

Theory into Practice: Application of Roland Barthes' Five Codes on Bina Shah's 'The Optimist'

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ABSTRACT

The present research applies Roland Barthes structural theory of five codes on The Optimist (2007), a short story by Bina Shah, a promising Pakistani fiction writer of the younger generation. The present study qualitatively examines the selected story in the light of five codes. The study includes brief critical premises of The Optimist and then the application of the five codes as theorized by Barthes on the structure of the story. Relying on the textual analysis, it shows that the selected story is tangled by all the five codes i.e. the proairetic, hermeneutic, semantic, symbolic and cultural codes. The story starts with an enigma, is full of suspense where several elements stand for connotative meaning. It is rich with the cultural references of Pakistani and Western society. Most importantly, binary oppositions (symbolic code) play a central role in the structure of the story. The theme and structure of the story rests on the idea of difference or binary oppositions. The study concludes that the author has created a fine balance in the story through the contrasting personalities of Adnan and Raheela. Their opposing nature, viewpoints, cultures and their perception of reality as opposed to the actual reality provide the basic structure and content to the story.

Keywords: Structural analysis, barthes codes, bina shah, the optimist

INTRODUCTION

Structuralism is a human science that tries to understand, in a systematic way, the fundamental structures that underlie all human experience and, therefore, all human behavior and production. (Tyson, 2006, p. 209-210) Literature is only one of the various human experiences or productions that Structuralism seeks to understand. In literature, it is the study of the structural system of a literary text. It tries to discover the underlying structures/codes/rules that shape a particular text. Hence, the meaning or the thematic side of the text is of secondary importance for a structuralist.

Roland Barthes, a French structuralist, philosopher and linguist, in his book S / Z (1970) described and demonstrated methods of literary analysis. He while analysing Balzac's story 'Sarrasine' identified five codes, i.e. hermeneutic code, proairetic code, semantic code, symbolic code and cultural code. These codes define a network that forms a space of meaning that the text runs through. The present study uses Barthes five codes to analyse Bina Shah's short story *The Optimist* to see how far the theory is applicable and relevant in a different social and cultural context.

The selected short story is chosen for multiple reasons. Though it is short, it is enigmatic for the reader. It is strengthened by the actions of suspense besides having many symbolic and cultural references. The story presents an amazing contradiction between two different cultures. Adnan and Raheela are characterized as binary oppositions: their different personalities and opposite mindsets are visible in the story. The interpretation of the story against Barthes codes can give an insight into the theme and structure of the text.

ROLAND BARTHES' FIVE CODES

Barthes presents his theory of five codes to understand the underlying structure of a text. He proposed that these five codes are the basic underlying structures of all narratives (Barry, 2002, p.151). After a close scrutiny of a literary text against these codes, the text can be categorized for its form and genre. In other words, through the study of these codes we can either recognize that which genre the text belongs to, or recognize the characteristics of an already established genre. A brief description of these codes is necessary before moving any further.

The Hermeneutic Code

The hermeneutic code is also called the enigmatic code. It refers to those elements of a text that are mysterious, puzzling and unexplained or incompletely explained in the narrative and so make the reader curious to know or understand them. The reader tries to unveil the mystery of these elements by raising different questions.

In Barthes terms these elements are termed as: “snare”, “equivocation”, “jamming” and “suspended answers”. The term snare refers to ‘deliberate evasion of the truth’, and the term equivocation stands for ‘mixture of truth and snare’. Some of the enigmatic elements are answered in the end of the text while some of them remain a mystery for the reader. The reader uses his/her mental faculty to give meaning to the text (Felluga, n.d.).

The Proairetic Code

The proairetic code is also called the code of actions. It refers to those elements that create suspense in the text and catches the interest of the reader. Every action of suspense heralds what comes next. What happens next? In this way it keeps the interest of reader alive for the coming actions.

The above mentioned codes are the important parts of a traditional literary work where the reader finds a chronological sequence in the actions, situations and characterization of the story. Therefore, these codes are studied syntagmatically. The rest of the codes are free from the chronological order and thus can be understood paradigmatically. (Ali, 2013, p.120).

The Semantic Code

The semantic code is also called the connotative code. This code refers to those elements that give some additional meaning or connotative meaning. The connotative meaning is often found in the characterization. This code is also related with theme (Barry, 2002, p.151 & Selden, Widdowson & Brooker, 2005, p.152).

