



## Five Codes in Qaisra Shahraz's Story *The Escape*: A Barthesian Reading

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**ABSTRACT:** *This paper provides a Barthesian reading to Qaisra Shahraz's short story entitled The Escape. This Pakistani English short story represents several enigmatic, symbolic, and cultural elements which need to be discussed and analyzed critically for better understanding of the story. To encode all such elements and to make the text understandable for its readers, this study analyses the narrative in the light of five codes' theory of Barthes. By this, the paper converts the simple target text into a writerly text. Relying on text-based analysis, the study examines all the proairetic, hermeneutic, semic, symbolic and cultural voices hidden in the narrative. The proairetic and the hermeneutic codes highlight the action-reaction, puzzling and enigmatic elements which altogether construct the plot of the selected story. Herein the words darbar-daig, zakat, chana-chat and sewaiyan etc. connotatively enrich the spiritual significance of the story. Similarly, several words including Eid, Eidhi, gharara, lengha, sherwani, and darbar etc. provide the knowledge of South Asian culture. Finally, this study argues that the analysis of these codes assists the readers to understand the theme, characterization, and plot of the story.*

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**Keywords:** Five codes, writerly text, snare, the escape

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### Introduction

The selected Pakistani English short fiction entitled *The Escape* (2013) revolves around the story of Samir who feels otherness in the foreign land of Manchester. Being isolated from his place, he urges to go back to Pakistan i.e., his native land. His frustration further connects with the narrative elements of suspense, enigmas, and cultural references which create ambiguity for the reader to understand the essence of the story. Due to this complexity, the target story needs to be analyzed critically.

Keeping in mind the problem of complexity in understanding, this paper provides a Barthesian reading to this story. It applies Barthes theory of five codes on the selected text to entangle the complex narrative elements. This theory helps us to

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highlight the narrative codes, enigmas, puzzles, the semic elements, symbolic or antithetical elements and cultural references embodied in the chosen story.

Barthes (1974) defines a text as a galaxy/ or a network of signifiers. These signifiers become stronger with the participation of reader in meaning making phenomenon. The reader actively participates to encode the hidden networks of signified of signified. Taking support from Barthesian methodology (given in Barthes, 1974), this paper analyzes the chosen narrative in a writerly way. The following section first discusses the five codes in detail, then it applies these codes on the narrative in the next section.

### **Literature Review**

Roland Gerard Barthes (1915-1980) is a French linguist. He proposes several theoretical concepts including the concept of readerly and writerly texts (Barthes, 1977), and death of the author (1967) etc. He also proposes his theory of five codes to provide an understanding of the underlying structure of narratives (Barthes, 1974). According to him, all narratives possess these five or a few of these elements in their structures. These elements have many signifiers that can be explored variously by the active participation of a reader in the meaning making process of the narrative. Moreover, the analysis of these codes helps the reader to understand the in-depth meaning. These theoretical codes are termed as the proairetic, the hermeneutic, the semantic, the symbolic, and the cultural codes.

Eagleton (1993) describes the proairetic code as the narrative code. It refers to the elements of actions and their reactions. Barthes states that a narrative possesses some elements of actions which arise interest in the reader to explore the reactions of the actions (cited in Felluga, n. d). The analysis of the phenomenon of action and reaction maintains the interest of the reader to understand the text.

Barry (2002) states that the hermeneutic code refers to enigmas, puzzles, and mystery in the narrative. It refers to the enigmatic and mysterious textual elements which further compel the reader to be enigmatic and mysterious to solve the riddle of the target narrative (Seldon, Widdowson, & Brooker, 2005). According to Barthes, there exists many inexplicable elements which create complexity in a narrative. Barthes further uses some technical terms including “snare”, “jammings”, and “equivocation” for this code. These terms stand for the “deliberate evasion of truth, acknowledgement of insolubility, and mixture of truth and snare respectively

(Felluga, n. d). Some scholars (Zaib, and Mashori, 2014; Zaib, et al., 2017) call these terms as the sub-codes of the hermeneutic codes.

The proairetic code invites the reader to analyse action-reaction elements and the hermeneutic code compels the reader to solve the enigmas. Both these codes assist the reader to comprehend the plot of any narrative. Lashari (2003) mentions that the proairetic code links with the chronological sequence of events, sequences, and actions, etc. In this sense, this code is analyzed syntagmatically. The rest of the text relates to the analysis at paradigmatic level (Malik, Zaib, and Bughio, 2014).

