

The Projection of Societal Evil in the Poetry of Hamid Khan

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Abstract

The concept of evil is foregrounded in most of the poems of Khan. This paper focuses on the theme of evil in its variant shapes that are foregrounded in Khan's poetry. For this purpose, both the collections of Khan, "Velvet of Loss" and "Pale Leaf (Three Voices)" are used for the data under study. Only those poems are selected that bear the foregrounded theme of evil. The poems that foreground the evil are Octopus, I Won't Talk, The Dawn, The City, In a Café, Labyrinth, Nostalgia, Nemesis, Eclipsed Moon, Space-Scape, and Inertia. The presence of evil that negatively shapes the human condition is indirectly projected for making the reader taking interest which, in turn, compels them to become conscious of their plight in the present and terrifying dangers in the future. This consciousness, ultimately, leads to the reformation of society. In this regard, Khan can be taken as a great reformer of the society who carries a sense of sympathy and empathy through his terse and stenographic style. Lastly, this paper will guide local researchers for furthering research in the area of Pakistani Literature in English. In this regard, local voices will be analyzed for local issues and problems.

Keywords: Hamid Khan, Evil, Foregrounding, Velvet of Loss, Pale Leaf (Three Voices)

Introduction

Pakistani Literature in English carries local issues and problems that is why most of the budding researchers take great interest in it. Tariq Rahman's (1990) *A History of Pakistani Literature in English* has been used as a guiding force in this connection. It contains almost all the notable novelists and poets who have been writing in English. Wilma Blue (first para) considers Rehman's *A History of Pakistani Literature in English* as an encyclopedia. But the list is still growing day by day making spaces chiefly for the budding poets and novelists. In this connection, Mary Tobin (first para) avers that Tariq Rehman's *History* throws light on the distinguishing characteristics of Pakistani literature in English.

Omar Tarin, Ilyas Khan, and Majied (2015) penned the history of Pakistani Literature in English from 1920 to the present. They trace it from preparation days because during that time the sense of national identity was getting stronger. They have mentioned writers of distinction such as Chattopadhyay, M.A. Rashid, Raja Rao, Sarojini Naidu, and Mumtaz, apart from Sake Deen Mahomet's travelogue, and Rabindranath Tagore's translations from Bengali into English. Regarding giving projection to local issues and problems, Hamid Khan, too, tries to grab the attention of the readers towards the problems faced by Pakistanis.

Hamid Khan is a local poet writing in English. He did his Ph.D. in English. Khan writes poetry in English centering both local and worldwide issues and human failings such as war, oppression, women's rights, corruption, and hypocrisy, to mention a few. He does so through the tools of foregrounding, i.e. deviation and parallelism. His poetry is very terse and stenographic and, more often, grips the reader's attention through unusual usage of linguistic choices. Moreover, his poetry carries deviation on various levels, such as syntactic, semantic, and graphological. As far as parallelism is concerned, he maintains it through phonemes as well as repetition of certain words that connote socio-cultural implications especially in the context of Pakistan and generally elsewhere in the world. Khan's poetry is stenographic but carries valuable messages for the reformation of society. It is both romantic and realistic. He has artistically connected the real picture with the distant hope for betterment. While going into imagination, he least cares for grammaticality and norms of saying things. In this way, he often violates the normal usage of English thereby attracting the attention of the

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reader towards the message he wants to convey. It is needful to explore the hidden messages, in such type of poetry as Khan's, through the tools of foregrounding.

Method

For the exploration of the hidden message in the poetry of Hamid Khan, a stylistic approach was chosen. Toolan (1990) maintains that stylistic methods of analysis can be beneficial in the process of teaching literature and language. Fauconnier and Turner (2002) maintain that the language of poetry (literature, in general) is different from the conventional languages, though they work on the same principles of grammaticality. That is why their treatment during the analysis must be different and, in this connection, objective exploration is needed which can be done through the tools of stylistics.

We can also confirm it from Leech (1969) as saying that without seeking help from linguistic concepts most of the literary terms, such as metaphor and irony, may not be fully interpreted. Concerning various levels of stylistic analysis, such as semantic, syntactic, or graphological, Imran Hussain and Mansoor (2017) quote Tellerman (1998) as stating that a researcher has the right to choose one, two, or more levels to explore a piece of literature. As for graphological features, Alabi (2008) maintains that they include the italics, punctuation marks, spacing, and even size of the print.

In this paper, the poems are analyzed through the tools of foregrounding i.e., deviation and parallelism. This classification of foregrounding tools is mentioned by Martindale (2007), quoted in Lesley Moss (2014), and is backed by Van Peer and Hakemulder (2006), and Shen (2007).