The Symbolic Code

This fourth code is also termed as the antithetic code. The code is somehow like the semantic code but its function is deeper than the latter one. It refers to those elements that give opposite meanings, i.e. have polarities and antithesis. The concept of polarities or binary oppositions is central to the theory of Structuralism. By these binary oppositions a structuralist understands reality. (Barry, 2002, p.151)

The Cultural Code

The last code is also known as the referential code. It refers to the elements that give common knowledge. By this code a reader gets the physical, physiological, medical, psychological, literary or historical knowledge. The gnomic code is one of the cultural codes and refers to those cultural codes that are tied to clichés, proverbs or popular sayings of various sorts (Felluga, n.d.).

THE STORY AND THE AUTHOR

The selected short story “*The Optimist*” is taken from the collection of short stories titled “*And The World Changed*” (2007) edited by Muneeza Shamsi. The story is written by Bina Shah, a Karachi-based, Pakistani fiction writer. She is the author of two novels i.e. *Where they Dream in Blue* (2011) and *The 786 Cyber Cafe* (2004). She is also the author of *Animal Medicine*, a collection of short stories for children.

The title of the story, *The Optimist*, which refers to the male protagonist Adnan, is used ironically by the writer and her speaker Raheela for Adnan believes it to be the notable trait of his personality. The story is divided into three Monologues, narrated by two characters, and the narration is arranged in the order as, (a) Adnan, (b) Raheela and (c) Adnan.

The story is concerned with the theme of arranged marriage between a Pakistani boy Adnan and a Pakistani-British girl Raheela (Shamsie, 2007, p. xv). The story opens with Adnan’s monologue who narrates the events of his wedding day when Raheela reveals her hatred for him. She brazenly says to him that her agreement for their marriage is only for the happiness of her parents; and she will soon break the relation and will return to England within a year of their marriage. Adnan, in confusion, tries to soothe his wife but due to the high lights of camera and the crowd of relatives on the grooms’ stage, he could not pacify her anger. He also highlights his distinguished characteristic i.e. his optimism for he was born in July and having the star Leo.

Then he narrates how he fell in love with Raheela. When he had looked at her picture in sea-green *shalwar kameez*, he instantly decided to marry her and announced his decision to his parents. His parents were happy with his decision and sent the proposal on phone which was readily accepted by Raheela’s parents.

The second monologue is narrated by Raheela. She narrates that how her parents forced her to marry Adnan. Once, when she returned from work, she was told by her parents that her marriage had been fixed with Adnan, her cousin in Pakistan.

The news brought the worst out of her. She started abusing Adnan as a fool, bastard, and cried for not taking her consent in this matter. Her dad shouted and threatened her to lock in the home and to give up her work for he had given his word. Her mother tried to appease her by eulogizing Adnan for his good job, his property and his nature. Raheela refused to give in and wishes to be a nun rather to be his wife in Pakistan. She ignores Adnan in all means and affirms that she cannot live happily with the Pakistani boy.

Raheela did everything to avert her fate. She, being indifferent from her home, started spending time with her friend Nina, indulged in smoking, joined club in night. One day, in her rebellious mood, she willingly destroyed her virginity by sharing a night with an unknown English guy. She felt a little scrupulous of her conscience but soon soothed herself in the name of freedom and liberty enjoyed by a British woman.

Then she tells that how she came to Pakistan. When she returned from her friend, she found her sister Nahid sobbing who informs her about their mother’s heart attack. Both of them join hospital and then after her Mom’s recovery she landed in Pakistan with her parents to marry Adnan.

The third and final monologue by Adnan tells that how bitterly he suffers from the indifferent and cold attitude of his wife. She does not even allow him to touch her on the first night of their wedding. The first night follows the second, and then the third, but to Adnan’s disappointment, she refuses to accept him as her husband.

Finally, on the fourth night, she cleverly, exploits Adnan to instigate him to make love with her. From thereon, she lets Adnan to make love to her but she never reciprocates Adnan's three words of 'I love you'. Adnan, being foolishly optimistic, never minds this and assures himself to hear the three words soon.

Finally, he narrates that when he and Raheela went to airport to see off Raheela's parents, Raheela, making a fool of him once again, left Pakistan for good. The story ends with his excessively foolish hope to go to England and settle there with her. His life would be complete when she would express her love for him.