The semantic code looks for the connotative elements in a narrative. Eagleton (1993) cites Barthes (1974) who argues that every narrative possesses some “characters, places, and objects” which according to Zaib and Mashori (2014) connotatively enrich the meaning of the narrative. The analysis of these elements helps the reader to understand the theme of the narrative. The symbolic code refers to the antithetical elements. Following this code, the reader looks for binary polarities, antithetical elements in a text. These polarities clarify the reality embodied in the narrative.

The cultural code refers to the worldly knowledge. This code confers only those elements which stand for cultural references. Barthes (1974) argues that the function of this code is to focus on some psychological, physical, literary, and historical characteristics of characters. Such characteristics provide the knowledge of different cultures to the reader.

This theory of five codes is proved useful to analyze the structure of all narratives either personal, literary, or historical (Barthes, 1974; Tohar, et al. 2007). Several scholars (Willson, 2011; Lashari, Afsar and Sangi, 2012; Booryazadeh, and Faghfori, 2014; Malik, Zaib, and Bughio, 2014; Zaib and Mashori, 2014; Zaib, et al., 2017, Jadoon, Naqi, & Imtiaz, 2020) apply this theory to analyze literary texts. Keeping up with these studies, this paper applies Barthes codes on the chosen narrative.

It is Barthes (1977) who also proposes the concept of readerly and writerly text. According to him, readerly texts are the classical texts read by readers passively. Whereas a writerly text becomes commercialized and productive text by the involvement of the reader in its meaning making method. The active participation of the reader in a text makes the reading active and by this the reader conceals the

entangle webs of narration. This paper provides the writerly analysis of the chosen narrative.

### **Research Methodology**

This paper follows Barthesian methodology to examine the codes in the chosen narrative. This methodology is extracted from Barthes's *S/Z* (1974). In *S/Z*, Barthes provides an analysis of *Sarrazine* by dividing the text into 561 lexias. Lexia is a unit of meaning which ranges from words to the phrases and sentences. Though, in our paper we did not divide the text into counted lexias, but we focused on some words, phrases, and sentences as a single unit of meaning. For example, in the selected narrative we analyzed several single words (as *zakat*, *sawijan*, *chana-chat*), phrases (like *darbar daig*, *the escape*) and sentences (as *I want to tell you something*), etc. as the single unit of meaning.

Simultaneously, we applied the codes on the narrative one by one. In this way, we interpreted the text into five segments as done by Zaib and Mashori, (2014). I first applied the proairetic code to explore the elements of narration. Then, I analyzed the hermeneutic, the semantic, the symbolic, and the cultural codes to understand the plot, theme, and characterization of the story. The following section discusses the analysis of the narrative in detail.

### **Data Analysis**

#### ***The Proairetic Code***

This code refers to the elements of actions. The elements of action make the reader attentive to examine their reactions. The action in the selected story begins with the *Eid* prayers of Imam-e-Darul Uloom. The Imam passionately pleads for the world peace and restrictions of terrorist activities in Pakistan. This action gives some hint to the readers about the Pakistani nationality of the Imam and some other characters of the story. Then, the narrator introduces Samir, a seventy-three-year Pakistan born English man, and many others Pakistan based immigrant living in UK.

After praying all the *namaazi* energetically hug and greet each other as *Eid Mubarak!* This action proclaims that Samir will also greet people with same enthusiasm. Opposite to this, Samir avoids greeting while he wants to escape from the mosque. When Samir's old friend invites him to his home for *Eid* hospitality, so Samir refuses his friend for he urges to go to his own home. This strange behavior of Samir creates tension in the narrative.

Another action arises when Samir goes with his son to his old home where he celebrates *Eid* morning alone. Then, the action changes where Samir celebrates *Eid* lunch with his all daughters and sons. Here, being disturbed by the secluded and tasteless life, he announces to his family members as "I want to tell you something." This announcement makes all his family attentive as Roxanna taunts her daughter to be silent by saying "Abbu ji is speaking, shush!" These narrative actions further appeal the reader to be careful to know about the reactions of Samir and his family. He proclaims that "I want to go back home\_ to Pakistan... to visit my family... stay there for a few months." His remarks make his family anxious that how their father will live in Pakistan for "a few months." They arise several questions which give some hints to the reader about the uncomfortable life of Samir in Manchester.

