

SIGNIFICATION THROUGH VARIOUS SIGNS, SYMBOLS AND METAPHORS EMPLOYED BY USMAN ALI IN HIS THREE-ACT PLAY *THE GUILT*

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Original Article

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Abstract

*The relationships between the 'signifier' and the 'signified' are referred to as 'signification'. This paper explores "Signification through various signs, symbols and metaphors employed by Usman Ali in his three-act play *The Guilt*". Saussure's discourse on Structuralism, particularly on signs, symbols and semiotics will be referred to catalogue various signs and their significance in the play. Signs take the form of words, images, sounds, odors, flavors, acts or objects, but they have no intrinsic meaning, and become signs only when one invests them with meaning. Usman Ali has presented all three characters of the play-Shera, Gama, Billa-as the representatives of culture of Pakistan by using signs, symbols and metaphors. Objective of this research is to analyze and interpret these signs to explore how they contribute in adding significant meaning to the play. Not much work has been done on Usman Ali's *The Guilt*. This research will be a significant contribution in the context of Pakistani literature in English. Future researchers can work on other works of Ali and promote research in the genre of English Drama by Pakistani writers.*

Keywords: Signs, Usman Ali, *The Guilt*, Symbol, Signifier, Play

Introduction

"Drama is a composite art in which the written word of the playwright is concretized when it becomes the spoken word of the actor on stage" (Boulton 4). It is an amalgamated representation which incorporates in itself the real and the fictional, set within a particular space and time. It "combines the qualities of narrative poetry with the qualities of visual arts", as Amrita Sengar states, "a narrative made visible" (Sengar 3). Theater is a way of making a narrative visible through the stylized re-enactment.

Moreover, according to Ferdinand de Saussure, a text is an assemblage of signs such as words, images, sounds and gestures constructed and interpreted with reference to the conventions associated with a genre and in a particular medium of communication (Chandler 2). The sign is the whole that results from the association of the signifier with the signified (Saussure 67). The relationship between the signifier and the signified is referred to as 'signification'. This paper explores "signification through various signs, symbols and metaphors employed by Usman Ali in his three act play *The Guilt*". Saussure's discourse on Structuralism, particularly on signs, symbols and semiotics will be referred to catalogue various signs and their significance in the play.

Literature Review

Semiotics involves the study not only of what we refer to as “signs” in everyday speech, but of anything which “stands for” something else. In a semiotic sense, signs take the form of words, images, sounds, gestures and objects. Whilst for the linguist Saussure, “semiology” was “a science which studies the role of signs as part of social life”, for the philosopher Charles Peirce “semiotic” was the “formal doctrine of signs” which was closely related to Logic (Peirce 59). For him, “a sign... is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity” (Peirce 60). He declared that “every thought is a sign” (Peirce 61).

According to Peirce, “we think only in signs” (Peirce 58). Signs take the form of words, images, sounds, odors, flavors, acts or objects, but such things have no intrinsic meaning and become signs only when we invest them with meaning. “Nothing is a sign unless it is interpreted as a sign”, declares Peirce. Anything can be a sign as long as someone interprets it as “signifying” something - referring to or standing for something other than itself. Usage of signs, symbols and metaphors is extremely evident and significant throughout the play *The Guilt*. It seems as if Usman Ali had imagined the play in his creative faculty in the form of signs, symbols and metaphors that he has employed in the play.

Mr. Usman Ali is authors who has writer of various plays i.e. three act play named *The Guilt* and the second one is nominated as *The Last Metaphor*. The other dramatic scripts written by Ali are *Hamlet’s Madness*, *Feigned or Real* enacted at British Council’s celebration of Shakespearean birthday. Another work designed by him is *An Imagined Interview with Robert Frost* in 2001. He also translated a book written by Gulzar called *The Speaking Silence*. He is currently serving as Chairperson of English Department and the Director of the Academics in University of Sargodha Mandi Bahauddin Campus.

Data Analysis

In his play *The Guilt* Usman Ali presents the journey of three artists who represent three significant pillars of stage and theater: writing, acting and dancing. Shera, the father, is an actor by profession. He is in his sixties and has spent all his life performing hundreds of roles and entertaining the audience. Gamma, his elder son, is thirty-three years old and is a writer suffering from writer’s block. Billa, the younger son, is twenty-two years old and is striving to master dancing.

The journey of these three artists has been presented as a struggle to achieve success in their respective fields. Walter Benjamin states, “Uniqueness of a work of art is inseparable from its being embedded in the fabric of tradition” (Benjamin 300). He further says that initially the “contextual integration of art in tradition found its expression in the cult” (Benjamin 301). Thus culture holds great significance in the expression of art, particularly presenting art in the form of a theatrical performance. Usman Ali has presented all three characters of the play as the representatives of culture of Pakistan. The play presents the true picture of the struggle of a Pakistani stage artist, Shera, who has spent his whole life making his audience laugh. He has played scores of roles and knows no other work than this.