APPLICATION OF BARTHES' CODES / DISCUSSION

The Hermeneutic Code

The Hermeneutic code pertains to the enigmas present in the story. The title of the story, The Optimist, seems to have some mystery in itself. It appears as an enigma to the reader. At the first glance, the reader asks that why the story is entitled as the Optimist. Then to whom the title designates? The enigma is resolved in the first monologue when Adnan introduces himself as an optimist. Adnan is born in July and his star Leo that is the reason of his optimistic nature (Shah, 2007, p.170).

But this trait is criticized by Raheela. She wonders on his stupid belief in horoscopes and therefore, calls him a fool (ibid, p.176). Here the reader is puzzled and tries to know that whether or not the title is meant to show the irony of Adnan's optimism. From beginning to the end, Adnan's optimism, despite his tragedy, remains unshakable. This seems a mystery to the reader.

The story of Nahid is presented with insufficient details. She is introduced in the story as sister of Raheela but it is not explained that why her story bores Raheela (ibid, p.173). Why Raheela does not like her sister much. What is there in her personality that irritates her? She only appears two times in the story with sad mood, i.e. sobbing (ibid, p.177) and boring mood (ibid, p.179). Perhaps her gloomy nature is disliked by Raheela. Otherwise, its true reason is not explained in the story.

Similarly, it is unknown that why Raheela chooses the day of her marriage, right after the moment when her nikah signed, to disclose her hatred for Adnan (ibid, p.169). She is introduced as his cousin. Adnan continuously sends her emails, and letters (ibid, p.176) so why did she not refuse him before. She claims that her marriage is for the happiness of her parents. Does she really care for their happiness? If she had compromised for the sake of her parents why would she leave Adnan so soon? Here the reader also might guess that she is very cunning and she uses Adnan just to hide her guilt that she had committed in England (ibid, p.176).

It is also unexplained that why Adnan's mother fears that his son would opt for an unsuitable life partner as *Shia* or an independent girl (ibid, p.171). Here why the word *Shia* is used? The reader is puzzled at the use of this word.

It is also enigmatic for the reader that why would Raheela pick an English guy to lose her virginity. It is interesting that she would not compromise for her parents wish but would easily give her chastity to an unknown boy just to take her revenge on her would-be husband (ibid, p.169). To sum up, the text is tangled with enigmas that keep the reader's curiosity awake while reading the story. The reader remains doubtful about the victim and his/her oppressor in the story. We are not sure till the end whether it is Adnan or Raheela who is at the receiving end.

The Proairetic Code

The story under analysis is interwoven by the actions of suspense. The suspense of the story starts when Raheela claims that she does not like Adnan and her marriage with him is only for the happiness of her parents. Otherwise she has decided to go back England in a year of her marriage (ibid, p.169). This statement creates a great suspense in the story. Her remarks not merely confuse Adnan but also make the reader unsettled. Adnan does not expect such bitterness and loses his strength to speak before her.

Earlier, when Raheela's parents inform her about the proposal from Adnan and their consent for this marriage, she, at that moment, feels a storm raging in her blood: "She gripped the tea cup so hard that it shattered right across the table, sending the sudden spray of blood spitting in her face" (ibid, p.175). This sudden action not only disturbs her parents but also make reader intrigued about the coming disaster. This scene sets the stage for another action when she, out of anger, calls Adnan, "f.....stupid bastard at the first place". In reaction her Dad warns her not to use such words again and threats to lock her in house and to give up her job (ibid, p.175).

Raheela after that day being indifferent to her home tries to avert her fate (that has decided her marriage with a stranger in a country for which she has very negative perceptions) and in wandering once she willingly destroys her chastity. First, she feels a little scrupulous of conscience and then soon soothes herself by calling herself a British girl with all freedom and rights (ibid, p.176-177).

After the marriage Raheela does not allow Adnan to touch her on their wedding night. Adnan seems helplessly disappointed. He is fascinated by her beauty and especially her decorated feet with the web of Henna but he keeps himself until she does not permit (ibid, p.178).

Then the suspense arises when Raheela wearing in a silk dress gives a hidden invitation to Adnan to make love. From this day he finds her in her arms but he yearns to hear the three words of I love you. Finally, when Raheela goes to say good bye to her parents at the airport but she also leaves for England along with her parents leaving the deserted Adnan waiting in his car (ibid, p.180-181).

