

## Barthian Semiotics in *Prince Bahram*, in search of *Gulandama*



### Liaqat Iqbal

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Abdul Wali Khan University Mardan, Mardan, KP, Pakistan.

Email: [liaqatiqbal@gmail.com](mailto:liaqatiqbal@gmail.com)

### Irfan Ullah

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Abdul Wali Khan University Mardan, Mardan, KP, Pakistan.

### Reena Khan

MPhil. Researcher, Applied Linguistics, Lahore Leeds University, Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan.

- p-ISSN: 2663-3299
- e-ISSN: 2663-3841
- L-ISSN: 2663-3299
- Page: 67 – 75

### Key Words:

Semiotics, Ronald Barthes, Hermeneutic, Proairetic, Semantic, Symbolic, Cultural Codes

**Abstract** *The paper aims at finding Ronald Barthes' codes in the short story Prince Bahram, In Search of Gulandama. Using textual analysis, the short story was analysed in the light of Ronald Barthes five codes. It is found that almost all of Ronald Barthes' codes: hermeneutic, proairetic, semantic, symbolic and cultural codes are present in the short story. The story has puzzles and enigmas which inspire the readers to read the story in order to answer the unanswered questions. Like other stories, in this short story too, sequence is created through proairetic code. There are implied meanings, which bring forth the semantic code. Paradoxes, where binaries are the most important elements, are represented through symbolic codes. Lastly, there are many cultural elements, showing the cultural code. These different aspects give a comprehensive narrative structure to the story.*

## Introduction

There are different methods and approaches to narrative analysis which are carried out at different levels e.g. plot, characters, and narrative grammar etc. Among these approaches, there are some approaches, which focus on the functional aspects of narratives i.e., what particular meaning does the story convey. There are other approaches which focus on the structural aspects of narratives. These structural approaches include Labov's model of narrative analysis, Fernando Ferrara's (1974) model of character analysis, Vladimir Propp's (1968) model of narrative analysis. As far as the present study is concerned, it is also a point of the same circle. Here, in this study, structuralist approach, Ronald Barthes' models for the

analysis of narrative is used. The story under analysis is a Pashto folklore short story *Prince Bahram: In search of Gulandama* taken from Aisha Ahmad and Roger Boase's (2003) book *Pashtun Tales: from the Pakistan-Afghan Frontier*. Though much has been written on Ronald Barthes' model and is applied to many texts. It is believed that the present analysis will help explore many of the structural elements of the story in the light of Ronald Barthes. Although efforts have been made to make the analysis more comprehensive, because of the length of the texts only limited examples are selected and thus worked on.

### **Ronald Barthes' Model**

According to Gerlad Prince (1982, p. 105-106), it is not only linguistic code that help us understand any narrative. In addition, there are other codes and sub-codes which are also important for the understanding of a narrative. Dino (n.d.) citing Barthes says:

*Barthes argues in S/Z that every narrative is interwoven with multiple codes. Although we impose temporal and generic structures onto the polysemy of codes (and traditional, "readerly" texts actively invite us to impose such structures), any text is, in fact, marked by the multiple meanings suggested by the five codes.*

These five codes help understand the text more comprehensively. These are in fact the basic elements of any story. To understand them, let's discuss them one by one.

**Hermeneutic Code:** In literary theory, hermeneutic code used to be referred to as the theory of text interpretation. Originally, it was used in Biblical studies. However, over the passage of time Ronald Barthes took this term and used it for his own purpose. Hermeneutic code studies puzzles in the story. In other words there are situations in the story which are not fully explained and fills the readers' minds with dozens of questions. These enigmas are named as hermeneutic code. Enigma can come anywhere in the story which is solved at any time. This is in fact an aspect of syntax. It raises questions like who is that, what you are up to etc. (Alexander Brewis, 2007, p. 20)

**Proairetic Codes:** This code refers to any action in the story. One action leads to another action and hence the story continues. In this way, the readers are propelled in the story. Like hermeneutic code, proairetic code provides a structure to the story. Both these codes are dependent on temporal order. Proairetic elements are usually read in a sequence as meaning is lost when sequence is broken.