However, this action proclaims that now the narrative is going to be moved quickly. Then the scene of the story changes, and Samir arrives in Lahore. His arrival in Lahore reminds the reader the question of Samir's daughter that how and where does he spend a few months in Pakistan? He first visits his sister's home and stays there for three days. In the meantime, he visits *Anarkali Bazar* and Mall Road. During his short trips, the reader realizes that Samir is still unhappy in Pakistan.

Then, the scene changes with the arrival of Samir to the village of his old home. He especially comes to the village to visit the graves of his parents. At the cemetery, he sobs when he sees the graves of his parents. His sobbing and crying compel the reader to think that why does he crying? For his father or for his beloved Sabiya (his late wife)? The reader gets attentive to investigate the purpose of his sadness.

In the same village, Samir also visits the home of a widow to whom his wife dutifully helped. He states to the widow as, "I just wanted to see how you all are\_ and how your daughters are doing." When the widow shares her financial problem, so her description clarifies the reader that now Samir will surely help the widow by charity. In consensus with the expectations of the reader, Samir assures them to help. He thinks about *zakat* as an ideal way of honoring his wife and her dying wish. This action shows Samir as a religious and loyal husband.

Then, the scene changes, and Samir returns to Lahore to visit *Data Gunj Darbar*. His visit to the *darbar* increases the curiosity of the reader who conceives that Samir is feeling some spiritual relief at this place. Next to this trip, Samir comes back to his brother's home. Here, he announces his decision to go back to home. This

announcement creates some trouble for his host family as well as for the reader that why does Samir want to return to Manchester within a week. While he comes to live here for a few months. This decision also reminds the readers the words of his daughter that “Are you sure baba... are you really going Pakistan for a few months?”

The action then moves towards the flight of Manchester. During his travelling, Samir continuously talks with a widower of his age. They both share their views of life and during their conversation they reveal to visit another new home. Finally, Samir and the old man both come to the old house made for old people and enjoy their new home that is different from their family houses in Pakistan and Manchester. They both get away from the sham comforts of their homes. Their discomforts at their old homes let them urge for the new home (home for old people) to get real happiness.

This story is built upon less or passive actions where the reader gets curious about the isolation of Samir. The examination of this action and reaction phenomenon together with the elements of hermeneutic code help the readers to understand the plot of the narrative. Therefore, to solve some mysterious elements of the narrative, the following section analyses the hermeneutic elements of the chosen text.

### ***The Hermeneutic Code***

The hermeneutic code refers to the enigmas and perplexing textual elements which compel the reader to solve such enigmas for the resolution of the actions. The target story embodies many mysterious elements. At first, the title of the story (*The Escape*) appears as an enigma for the reader. The reader ponders that why do the story is entitled as? The escape means to get away from a place where you are hold or kept. Or to get away from a dangerous situation. This title and its meaning make the reader attentive that perhaps the theme of the narrative is somehow perplexing.

The story opens in a mosque on *Eid* day where the central character Samir performs his *Eid* prayers. His prayers as “Allah Pak bless her soul and let me scape”, further invites the reader to find some connection between the title of the story and his prayers. At first, the pronoun “her” arises a question that who is she about whom Samir is disturbed. Why do the blessings of Allah upon the unknown her is relevant to the relief of Samir? Then, the narrative clarifies that this “she/her” is used for Samir’s wife who passed away a year ago. Moreover, his prayer solves the riddle that

perhaps Samir is upset because of the death of his wife, and therefore he wants to get away from his own life to meet with his beloved in hereafter. This supposition gets resolve when Samir thinks that "there is nothing to celebrate on his first *Eid* without his beloved wife." This sentence further clarifies that Samir loves her wife without which his *Eid* is noting.

This enigma becomes complex when Samir states as "I have all the time in the world". He speaks this sentence throughout his trip from Longshit to Beresford Road. During this trip, he eagerly watches to the Pakistani, Bengali and Somalian communities and recollects his childhood memories to visit Toy Shop to purchase children's toys and to buy the local Pakistani groceries. This narrative description and the remarks of Samir invoke the reader mind to consider Samir's life as trapped in recollections. By this, the reader can idealize that perhaps Samir wants to escape from this superficial or artificial world of Manchester. This clue is further supported by the sentence when Samir shares his decision with his family members to go back to home. Samir announces as "I want to go back to home\_ to Pakistan." This sentence affirms that Samir needs to get away from Manchester that is not his home or his native land.

