



Treatment of Traditional and Superstitious Elements in Ashfaq Ahmed's Stories

Dr. Muhammad Masood Abbasi, Assistant Professor, Department of Urdu, AJK University, Muzaffarabad

Dr. Muhammad Gulfraz Abbasi, Associate Professor, Department of English, Kohsar University, Murree

Yasir Arafat, Assistant Professor Faculty of English NUML Islamabad

Dr. Zafar Iqbal Khattak, Lecturer English Language Center, University of Technology and Applied Sciences, Al-Musanna, Oman.

Dr. Raheela Khurshid, Assistant Professor, Department of Urdu, Shaheed Benazir Bhutto Women University, Peshawar

Abstract: Ashfaq Ahmed, with the ability to penetrate through the subconscious of his characters, has in his stories exploited his tremendous talent and brought out meanings related to apparent as well as inner reality contained in the subconscious mind of his characters. Using qualitative content analysis technique, the short stories of Ashfaq Ahmad are analyzed by focusing on his treatment of the elements of superstitions and traditions in his stories. These elements are found to have protective capacity for the people who could otherwise be shattered because of the tribulations of life. The characters take refuge in these superstitions consciously and unconsciously. Ashfaq Ahmad's treatment of these elements in his stories has mystical touch which makes his stories different and unique.

Keywords: Tradition, superstitions, mysticism, mythology

I. INTRODUCTION:

Urdu short story writing tradition started in the twentieth century when it got inspired by the popular short stories of the western writers. According Dr. Masood Raza Khaki, Rashid-ul-Khairi was the pioneer of this genre in the subcontinent.

Sajjad Haider Yaldrum was the second famous Urdu short story writer who was inspired by a legend, Tagore. With him Romantic Movement in Urdu short story got popular. As the tradition of short story moved forward, writers like Rashid-ul-Khairi, Sajjad haider and Prem Chand emerged as the most prominent figures. After the inception of Pakistan, the tradition of short story continued and figures like Saadat Hassan Manto, Ghulam Abbas, Intizar Hussain, Mumtaz Mufti, Qudratullah Shahab, Ahmed Nadeem Qasmi, Bano Qudsiya, Ashfaq Ahmad, Khadija Mastoor, Mansha Yad and Rashid Amjad performed their role in promoting the diversity of short stories in Urdu. Different writers experimented with different topics according to the contemporary situations prevalent in the country. As the situations changed, the subject matter also underwent a drastic change, especially, after partition the pains and pangs of separation were made the content of many short stories. From love, the subject matter shifted to the real-world realities which were the outcomes of partition.

Some short story writers took up the theme of mysticism and discussed the inner world of a man as the most fundamental reality. Ashfaq Ahmad and Bano Qudsiya were among those who did this experiment successfully.

II. METHODOLOGY

In this article, qualitative content analysis approach has been used. This technique focuses on certain patterns such as themes, motifs and ideas used in his short stories. In this study, two categories have been selected, i.e. superstitions and traditions. How Ashfaq Ahmad engaged these two elements in his short stories and how far he has been justified in presenting the worth of these elements. This article focuses only on the superstitions and traditions though; vastness of his ideas in his stories is immense and limitless.

III. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Following research questions will guide our research topic:

- i. How does Ashfaq Ahmad deal with the meaning hidden in the subconscious mind of the characters, which basically represent the living characters in the society?
- ii. What does he convey when he attaches myth with the events of the stories
- iii. In what way, social discrimination of different nature is treated in his short stories

- iv. Why does he explore the subconscious of his characters when he mentions their devotion to certain prevalent traditional rituals
- v. What ills in the family system and our society he mentions in his short stories.

IV. ANALYSIS

Ashfaq Ahmad's stories have a distinct color that breaks the flow of the moving story and confronts the questions arising out of human subconscious, and thus the meaning and purpose within the story become stratified. How he gives meaning to his story, is described by Mohammad Hameed Shahid in these words: "Just writing the story is not Ashfaq Ahmad's problem. He has been constantly trying to give a deeper meaning to life. The external reality breaks and dissolves into a larger and more realistic reality." (Shahid, 2006:118)

His style is not borrowed from anybody, but he creates his own style and the new dimensions of the story, just like his characters. For him, the story or plot is not important, but the character receives the primary attention. His mystic characters, like that of Khwaja Hasan Nizami's, are somehow covered in mythology and the narrative begins to wane into a tale. Nevertheless, his fiction is that of a universal stature. He declares war against social discrimination, inequality, injustice and racism. He keeps a keen eye on social complexities and inequalities. His deep insight has brought each of his characters closer to reality. Dr. Anwar Ahmed writes of his depth and universality in writing fiction:

"Ashfaq Ahmad possessed an innate ability to write fiction and was able to delve deep into the human spirit imbued with sorrow. He knew how to create a blended situation, and above all, he had an extraordinary ability to express what he desires to express." (Ahmed, 2010:429-30)