When the play opens stage setting is described in detail. There is the portrait of an Indian actor and a splendid dancer Hrithik Roshan placed on the wall. Portrait of an Indian actor/ dancer is quite symbolic. On one hand, it shows the diversity of attitude and culture adopted by the playwright. On the other hand, it reflects the amalgamation of a foreign (Hindu) culture in art and culture of Pakistan. When Billa says that it’s time of my prayer, he actually intends to worship the portrait of his

ideal in dancing. It highlights the ritual of idol worship being practiced in Islamic cult. It also shows that art has no religion; it is boundless and ecstatic.

In addition to this, the mirror hanging above the sink is highly symbolic. There is no usefulness of mirror as literary devices in mirrors imagery and allegorical complexity. The clarity of self-knowledge and awareness is being gleaned to suggest the delusion and distortion of reality. There is a glimpse also of cracked calamity and tragically fractured identity which is horrifyingly reflecting an empty and deserted soul. There is an imagination of writer for centuries in mirror. Mirror also presents an intricate identity of representation and self-consciousness, and there is a reflection of oppositional themes which were surrounded by reality, illusion, candor, logic, narcissism, self-loathing deception, logic, flattery, symmetry, and harsh difference. Whether one accepts, rejects, fears, or embraces the mirror and what is reflected therein, it is possible, as E. T. A. Hoffmann's narrator in *The Sandman* suggests, that "you will come to believe that real life is more singular and more fantastic than anything else and that all a writer can really do is present it as 'in a glass, darkly'" (Hoffman 105).

Generally, physical and spiritual reflections are symbolized through mirrors. Individual's surroundings are reflected by one, s spiritual mirrors. In other words, Spiritual Mirror shows people, places and events which are currently a part of the life one has created for oneself. One can approach into the one, spiritual mirror by looking directly on by viewing it or gazing on external surrounding on it. This idea of self-evaluation by looking into the mirror is significant in the play where Shera sees himself into the mirror and evaluates his talent, charm and skill. As it is gazed by the Egyptian God into the mirror which is hand held to see the reflection that how they are correctly describing themselves, simultaneously they are viewing also into the mirrors for the understanding of consequences as a result of events which are decorated by them in motion. They are pouring the reflection on the results and activities in other words, in an eternal self-evaluation process which is visible in their thoughts. This idea of self – evaluation by looking into the mirror is significant in the play where Shera sees himself into the mirror and evaluates his talent, command and skills.

When Shera stands in front of the mirror to prepare for the show he "sees" himself in the mirror as aged, decaying mass of body who has spent the golden years of his life. He has passed the golden years of his life and now new generation is coming to take his place. As Kaleem Omar rightly says in his *A Troubadour's Life* that, "Age itself is a fearsome thing" (Omar 130). Therefore, the mirror reminds him of his lost youth and arrival of old age, which he wants to deny and avoid. Aging is a natural phenomenon which he cannot have oblivion from. As, Gregory Maguire writes in *Mirror, Mirror: "A Novel"*, "But the mirror wouldn't let her alone. Try as she might, shroud it in black lace from Seville, blow out the candles in the room, close her eyes – the mirror still gripped her. At last, she was failure take more and she positioned herself in front of its harsh eye, and demanded the truth of it" (Maguire). This same idea of 'trapped within the reality of time past' and the consequences after it are hard for Shera to accept by looking into the retrospect through mirror.

To cast the reflection of mirror, there is required a light and light is presenting wisdom, enlightenment, awareness, illumination symbolically, and, for the evaluation of one's self honesty and world one has to created his/her own world by using the personal spiritual mirror. By adopting one's current reflection with enlighten mind one can see it easily. By keeping in mind that reflection of the mirror shows only that particular image that is before it, whatever one views in one's personal spiritual mirror is currently the truth of not only one's personality and reputation (who we are) but also the truth of the world which one has created around one's self. As enlightened being one has both the ability and responsibility to change one's personal, mental, and spiritual reflection whenever one "sees"

something in one's mirror that is not harmonious with who one truly aspires to be. In this way one is identical to the Egyptian Neters / Gods who gaze into their hand-held mirrors in an eternal process of self-evaluation, self-improvement, self-change and self-enlightenment. However, Shera is unable to honestly evaluate himself and find a ray of hope in the darkness and melancholy which surrounds him. His struggle to come out of his self-created whirlpool is of no use unless he is able to recognize the presence of light in its absence.

Moreover, "the new table with an old computer" placed upstage left reflects the binary of new, juvenile, raw versus old (aging), worn-out or simply rottenness. This binary is also evident through the characters of Shera, Gamma and Billa. Shera is the one who belongs to the territory of old age and has played the innings of his life. His position has been taken by his sons who are the representatives of the "new and juvenile". Table is also a symbol of support for the old computer. Thus the new generation or society has substituted the old worn-out table, the source of support. Yet the object of skill and talent is computer, which is old. This proves that the artist will not progress unless the old methods or technology will not be upgraded to the latest software of art. That is the reason why Gamma says that "Art is cruel" (3).