**Semantic Code:** Semantic code is also referred as connotative because it is the connotative meaning which is not explicitly said in a narrative but is implied. In other words, semantic code is a combination of different elements which is called semes that connotes rather than denote. As already said, both hermeneutic and

proairetic codes need to be read in sequence. Contrary, this code needs not to be read in sequence.

**Cultural Code:** Cultural code refers to any element in the story which refers to a body of knowledge and wisdom. It includes proverbs, sayings and other cultural relevant elements. It is our understanding of culture, common sayings, science, and other folk wisdom. One cannot get the meaning without understanding the particular culture. Like semantic code, cultural code is also independent of the time sequence and context.

**Symbolic Code:** Like semantic code, symbolic code is also connotative in meaning. The most important elements of symbolic code are paradox and antithesis. If two opposing ideas or binaries like life and death, good and bad, young and old, etc., are brought in opposition to each other, the meaning created is symbolic in nature. Like semantic and cultural code, symbolic code is also independent of context and any sequence.

## **Results and Discussions**

In this section there is discussion about Ronald Barthes model and the way it is worked out in the short story *Prince Bahram: In search of Gulandama*. The codes found are the following.

### **Hermeneutic Code**

If we look at the very title *Prince Bahram: In search of Gulandama*, it fills our mind with dozen of questions like: who is prince Bahram? Who is Gulandama? Why is Gulandama searched for by prince Bahram? Is Gulandama his mother, sister, daughter or beloved? These are the questions which puzzle the readers and hence, create a sort of enigma for them. These are the questions which are waited to be inquired upon and finally, when one moves through the story, their answers are found one by one. For example, the first question—who is prince Bahram – is answered on the very second page of the story in the following words:

*...but a long time passed; and a year after the fakir's visit the king's wife gave birth to a son. The prince was named Bahram. (Page 2)*

Now, coming to the second and third question; why Gulandama is searched by price Bahram and whether Gulandama his mother, sister, daughter or beloved, the clarification of the enigma is much delayed. It is mentioned in the story that Gulandama was a beautiful lady, loved by an old man and many others. The prince after looking at statue of Gulandama and hearing from the old man fell in love with her and decides to win her heart. The lines of the story say:

*When the old man has finished his story, the prince said: 'Tell me the way to that city in China. I want to go and win the hand of Gulandama. (page 6)*

From this extract, the enigma is solved that Gulandama is neither the mother nor the sister of prince Bahram, rather she is his beloved. Another enigma comes in the story when the fakir prays to God to bestow the king with a son. It is said by the fakir:

... *'I shall pray to God to grant you a son, and I shall return after one year. If by then you have a son, you must promise to give me a reward.'* (page 2)

The puzzle is that of reward. The question comes into mind that what type of reward the fakir will demand. What will be the reaction of the king if the demand is too worthy? These are the questions which disturb the reader. Answers to these questions come in the next page when the fakir returns three days after the birth of the prince and knocks at the door. The fakir says:

... *'May I have my reward, so that I can go on my way?'*  
*'What you ask should be granted' replied the king.*  
*'If ask for your kingdom, would you give it me?'*  
*'Yes,' agreed the king, 'I am even willing to give you that.'*  
*'Then give me your kingdom.'* (page 2)

Here the enigma is solved and now it is clear that what type of reward the fakir wanted. A further puzzle appears when the prince goes on hunting. Pursuing a deer, the prince travels a long way and loses his way. He reaches a strange place where *'He saw 80 empty charpoys. Nearby there were 80 posts for tethering camels. The smoke was rising from a narrow ruined tower.'* (Page 5)

It is not explained at that time why eighty posts and eighty charpoys are present there. It is explained later in the narrative when the old man tells his story. It is said:

*'... Then I travelled for many years until I came to this spot. I had this tower built for myself, and I bought 80 camels and hired eighty servants. The camels are rented out to carry goods to different countries. The profits are divided among my servants, except for what I need for food and drink. I myself remain here with the statue.'* (page 6)