The theme of Evil is projected by Hamid Khan in various forms that have been devastating society from every angle. Khan has indirectly tried to reform society and to make his people conscious of the vices that are damaging us without noticing. This idea is embodied in the following poems: *Octopus*, *I Won't Talk*, *The Dawn*, *The City*, *In a Café*, *Labyrinth*, *Nostalgia*, *Nemesis*, *Eclipsed Moon*, *Space-Scape*, and *Inertia*.

Analysis and Discussion

In this section, the poems that foreground the idea of evil are (here "are" is correct as it carries agreement with the subject, "the poems") analyzed one by one. The words, phrases, and the phonemic parallelism that project evil in one form or another is highlighted and discussed concerning society.

Through various tools, the poem, *Labyrinth*, foregrounds the theme of evil. The *night* is personified that projects the ill will of people, as is shown through the words, *cage*, *chock*, and *poison*. Khan also maintains this effect through the *labyrinth* that gives the idea of the evil cycle. This compels us to ponder over the naivety of today's man who is easily betrayed by the niceties of the mundane life but forgets about the transitory nature of artificiality. Similarly, the parallel phonemes can be converted to the anagram, *not till good* thereby giving the idea that goodness cannot prevail unless negativity is eliminated. It is a herculean task to wipe out negativity completely and it is beyond the human approach as it is very otherworldly. Poetic messages often carry exaggeration, but here it does not necessarily mean that we cannot minimize the effects of evil. Instead of lying idle, we can overcome our undue wishes and desires that often put us on wrong track. So, once humans get conscious of all the hidden and obvious forms of evil, they can protect and redeem themselves.

Similarly, the poem *Space-Scape* foregrounds the idea that man is lost in the mechanical busyness and has gone far away from the traditional values and norms. Gone are the days when values and mutual respect were given priorities. The phrases *strangled/ the spirit* projects evil. The bringing of the opposite words, *shining* and *sterile* corresponds to the uses and misuses of technology. The singing of the mermaids and the word *jungle* foreground, respectively, the idea that it is a technology that makes spaces for the possibility but at the same time, it has converted man into a ferocious animal who is devoid of human feelings and emotions. It also takes us to the struggle for survival where leg-pulling is an on-going process. It simply conveys the meaning that technology should be positively used otherwise it turns into the most deadly tool. No matter how much one gets self-sufficient, they need others for the smooth running of the affairs of the world. Notably, during weddings and funerals, only machines are not sufficient to help you spend the occasions. Here, everybody needs emotional satisfaction through mutual help.

Again, the poem, *Nostalgia*, projects the message of all-pervading. The very title bespeaks of the good old days when people used, to be honest, and cooperative. Khan indirectly refers to the time when people would stand by each other through every thick and thin. It was a time of cooperation and collectivism. Now-a-days the situation is different. Society is fast-moving from collectivism to individualism. The west has excelled in it and now the east is also fast-moving in that direction. Even

the phonemic parallelism can be converted to the anagram that gives the word *Nostalgia* and *hike* that correspond to the severity of the sad feelings about the sorry state of affairs.

Moreover, the mentioning of only one star during the night foregrounds the darkness within the human heart. The generalization of this fact is projected through the lack of the definite determiner in the noun phrase, *man*. Likewise, the phrases, *cocoon of a human heart* and *Gibranic sorrow* foreground the idea that the human heart must be the hidden storehouse of emotions and it should not let them go otherwise it's bursting out will cause devastation on a larger scale. In short, Khan's poem, *Nostalgia*, projects the message of awareness on part of the people regarding the moral deterioration of Pakistani society in the forms of corruption, bribes, and selfishness.

The poem, *The City*, projects the idea of evil. Among the ten lines, deviation occurs in seven lines which compel us to think of the lawlessness pervading in our society. This lawlessness can both be on a religious level and social or cultural level. Historically, life in cities is often Labeled as full of basic facilities on one side and the presence of various malpractices on the other. Where there is buying and selling, the element of competition shows itself up which, in turn, paves way for a sense of winning by hooks or by crooks. This carries with it breaking away with all the available principles and rules of life propounded by religion, government, or societal or cultural norms. The phrases *Bowels of a monster* and *centipede fear* foreground the severity of the situation as man is engulfed by the avarice that causes serious threats to their survival. This is nothing else but self-destruction. Moreover, the word *city* is preceded by a definite article that gives us a sense of intimacy thereby taking us to the current scenario of Pakistan where the evil of terrorism is fast spreading. Besides, the parallel phonemes give us the anagram, *teeth* that project monstrous effect. Thus, the poem, as a whole, draws a horrific picture of city life which ultimately makes us aware and prepare for taking remedial measures so that we could live with peace and harmony. No doubt, the sense of competition is necessary for the continuation of worldly affairs but if it is manipulated positively then it can bear fruits otherwise it makes a mess of everything. Therefore, Khan has tried to open up our eyes towards this important issue through his peculiar style that is replete with deviation from normal usage both on the levels of words and sounds.