This guess of the reader further falls in ambiguity when the reader finds that Samir feels dissatisfaction in Pakistan as well. Though, he comes to Pakistan to release his soul, but his restlessness remains continue. His dissatisfaction confuses the reader that now where does Samir want to go now for getting inner peace? Where does he want to escape in real sense? He sobs at the grave of his mother without any known reason. The narrator compels the reader to solve this enigma by arising the question that "why is he crying? For his parents who had died decades ago or for his beloved Sabiya?"

Finally, the meaning of the title of the story "the escape" seems to be resolved when Samir arrives at the old house. His arrival claims that Samir feels aloofness due to the negligence of his children to his feelings. In search of happiness, love, and peace, he joins the old men house to share his grieves, sorrows, and happiness with other some old men who may respect his feelings.

The following section analyses the semantic code for further comprehension of the theme of the story.

### ***The Semantic Code***

This code refers to the elements which stand for their additional or connotative meaning. The chosen narrative possesses many words that can enrich the meaning of the narrative when they should be defined connotatively. There are some food dishes' names in the narrative which seem to be comprised by the author for some specific purpose. For-example, *sawaiyan* and *chana-chat* are mentioned in the narrative more than two times. These are explained as the two important dishes for *Eid* hospitality. *Sawaiyan* is a sweet dish which connotatively stands for the sweetness, politeness, and happiness in the life. Then, the addition of *chana-chat* reminds the reader about the ups and down of life. *Chana-chat* is a spicy dish. Its spicy flavor connotatively stands for the mishmash flavor of life where the people sometimes become happy and sometimes sad, that is the spirit of life. Samir's family neither serve *sawaiyan* nor *chana-chat* in *Eid* hospitality and his life seems tasteless.

The mentioning of *Shami Kebab*, *Qeema Lobia*, and *lassi* also seem to have some connotative significance in the narrative. The thought of *qeema lobia* reminds Samir the days of his hard life. In hard times, he loves to eat and cook *qeema lobia* which is a dish eaten by people commonly. The thought of *Shami kebab* are attached with the bliss of his marital life. His wife served him *shami kebab* while his family avoided this dish and prefer roast meet to *kebab*. Then, the mentioning of *lassi* embodies coolness and easiness of Samir's feelings.

*Darbar-daig* is another word that connotatively stands for the cauldron of spirituality. Samir eats *daig-rice* as the *tabark* given to him at the *Data Gunj Darbar*. After eating this rice, he states as “*Darbar-daig* rice was wonderful. Good to eat *tabark* sometimes. It reminds us gently what the life is all about\_”. These remarks together with the narrative description claim that Samir gets spiritual relief in eating the *darbar-rice* which are cooked in the cauldron of spirituality.

*Zakat* is the Islamic pillar (Dhar, 2013). By this, people help poor. In the narrative, the thought of *zakat* pacifies his soul. He considers this act as the pleasing act for his soul. Samir separates his pension money to always serve in *zakat*. This act may provide him inner satisfaction.

The next section analyses the symbolic elements of the narrative.

### ***The Symbolic Code***

This code refers to the antithetical elements of a narrative. The reader examines the antithetical elements and binary oppositions to explore the theme and characters underlying in the narrative. The chosen story possesses many antithetical elements and clashes. The narrative first presents a clash between Samir's expectations about his brothers and sisters in Pakistan. Samir urges to go back to Pakistan. He assures to his daughters that "you need to understand Rosie that just as this is your family\_ I have the same back home... they care about me and want me to spend time with them". His remark shows that his family as caring and loving as well as hospitable. Opposite to this, the narrator narrates the reality of Samir's family. The narrator mentions as Samir's visit to Lahore surprises his family. They wryly consider that "what is he doing here, all of sudden? How long is he going to stay? These questions present a clash between Samir's expectations about his family who consider Samir as a burden and becomes anxious about the hospitality of this *velati* guest.

The narrative further presents a clash between the economy of Smir's family at Manchester and Samir's family at Lahore. His family at Manchester is portrayed as very rich. They celebrate *Eid* day by eating roast meet, chicken tikkas, *gajjar habva*, and tea etc. These dishes clarify that they are rich people who can easily buy beef meet and chicken. On the contrary, his family at Lahore is portrayed as financially poor. The narrator mentions that his host family has gone in trouble in their offer of hospitality. One time, they snatch a hen to cook for his dinner. In sweet dish, they cook for him pink custard. They offer their hospitality in difficulty.

The narrative further presents a clash between the outer and inner personality of Samir. At the outer appearance, he appears as a strong person. His sons and daughter obey him and become silent when he speaks. His family respects him but his feelings are delicate. After the death of his wife, he feels aloofness. His sobbing, crying, and weeping actions proclaim that he needs moral support and spiritual relief. Finally, he joins old men house for inner peace and satisfaction.