It is interesting to note that almost all the action in the story is done by Raheela whereas Adnan is passive. Apparently, Adnan, though, decides to marry Raheela, in reality, it is Raheela who decides to teach her parents and Adnan a lesson for forcing her into an arrange marriage she is not interested in. She sleeps with an English guy; she doesn't let Adnan touch her; or later on exploits him. It is Raheela who is leading the action and not Adnan.

The Semantic Code

Most of the elements in the story have connotative meaning. The first example of this code is the dress of Raheela in picture. Her beautiful sea-green *shalwar kameez* and her cascading long hair attract Adnan and he decides to marry her. Here what he behaves like, he is behaving as an Asian rather a traditional Pakistani. His love for her is hidden in his love to his own culture that he mistakenly expects to find in Raheela. Similarly, when Raheela complains to her mother, 'why in God's earth did Dad decide to settle here, instead of some decent place like the Bahamas or Morocco?' (ibid, p.172). Her desire to live in such decent places makes her character extravagant.

The use of the phrase 'drug me' also has connotative meaning. Raheela says to her mother to drug her daughter who believes in freedom that she enjoys in the Western culture. She herself can never be agreed for this marriage with her conscious mind. Therefore, it is better to drug her that should lull her senses and then she could be forced into this marriage.

Moreover, Raheela wears the silk gown on the fourth night of her wedding. The silk has a sensuous appeal and is worn by women to attract men towards them. Her silk dress along with her desire for chocolates is a reference to western culture. Westernized Raheela along with silk dress, her liking for chocolates and with soft words (though she usually harsh and rude) lures Adnan to make love to her (ibid, p.176).

The Symbolic Code

The Symbolic code is related to binary oppositions on which the structure of a story/text rests. The story under discussion is structured on the basis of opposites, the binary oppositions. The story is concerned with two major characters, Adnan and Raheela, who both are entirely opposite to each other in their approach, outlook, and personalities as they belong to different countries, social backgrounds, and cultures.

Adnan is a Pakistani boy who has a peculiar Pakistani mentality that is opposite to Raheela, a Pakistani-British girl, who has adapted to the western culture and lifestyle and enjoys the empowerment and freedom that it entails her. Adnan has a low and gentle accent who “can never keep off emotions his face” while Raheela had a “strong accent” that made Adnan think of like the double décor buses, BBC and the roaring of the ape with, to Adnan’s wonder, “such a command over her expressions” (ibid, p.169).

Adnan’s firm belief on horoscope and his distinguished optimistic nature goes against the Raheela’s disbelief on stars and what Adnan’s excessive optimism is regarded as foolishness by Raheela. Raheela says “this guy was twenty seven year old why the hell was he telling me about his star sign? I’d stopped reading the horoscope in the paper when I was seventeen” (ibid, p.176).

Adnan’s polite treatment with his parents presents a sharp contrast from the harsh attitude of Raheela with her parents. Adnan is the symbol of happiness for his parents who appreciate his good job, good manners, and good decision. Contrastingly, Raheela is not willing to empathize with her parents who try to hold onto their culture and their relatives back in Pakistan. She behaves like a typical westernized who believes in her individuality and personal freedom. She doesn’t care for the traditional feminine values of modesty, politeness and docility. Rather, she teaches her parents and Adnan a lesson first by losing her chastity and then by leaving her husband after a week after their wedding.

Table 1. Shows Adnan and Raheela as binary oppositions

<i>Adnan</i>	<i>Raheela</i>
a. A Traditional Pakistani Boy	A typical Westernized British girl of Pakistani parents
b. “Horrible face, Pathetic weak smile, ridiculous clothes” (176)	Beautiful sea-green <i>shalwar kameez</i> , dark hair, milky eyes
c. Gentle voice	strong accent, uses abusive language
d. Idealistic/optimistic/foolish	Realistic/shrewd
e. Extremely romantic	practical and rational
f. Loves Raheela	doesn’t love him; takes him to be fool, stupid and ugly
g. Believes in Compromise	rebellious and uncompromising
h. Believes in winning her through love and kindness	believes Pakistani men to be chauvinistic
i. Confused and unrealistic	has clarity of mind
j. Passive (he is receiver of the action)	Active (most of the action is performed by her)

Adnan's idealism is contrasted with Raheela's realism. He falls in love with her by paying a cursory look to her photograph in which he (mistaken by her eastern dress) takes her to be the one of a traditional eastern / Pakistani type. He does not care for her world and her aspirations (Shamsi, 2007, xv). Unlike him, Raheela scrutinizes him in all means: his girlish handwriting, horrible face, pathetic weak smile and his chauvinistic ideas.