Similarly, "monitor also functions as a television". This shows multi-tasking or in other words role-playing, switching from one role to the other depending upon the need and requirement. This image can be perfectly related with the scores of roles Shera has played as an actor on stage. He has been switching roles, taking the identity of his characters through his roles. He has lost his own real identity while switching from one role to another, repeating this process more than hundred times. As a result, he has a confused personality and has lost his individuality at this age.

The wheel of bicycle is highly symbolic in the play. The circular shape of the wheel reflects the wheel of life, new generation taking place of the older generation. Further, it is evident that the wheel of bicycle placed on stage is broken. That shows the impairment of the cycle of life as well as the cycle of art and artists. An artist struggles during the initial years of his life and finally reaches a point of supreme success at his youth. Once that saturation point is reached there is no further progress in his success. With the passing time, age surrounds him. Meanwhile, the generation who were struggling when he was cherishing his success at its full bloom are now ready to take his place. The artist is left with no other option than to retire from the medium he was performing. His name is then forgotten within few years and he sets for the journey of never ending decline, and the cycle continues. However, Ali has clearly marked the flaw in this cycle. Shera, who has undergone this process of decay, sits and starts fixing the broken wheel of the cycle. Ali expects from the world of art and artists to start this process of repair before it is too late and more names of gems of art are forgotten. Thus, he forbids following the herd mentality and indulging into the never ending cycle of conventional life style. He suggests repairing the wheel and introducing innovative trends and practices.

Moreover the empty pages, which Gamma replaces from the typewriter, are symbolic of empty and meaningless lives of these three actors on stage. Shera struggling with regaining his lost skill due to age, Gamma struggling through writer's block to write a story and Billa struggling through his undisciplined practice to become a great dancer like Hrithik Roshan, all result to emptiness. Philip Larkin's idea of "Absences" needs to be observed here that there is presence in the absence, just like there is light even in the complete darkness.

Further, the mention of tools and gadgets like "blade, hammer, wrench and nut" signify their usage like "cutting, hitting, and tightening/loosening". Thus the mention of these objects creates an

image of forceful action performed to acquire certain results. They could be interpreted as the symbols of the process of struggle; cutting the evils from the current society and tightening the loose screws to repair the malfunctioning of the entire system. Although this process involves great pain and suffering, but the ultimate product obtained would compensate the pain and misery endured during this process. Contrary to this, Shera's attempt of putting the nuts into his mouth, trying to digest them and make them a part of his body, is vain attempt of being successful in his attempt of repairing the wheel of bicycle.

Moreover, in Gamma's remark, "Dew rusts the blades of wit" (12), water has been used as symbol of decay and death of "wit", unlike life-giving and healing properties generally associated with water. Coal, ash of cigarette and ember further reflect death, decay and decomposition. Also, "Smoking is an art" (11) too, which needs pattern to be followed and skill in order to learn and master it. When Gamma says to Shera that, "You have become expert in drinking ash" (13) confirms the fact that smoking is a painful process like creation of art. It is also hard to master and is perfected with practice and rehearsal. However, in the case of these misguided artists, "the more they rehearse the worse they become" (13). It is because of the reason that they are following wrong pattern and no principles, or in other words they "lack discipline" (21).

Further, "Bird buried in the trees" (9) are the ideas which are trapped within the confines of artistic sensibility. Also, "The story with the punctured heart" (9) is the process of creation of art. The anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss asserts that the process of creating something is not a matter of the calculated choice and use of whatever materials are technically best-adapted to a clearly predetermined purpose, but rather it involves a "dialogue with the materials and means of execution" (Strauss 29). Otherwise, it is the wheel which has been "punctured" like the "broken wheel". This "punctured heart" is the wheel of time as well which is in a need of urgent fix and correction. Therefore, "Nothing would grow" in the garden of life, in general, and in the garden of art, in specific, if these punctures are not sewed. Thus the process of creation itself is a "journey" and "it is the journey itself", according to Ali, "that is important" (16).

Animal imagery is highly significant and symbolizes various purposeful meanings introduced by the playwright. For example "crows and vultures" (24) mentioned in the end of Act I signify the dual purpose served by these animals like an artist. Vultures, on one hand, eat the dead. While, on the other hand, they help in cleaning the earth from the remains of the dead animals. Thus 'duality of purpose' is an important feature associated with vultures. Similarly, an artist's work should not be restricted to any particular audience, time and space. It must be "timeless" and "universal". It must cater the groundlings as well as the elites.

It can be concluded that Ali employs symbols throughout the play to bring all the three artists together and making art supreme. When one of the theaters is blasted Shera laments, "They have set me to fire. My veins disjointed. Entrails getting blacker and blacker. No water. No rescue. My eyes turning into coal. My palms stranger to myself... We cannot be saved... My theater... my theater... my theater..." (32). All the artists are alive but they need proper discipline and direction to break their artistic blocks. The role of the artist community and society is important as well. Society has to work in synchronization with the artists to retain the life of art.

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