The following section discusses the cultural code underlying in the narrative.

### ***The Cultural Code***

The cultural code refers to the worldly knowledge embodied in a single text. The chosen narrative is full of Asian cultural references. Here, the reader finds the

names of different South Asian foods, customs and costumes which enrich the narrative with local flavor. The narrative starts with the description of *Eid Day*. *Eid* is a Muslim festival which is celebrated after *Ramadan*. Muslims in all over the world celebrate this occasion with warm wishes, and greetings as *Eid Mubarak*. The most favorite ritual of *Eid* day is *Eidhi* money. *Eidhi* is the gift of *Eid* delivers in different forms. Mostly elders distribute money among family members, sometimes it takes the shape of sweets (*Mithai* like *Cham cham*, *gulab jamun*, *kalakand*, etc.), and sometimes *Eid* cards.

The narrator mentions the food names of *Eid* hospitality including *sawaiyan*, and *chana-chat*. The Hindi term, *sawaiyan* is a food name made by *maida* floor, in the shape of long strips. The sweet dish is fabulous in Pakistani, Indian and Irani cultures. Muslims celebrate it at the first day of *Eid* while Hindu prepare it at the season of *Sawan*. The two different Hindi terms *chana* and *chat*, collectively used as *chana-chat*. This is a well eaten dish, famous in Asian culture especially Indians and Pakistani people like *chana chats*. This *chat-pata*, spicy, dish is eaten to make the test sharp.

The Arabic term *Kabab* is the spicy food which looks like a compressed ball of chop beef, chicken, or potato. In the narrative, this dish is specifically mentioned as *Shami kebab*. Chop beef is used for *Shami Kebab*. This dish is cooked by many people at *Eid* day.

Together with these foods, the narrator further mentions the names of some South Asian rather typical Muslim costumes including *gharara*, *lengha*, *shalwar kameez* and *shervani*. *Gharara* and *lengha*, the Hindi and Urdu words, are the two cultural costumes very fabulous in Pakistani and Indian cultures. These dresses may be defined as long loose and sometimes embroidered skirts for women. They are opposites to English short skirts and jeans. Mostly women and little girls wear *ghararas* and *lenghas* at the spacious festive days like *Eid*. There is also mentioned about *dupatta*. *Dupatta*, the Urdu term, is the long piece of cloth by which women cover their head and body to show more respect (Malik, Zaib, and Bughio, 2014). Similarly, *Shalwar*, the Arabic word, and *kameez*, the Persian word, are the two names of male dresses. Muslim wear this loose dress to feel easy or to be comfortable in their daily routines. With the addition of *Shervani*, they feel themselves as well dress. The full soot like *shalwar kameez* with *shervani* is the opposite of the *shirt*, *paint* and *coat*,

the full three-piece Western cultural dress. All these customs and costumes provide the reader an in-depth understanding of different cultures.

### **Findings**

Through this application of Barthesian five codes on the story, the researchers understand the plot, theme, and characterization of the story. The first two codes (i.e., the proairetic and the hermeneutic code) of the theory assist the reader in understanding the plot that is intertwined in complex webs of enigmas and suspense. With the help of the semic code, the reader understands the ambiguous terms/words of the story. Herein, the words chana-chat, swaiyan, daig-rice, shami kabab, and zakat stand for their connotative meaning that entangle several themes of the story including happiness versus sadness, hardships, and ups and downs in life etc. These terms further stand for the spiritual bliss and past times happiness of Samir's life. Further, there are various elements that present clashes, antithesis, and binary polarities. The exploration of these binary oppositions assists the reader in understanding the art of characterization of the narrative. Further, the exploration of cultural elements in the story correlate to the culturally hybrid personalities of the characters of story.

### **Conclusion**

The title of the story *The Escape* creates an ambiguity for its novice readers in understanding the theme of the narrative. To solve this enigmatic and puzzling narrative, this paper applies Barthes five codes' theory on it. With the application of the proairetic and the hermeneutic codes, this paper examines the action and reaction phenomenon and the plot construction of the story. Further, the semic and symbolic elements altogether make the narrative understandable. The analysis of cultural codes provides the reader the knowledge of various cultures, their customs, costumes, and foods etc. Finally, this study explores that Samir wants to escape from the careless world where people do not pay attention to the feelings of old aged people.

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