Ashfaq Ahmad's style is quite conspicuous and he is in command of presenting the common as novel. He also portrays the erasure of his mother's grave in such a way that the reality has disappeared in many ways and this is the color of the particular mysticism that he has devised. He presented the incident in the story "*Sardar Begum*". It shows the colors of the mother's routine and the love of children. Then, he narrates the whole incident of her death and burial in Miani Sahib near the shrine of Ghazi Ilm Din. The ritual of placing five flowers in a wreath on the grave of sisters and brothers is also mentioned. And it is collectively decided that according to the Shariah order, her grave will not be concreted. In all these scenes we find the mention of rituals. And then, on the night of *Shab-e-Qadar*, the incident of going to the grave of the mother has also created sensation from where the ritual is narrated. In our Muslim society, it is customary to visit the tombs of beloved relatives for feasts, festivals and entreaties. And the tombs are decorated with lamps, candles, sheets and flowers. In this process of performing rituals, the love for the relationships and the emotions associated with it are purgated. On the occasion of *Shab-e- Barat*, when Ashfaq Ahmed goes to visit the grave of his mother, the grave erected there a year ago was no more there. He portrayed this incident in such superstitious manner that the reader is shocked. He went to lay flowers at Aman's grave on:

"There was no grave! We searched thoroughly but could not find any clue. It was just empty land.....She knew that on the day of Eid-ul-Fitr, the children would come to her grave under some compulsion and try to accomplish the rituals. They are busy people. It would be difficult for them to do so. Why not release them! So she set us free forever as before". (Ahmed, 2004:30-31)

In Ashfaq Ahmad's art, there is tendency of shift from religion as well as to the religion. The reason for this seems to be that their characters belong to the middle class. In the collective consciousness of the middle class, this thing is constantly going on like a war. At times, they came closer to religion and at times disengage from it. Religion has a certain threshold, which does not work below the poverty line and above the high point of riches. Therefore, proximity and hostility to religion fall into the domain of the middle class. When the illusion of being rich persists, life and religion go along and when it comes below this mark, it becomes difficult to maintain this coexistence.

In the same way, temptations and excuses are found in the realm of deceit, and when those actions begin to provide happiness and tranquility, man becomes stressed by religious acts. Let's take the story of Ashfaq Ahmad, "*Batair*" which is molded in the same defeat and wilderness. Where the mosque does not provide him color and interest, but his passion for fighting quail makes it to himself. The battle of quails and chickens is just as lovable in the subcontinent as watching humans or dogs fight. In these beloved hobbies, those who want to escape the life of worship continue to associate politics and the events of their lives with this sport. The character of the myth is Baboo Latif Batair Baz, and in this sport he becomes so obsessed that the religious ritual and practices alienate from him. Ashfaq Ahmad has described the two customs as contradictory to each other:

"He stopped going to the mosque and in the evening began to visit Shalamar in order to revive the memory of his old and new friends. Other people from the city also came there and brought their own quails. (Ahmed, 2004:84)

Ashfaq Ahmad presents superstitions as well as rituals in a new way and it sometimes seems that they never existed in this society before, but the art of Ashfaq Ahmed gave birth to them. The mythology is also mentioned in his story, "Quail." where the reader is not familiar with them before or it is established by Ashfaq Ahmad's extensive knowledge. The protagonist of the above-mentioned narrative is Babo Latif, a clerk who changes his life after retirement. He goes to the mosque and starts praying. And started practicing English language at home. After retirement, he also learns the art of knitting a bed. In his house, there is his wife named Rashidan who is fifteen years younger than he is yet she is unable to give him any child. She takes care of herself and maintains her health. But sometimes becomes emotional and tells Latif that if they had children, they would have been studying in any college.

She would go to religious gatherings and read the greetings, but she was never heard of. Doctors told her that Latif had no hope for fertility. But both were happy. Latif started gardening and grew vegetables. Rashidan brought her a newspaper in the morning and when he felt lonely, he went to the mosque, but there too he was alone. He went to pick up books to study new ideas so that time could pass, but ideas made him confused and he became self-deprecating. Once he realized this, he distanced himself from religion and went to the hotel to listen to the people about politics. There he became friend with a quail-hunter and then the void of children was filled with quails. One of his quails got a broken leg and became lame. He loved it more than his children if he had any. In his deprivation, his wife also participated in the exercise, and when his quail's leg broke, he was up at night and shed tears. In the meantime, his wife's eyes opened and the scene she witnessed was presented artistically by Ashfaq Ahmad in his work, that is, to what extent people who are deprived feel for the loss of relationships. She says:

"Rashidan awakened from deep sleep and saw Latif sitting on his bed with both legs hanging down. Rashidan's heart was shocked as she had heard that after retirement, most people would hang their legs four feet before death and then their heart would fail."(Ahmed, 2004:84)

Before the social system came into existence, humans had built their own separate shelters. Then when they realized the power of their group to deal with the animals, they learned a new system to unite the group. Power was the pivotal thing in this system. Whoever is the most powerful becomes the ruler of all and possesses the wealth and land. He then learned to train the animal. He also learned to use weapons, and then found justification for his power and control.

