story, we see the mention of the story of Prophet Yusuf [Joseph]. As the prophet was invited by Zulaikha [Potiphar's wife from the Old Testament], she set this whole scene where her friends were cutting fruits and when dazzled by the beauty of the Prophet as he entered, they cut their fingers. Now in the story being discussed, the lady of the house is married to a colonel who is actually ugly looking, and when he brings this servant who is very handsome, “*MashaAllah*” [Allah willed it]. Madam murmured looking at him and God knows how she cut her finger while cutting the water melon.”¹⁷ This story of Yusuf and Zulaikha, apart from its origin in religious texts, has become a classical tale. It has been retold in many languages with considerable exaggerations and it has been painted by prominent painters as well. The word ‘exaggerations’ as regard to this classic tale is used because the long narratives like that of ‘*Ahsan ul Qasas*’¹⁸ [the best of the tales] by Maulvi Ghulam Rasool Alampuri, are nothing what the Qur'ān states.¹⁹ Qur'ān has stated the story briefly²⁰ and as is seen, there are many other notions to be learnt from the tale rather than taking it just as a tale of unrequited love.

The love that Zulaikha had, has been highlighted in rather *Sufi* terms by writers and taken to levels of strange sacredness. Qur'ān refers to the acts of Zulaikha as “evil and shameful (immoral) deeds.”²¹ It is a very popular tale and is referred to in the works that were studied for this research, at other places too, for example, Neelofar Iqbal writes, “Actually a greater portion of beauty is granted to Yusuf's beauty. A single glance...and finger tips are cut off.”²²

Symbols related to end of life and doomsday, are found in abundance. Difficulties in life have been depicted as walking on *Pul Sirāt* [bridge of Sirāt]. It is a notion from religious tradition of Islam that people will have to walk on a bridge “thinner than hair

¹⁵*Al-Qur'ān*: al- Baqara 2:153.

¹⁶Neelum Ahmad Basheer, *Le Saans bhi Aahista* [Even Breathe Slowly] (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel, 1999).

¹⁷Neelum Ahmad Basheer, “Andar ka Rang,” [The Inside Color] in *Wehshat hee Sahi* [Wildness would Suffice] (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel, 2013), 25.

¹⁸Maulvi Ghulam Rasool Alampuri, *Ahsan-ul-Qasas* [The Best of the Tales] (Lahore: Punjabi Adabi Academy, 1961).

¹⁹*Al-Qur'ān*: Yusuf 12.

²⁰*Al-Qur'ān*: Yusuf 12:22-35.

²¹*Al-Qur'ān*: Yusuf 12:24.

²²Tahira Iqbal, *Ganji Bar* (Islamabad: Dost Publications, 2008), 80.

and sharper than a sword”²³ on doomsday and in that moment, it will be decided who will fall into Hell or walk through to Heaven. “If she will move here and there a little, she will fall down. She thought for a minute, why so many *Pul Sirāt* have emerged in the world. For how long will she walk on them, for how long.”²⁴ Hashmi has used many such symbols of doomsday in her writings, but not as profoundly symbolic, for instance she writes: “And doomsday cannot come until *Imam Mehdi* would descend from the sky with forty thousand angels,”²⁵ “Like *Hārut* and *Mārut* who were imprisoned in the well in Babel for trying to learn magic”²⁶ and “Expedition of skies is against religious teachings? If it was possible to bring the throne of Balqis in Solomon’s court, then what is impossible.”²⁷ These excerpts are only bringing in examples from religious text, but not adding anything symbolic.

Qurat-ul-Ain Haider has indulged in using religious symbols at many places in her works. She has her unique ways of using them however. She tends to generate philosophical discussions. At one place, she discusses about the need of humans to worship unknown and unseen through their lives. She writes:

In our secret compartments, there is a small shrine. An unknown idol is placed herein. I do not know, the name of the idol: Christ, Saint Thomas, Krishna, Narayan, Zarathustra...this idol will remain unnamed till the end of the time. In the last moment when a person’s eyes are closing, whatever does he see at that time, what shape does that idol acquire...who knows it.²⁸

In the writings of Khalida Hussain, the themes of religious origins and symbols from religious texts are repeatedly used. She has placed religion as the one criterion on which rest of all things should be measured up. Religious signs and symbols are used as faith rather than just symbols. Her characters are scared of the judgment day. They believe in fatalism. For example, she writes, “Now Guddo’s mother reads the lesson of Qur’ān sitting on a small stool (they are deaf, dumb, blind, so they will not return). This is me, this is me. She could see herself burning in flames of Hell.”²⁹ In another short story, she writes, “Yes, you tell the truth...the predicament of earth and skies is written in *Loh-e-Mehfooz* [Preserved Scripturum]...not a leaf can move, but by His order. Metaphysical color started forming in surroundings. Strange images of *Loh-e-Mehfooz* started emerging in mind.”³⁰ But we also see in these excerpts, that the female characters, the narrators of these stories are talking about these religious texts in the ways they are

²³Khadija Mastoor, *Majmooa e Khadija Mastoor* [Collected works of Khadija Mastoor] (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel, 2008), 558.