Besides, in the poem, *Inertia* also projects evil. The spreading of the evil is shown through uniting the words' *insult* with *wind* and *disgrace* with the *sea*. Similarly, the metaphor of *December* projects the end of human values. The parallel phonemes give vent to the anagram, *seed*, thereby giving the message of the deeply rooted evil in the form of all malpractices in our society. It further takes us to the fact that normally humans stick to wrongdoings while they rarely show firmness when they are on the right path. Only those can maintain goodness who is bestowed with the highest of faith. This will go on as is reflected through the word, *sea*, which is taken as the symbol of life. So, it is pitiful and a bit cynical to say that normally people do not hesitate to carry on with their evil designs.

The poem, *Octopus*, projects lack of self-respect as an evil in our society. The phrases *dead hours* and *soiled in the ugly earth* give the message of ruthlessness. The metaphor of octopus is suggestive of the avarice and selfishness of man as is projected through the bodily shape of octopus that has eight arms and two eyes plus a beak and mouth in the center. The nefarious activities of humans are projected through the simile, *like pit-workers*. Thus, Khan projects the presence and multiplication of evil thereby indirectly advocating the reformation of the society.

Similarly, the poem, *In a Café*, foregrounds the evil of self-centeredness. This is shown through *mixing tea/ with tears*. The incomplete sentence, *sitting next to you* and the parallel phonemes give rise to the anagram, *sitting in the café*, convey the miserable plight of the people. Moreover, the inhumane approach towards others is projected through *indifference* and *cell*.

The theme of evil is also projected in the poem, *I Won't Talk*. The *pale leaf/ on the naked tree* foreground deadly effect as well as obscurity which gives vent to the idea of the reticence of the sensitive people as their message is more often not understood.¹ Finally, the repetition of /s/, /i/, /t/, /l/, /f/ project destruction.

¹ Maybe I myself may not have gone in that direction what Hamid Khan means to convey through his poetry. In this regard his saying is prophetic. But, being bound by the theory of foregrounding and stylistic and objective analysis, it is not possible to run after the poet's messages by interviewing him, as it would merely have become

Similarly, in the poem, *Nemesis*, the degraded human condition is foregrounded. The pronoun, *they*, in the beginning, projects a sense of familiarity and generalization thereby extending the element of reformation. Similarly, the bringing together of hunger and God suggests that people normally believe that the poor condition of man is designed by God, though the words, *everything*, and *nothingness* give the idea that the rich are responsible for the bad condition.

The evil of drug addiction is foregrounded in the poem, *Eclipsed Moon*. Khan connects the concept of white fever and the modern youth thereby giving the notion that the youth of today is carried away by a carefree and licentious attitude. In the context of Pakistan, it refers to *shababkabab* or *jaam aw janaan*.² Moreover, Khan, through the personal pronoun, the problem of drug addiction is localized and familiarized which, in turn, projects lack a sense of identity. This is further cleared by the employment of the oxymoron, as *a man without manliness*. Moreover, this is also highlighted through the parallel phonemes that give the word anagram, *dim*.

Conclusion

The evil is foregrounded in various forms and shapes which has permeated through nearly every aspect of human life, especially, in Pakistan and, generally, elsewhere in the world. It needs immediate uprooting from society for maintaining peace of mind and sustainable living. These evils are manifested, in the poems under study, in the forms of foreign culture obsession, cruelty, absence of humanitarian feelings, self-centeredness, and mechanical life that is devoid of sympathy and sense of cooperation. Thus, Khan has tried in his own right to attract the readers' attention towards the social evils that need serious address and uprooting. Once one becomes conscious of the surrounded evils, they can easily overcome them. This is the message he conveys to all at all times. It is said that it is the faculty of poets to understand poetry. But it does not necessarily mean that the readers who are not poets will not understand poetry. Various literary and linguistics theories can make one explore the hidden messages the poets intend to convey. Among the various available theories and tools for the interpretation of literary works, stylistics is best as it is not only directly related to the interpretation of art but also presents the findings objectively which appeal to the majority. In this regard, foregrounding, a stylistic tool was chosen for the interpretation of the poems. It was wonderful to see that the concept of evil is projected in Hamid Khan's poetry in many shapes and forms that have been devastating the society from within. Lastly, it is suggested for other researchers to apply the tools of stylistics for the interpretation of poetry. Furthermore, it is highly commendable to research local voices, especially those who write in English.

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a literary explanatory note to his poetry. As Khan is still alive, so he would enjoy the foregrounded messages and issues after the successful completion of the thesis.

²*Shabab Kabab* are two words of Urdu meaning youth and good eating respectively. It implies the carefree life of young man who run after fair girls and good food. Similarly, the idiomatic expression in Pashto, *jaam aw janaan*, too refers to alcoholic drink in the company of a lady. It also implies the life of licentiousness.

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