Another justification was also based on new inventions. The biggest problem at that time was water. Therefore, in search of the location of water, human groups would fight with each other to occupy those places. Often, an assailant would demonstrate his new invention before fighting, and if the opponent did not have its competitor, he would obey rather than fight. The ritual of accepting such obedience was observed by the whole tribe. This method of obedience was later known as allegiance. The story of Ashfaq Ahmad, "The Masroor Marsia," covers the details of the royal period and the rituals contained therein.

There, Radha, a role model who learned the art of shoe making and made the world's first shoe out of wild cat's skin for his wife. Therefore, he knew it only to accept him as king. Ashfaq Ahmad described this ritual of recognition of the kingdom as a history and a story behind it. There is also a lesson to be learned from it, and a look at the origin of traditions and customs. The lesson is that by recognizing the competent human being, there is peace in the society and the rightful person gets the right. In this story we see how the king presented Radha with his twenty-five-year-old rule.

"The king of Humba, standing in front of the people of the town, prostrated himself first. Then he grabbed his hand and sat on the throne. He kissed both his eyes and then both hands separately and requested all the people of the town to observe the ritual."(Ahmed, 2004:133)

From ancient times, the ritual has been consistent to this day that the offspring and cousins of a grandfather are closer to each other than the brothers. One of the reasons is that every man and every girl needs a friend. And where there is a joint family system, the children's first friendship is with the uncle's offspring. Friend is the relationship with which everything can be shared: for example, in human affairs, it has to do with some secret sexual or social issues. Those whose solutions require a relationship for advice, with which there is no moral or social restraints to discuss these issues, uncle's children are the only relationship that can be trusted. There is no shame or concern for privacy. Things that matter to your siblings or parents are related to things that happen to a close friend, so this relationship becomes more dear and closer to your siblings. Secondly, siblings have many things common between them and most of them do not go well, so the relationship that God has made is forcibly accepted, but the relationships that a human being creates are thoughtfully created. That is why, these relationships are more endearing than blood relationships. One-to-one clothing and similar embellishments are adopted to nurture relationships

and to enhance and express love. This ritual is present in the world and in the sub-continent like India. This ritual is expressed by Ashfaq Ahmad in his story "The Talents" where two cousins "Sabu and Dino" live at the same time. They eat the same things and wear the same things, and are closer to each other than brothers so much so that their love is for the same woman, and they both die together at the hands of the same killer. Ashfaq Ahmad describes this ritual as follows: "Both of them loved each other more than real brothers did. Wearing same clothes and matching hats. Both wore same shoes and wrapped same sheets with cream on both lips." (Ahmed, 2005:07).

Ashfaq Ahmad adorns his myths with his distinctive mysticism and style. These things are extravagant and narrative. The reality of this is dubious. As it is known about the elephant used by Bhadur Shah Zafar, whose name was Mola Bakhsh, had stopped eating after the capture of Lal Fort in Dilli, and the white men sold the elephant to a Hindu. The elephant, after hearing that a Hindu would ride him instead of Zafar hereafter, fell down with the shock and died. Even more epic tales of this kind are part of history. Ishfaq Ahmad writes in his story "Qasas" that a character "Kartara Singh" is killed, his horse escapes and arrives at the house of "Kartara Singh" and reports his death. Then he stays in the same house for a year after his master's death, but what happens to him when Kartara's mother sells it a year later:

"One year after Kartara's death, when his mother sold the horse the villagers saw the horse weeping while leaving. She knew the buyer was a "friend" of Kartara's since his childhood. But she didn't let him ride inside his village. The horse, the dog, and the black partridge are attached with their owner." (Ahmed, 2005:11-12).

For the last decade, a guy named Seth Kalya started a gambling business from Karachi, which happens to be for only one night every fortnight known as "Chaand Raat". The business was played on the correct marking and estimation of the first four numbers of the serial of the Prize Bond issued by the State Bank, which would occur every fortnight. Whoever, guessed these numbers correctly, would get ten times the amount he was putting on his gambling. The nature of the business was spread all over the country and the people of the country embraced it in a bid to get rich overnight. The biggest benefit of this gambling would go to Seth Kalya, the other big benefit went to fake saints. Simple people would go to these so-called peers (saints) and present them their offerings, and in return they would ask for numbers, and these fake saints would suggest tactics that would work well for them. They would also suggest meat for charity and demand money to make their dream true. Obviously, the order of these four numbers was not visible at all, and on the next moon, the order of those four numbers would have to go back and forth. The gambler would approach the peer to set it right. Thus, the business of Seth Kaliya and fake peers continued in parallel.

Innocent people would suffer from psychological disorders and they would go to crazy places to end their lives. Now, this trend has become a part of Pakistani society. But Ashfaq Ahmad had preserved it by investing it in his story "Saeed Junior"

V. CONCLUSION

To cap it all, Ashfaq Ahmad in his stories captures the superstitions and traditions of our society in such a way that it appears to be a reality. He mentions day to day superstitions and traditions in an artistic way by using color of. He does not just mention them but conveys immense meanings out these superstitions and traditions.

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