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵Jamila Hashmi, *Dasht-e-Soos* [The Desert of Soos] (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel, 2007), 15.

²⁶Ibid., 20.

²⁷Ibid., 50.

²⁸Qurat-ul-Ain Haider, *Aag ka Darya* [River of Fire] (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel, 2000), 310.

²⁹Khalida Hussain, *Majmooa-e-Khalida Hussain* [Collected works of Khalida Hussain] (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel, 2008), 30.

³⁰Ibid., 34.

not just faith or religion but they are visualizing things; seeing one's self burning in Hell and imagining strange forms of the *Loh-e-Mehfooz*, the Scripturum on which whatever is happening and going to happen in the universe is written and kept safe. Apart from these usual references to the religious scriptures, she has also used certain symbols and metaphors from verses of the Holy Qur'ān in a novel fashion. While a character finally holds the hands of her man in the last moment of life and time, the depiction of doomsday from a chapter of Qur'ān is used powerfully in narration. The narration goes into the intricate concepts of unity of being. She writes;

I held his hand strongly. Then mountains started to fly like combed cotton. And the earth threw the burdens of its inside...and the seven skies opened their layers. Then a fiery circle of burning colors emerged...growing...spreading...simmering...sprinkling flames. Then I became a moth and circled around it because now I had entered into my orbit for eternity.³¹

Buddha comes in these short stories and novels as a very powerful symbol. The self-imposed exile of Buddha has been symbolically referred to in many stories, particularly with reference to the ways in which one has to abandon and sacrifice or achieve greater goals and for knowing and exploring one's self. Secondly, it has emerged with reference to Yaśodharā, his wife, who had to suffer his leaving at another level, yet which has not been the top story as far as the Buddha legend is concerned. As Qudsia states: "To find nirvana, Kapilvastu has to leave Shakyamuni...Migration is the basic principle in knowing."³² Qudsia writes; "When Siddhartha left after leaving Yaśodharā and kids, he left all sorrows in the palace of Śuddhodana, by which an ordinary man burns in the furnace of distress."³³ Like this excerpt, following are two more excerpts from other stories of Qudsia, which show the ways in which Buddha has been used as a symbol of certain characters, who had to choose the difficult paths or who left their families, acting somehow selfishly.

kept on looking at them silently. With the same gaze, Mahatma Buddha would have seen his queen and son for the last time. Passing through stages of suffering, he would have reached this conclusion that it is inevitable to be separated.

Mahatma Buddha would have gone ahead of me after reaching this decision. He would not have turned and looked back at Yaśodharā and the kid. Otherwise he would have stayed in the phase of uncertainty and would not have done anything.³⁴

Buddha's heart grew weary of self created heaven of Śuddhodana, the story of Adam was repeated again and one day Siddhartha left Yaśodharā and his son at the age of twenty-nine and went from the happiness of heaven to find a life laden with distress.³⁵

³¹Khalida Hussain, *Majmooa-e-Khalida Hussain* [Collected works of Khalida Hussain]. (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel, 2008), 202.

³²Bano Qudsia, *Hasil Ghaat* (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel, 2003), 161.

³³Bano Qudsia, *Amar Bail* [Air Creeper] (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel, 2009), 18-19.

³⁴Bano Qudsia, *Hāsil Ghaat* (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel, 2003), 83.

³⁵Bano Qudsia, *Hāsil Ghaat* (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel, 2003), 143.

4. Conclusion

The purpose of this paper is to highlight the intelligent use of symbols picked up from various religious traditions by Pakistani female fiction writers. The novelty of women writers lie in the variant ways they have transformed the usual and the clichéd into novel and evolved.³⁶ For example, the religious symbol of “people of *Kahf*” is used to describe the Americans. “By looking at the American villages, it seems that all villagers are the followers of people of *Kahf*. And they are roaming around in a dream from where Prophet Christ just passed through.”³⁷ Thus we find rare examples of novelty as regards to the symbols. The texts are studded with symbols which are used in a stereotypical manner. Helene Cixous³⁸ writes; “Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies – for the same reason, by the same law, with the same fatal goal.” As stated in a recent publication,³⁹ “Taking a woman's point of view would mean how a woman constructs her experiences in her own words.” But we witness that our fiction writers do not try to rise beyond what is prevalent and are reusing the symbols as created by men, the custodians of pen.

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³⁶Ambreen Salahuddin, “Women’s Lives and Images: Traditional Symbolism in Pakistan Fiction,” (PhD Diss., University of the Punjab Lahore, Pakistan. 2015).

³⁷Bano Qudsia, *Kuch Aur Nahin* [Nothing more] (Lahore. Sang-e-Meel, 2004).

³⁸Helene Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” *Signs*, 1 no. 4. (Summer, 1976): 875.

³⁹Ambreen Salahuddin, Muhammad Zakariya Zakar, and Ahmad Usman, “Threshold: A Spatial and Ideological Barrier in South Asian Fiction-A Case study of Pakistani Women Fiction Writers,” *South Asian Studies* 31 no.1 (2016): 175-185.

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