Adnan seems impotent before Rheela. He loves her, marries her and is also fascinated by her charm but keeps himself in the matter of making love until she does not permit him. Raheela, on the other hand, independently does whatever she wants. She being shrewd exploits Adnan may be to hide her guilt that she had committed in England and leaves him (Shah, 2007, p.181).

Table 2. Shows perception and reality as binary oppositions

<i>Perception</i>	<i>Reality</i>
a. Adnan believes himself to be romantic and optimistic	In reality, he is unrealistic, fool and gullible
b. Adnan and his parents expect Raheela to be Easternized; raised in a proper Pakistani fashion	In reality, she is westernized who is proud of being an independent British woman
c. Raheela believes Pakistan is like Ethiopia; without proper bathrooms; she will be forced to wear <i>hijab</i> and won't be allowed to work.	In reality, urban elite in Pakistan enjoys all the luxuries and leads Westernized lives. Adnan believes in compromise and wants to win her through love and kindness. He is even ready to leave his parents and business and move to England for her sake.
d. Raheela believes that Pakistani males are chauvinistic and obey their mothers.	In Adnan's case, he is very polite and submissive; his decision to marry Raheela was entirely his own.
e. Raheela in Photograph wearing sea-green <i>shalwar kameez</i> appears to Adnan to be his dream girl.	In reality, she is the opposite; she is Westernized who occasionally smokes and takes drugs. Against Adnan's hopes she is not the type of he is dying for.
f. Adnan and Raheela's parents believe that Adnan can give Raheela everything: stability, a good home, a good boy. (ibid, p.172)	In reality, Raheela, bluntly, tells to Adnan, "this will never work". That she didn't want to get married. She doesn't love Adnan.

The Cultural Code

The story has so many cultural references for instance the use of the word *nikkah* (marriage deed) in the opening of the story refers to the Muslim tradition. In a Muslim society *nikkah* is considered important that gives guaranty to the life partners to live together under some restraints.

The mention of envelope of money is also a reference to a tradition in the Pakistani culture. This is the marriage tradition of Pakistani society where some close relatives and friends present envelopes of money to bride as her gift.

Similarly, the crowd on groom's stage refers to another tradition. Adnan's brother, father and uncle and aunts come to the stage to greet him. This is the reference to Pakistani and Indian culture where there are extended and crowded families.

Raheela's feet are adorned with the webs of *henna*. The reference of *henna* reminds the reader about the peculiar Pakistani and Indian culture where brides hand and feet are decorated with *menhdi*.

The mention of *hijab* (ibid, p.175) is associated with Muslim society where the Muslim women cover their bodies and hide their face by veil as *pardah*.

Raheela's habits of taking cigarettes, smoking, dancing in clubs and using abusive language, the f... words in particular, (ibid, p.173) are references to the Western culture where both men and women equally indulge in these activities as a means of entertainment. Adnan entertains Raheela by giving her teddy bears, chocolates and flowers (ibid, p.178). These gifts are commonly appreciated in Western societies by girlfriends.

The mention of the silk dresses and heavy sets of jewelry are the references used for Pakistani culture. In Pakistan, brides wear silk dresses and beautiful sets of gold jewelry that identify them new brides. Moreover, the use of words like Amma, Abba and Mom, Dad are the peculiar words used in Pakistani and Western societies respectively.

CONCLUSION

In the end, it can well be concluded that the analysis of the story in the light of Barthes codes provides a deep insight in understanding the structure and theme of the story. All the five codes can be easily traced in the text of the story. The text is tangled with enigmas that keep the reader's curiosity awake while reading the story. The reader remains doubtful about the victim and his/her oppressor in the story. We are not sure till the end whether it is Adnan or Raheela who is at the receiving end. Moreover, there are many examples of actions that generate suspense and herald the coming actions. Raheela's character and her actions are delineated with great mastery that subverts the patriarchal notions about women and their marriage. The symbolic code enjoys the utmost significance in the story. The plot of the story is completely based on the binary oppositions: two major characters (one male and one female), two different narrative voices, contrasting personalities of Adnan and Raheela, difference of two cultures are present at the very basis of the text. And finally, there are many references that pertain to things, values, customs and perceptions in the Pakistani and British societies.

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