Here one can find partial answers to the puzzle that that these eighty posts are there in order to fasten the eighty camels. Secondly, the eighty charpoys are there so that the eighty servants may sit and sleep on these charpoys. There is another enigma when one of Sarasa's brothers named Sayfun gave a hair from his head to Prince Bahram and says:

*'whenever you are in trouble,' he said, 'and whatever the trouble may be, burn this hair, and I shall instantly come to your rescue. I have an army of attendants, and they will appear out of thin air if I give my word of command.'* (page 10)

This is an enigma, which questions that how a hair burning can leads to someone's appearance. This enigma is solved later when king Bayzad, who was also in love

with Gulandama, attacked Gulandama's country. When Prince Bahram heard the news,

*'He took out the hair that Sayfun had given him, and that night he burnt it. In the twinkling of an eye Sayfun appeared before him, and inquired, 'What can I do for you?'* (page 13)

Here, the puzzle is solved when Sayfun appears. It means that in this story there are many instance where the readers are confused, which shows the existence of hermeneutic code.

### **Proairetic Code**

Proairetic code which is also known as action code, includes almost all actions of the story. The story selected for this analysis has many such examples. For example, the very first proairetic code appears in the story when a fakir who was accidentally passing the king's palace, cried:

*'In the name of Allah, be charitable'.* (Page 1)

This appearance of fakir leads to many other actions and hence a continuous progression continues. The fakir's praying to God, the birth of the prince and then the fakir's demand for the reward, all are linked together. From this point onward there is an increase in pace of the story and many other actions occur. Later, when the prince grows an adult and goes hunting in the jungle, he finds a note. He hands it over to the vizier and says:

*'Read what is written here,' he ordered.*

*'... It is written that if any man goes beyond this point, he does so at his own risk, because a man-eating tiger lives there.'*

Without caring for any danger, the prince moves ahead when

*'the man-eating tiger emerged from the shadows and blocked the way. But when he pounced, the prince lifted it up with his bare hands and threw it on the ground with such force that it died immediately.'* (page 4)

This episode comes to an end, but being a skillful hunter, the prince continues his activities. Another action starts when next morning the prince goes out hunting. There he pursues a deer. It is said in the story that

*'While they were in the jungle, a deer appeared in front of the prince. He pursued it alone, but was unable to catch up with it, so that by the evening he had travelled a long way from the place where he had left his guard...'* (page 5)

The code of action moves on. The action started in the previous paragraph continues and at last the prince falls in love with Gulandama whose statue attracted his heart. Prince Bahram decides to wins her hands. The line of the story says:

*When the old man has finished his story, the prince said: 'Tell me the way to that city in China. I want to go and win the hand of Gulandama.'* (page 6)

In search of Gulandama, Prince Bahram goes out and encounters Sarasa's brothers. *'After a short time the six brothers returned. When they saw the prince and his horse in the garden, the eldest brother summoned to a jirga, or council. The eldest brother said to the youngest, 'Find the traveler and cut off his head.'* (page 7)

After this quarrel, Sarasa's brothers and the prince Bahram becomes friends. The eldest brother's wife Rueh Afza is kidnapped by a *deo*. Sarasa's brothers request the prince:

*'We have an enemy. I have fought with him twice, but on both occasions I was defeated. Please help us.'* (page 9)

*The prince agreed to help them, the next morning he said to them 'Let us go and fight your enemy.'* (page 9)

The actions are further complicated when Prince Bahram succeeds in killing the *deo* and leaves the place. He reaches his goal i.e., finds Gulandama. There are many other instances in this short story where proairetic code is very obvious.

### **Cultural Code**

Though this is not a type of story where one can expect many examples of cultural codes, there are certain examples which show the existence of this code in the story. For example, when in the very beginning of the story, a fakir denies taking grain as charity, the king orders:

*'Perhaps it is not sufficient, said the king, Give him more grain.' ... but again he refused to take it. The king heard this and addressed the fakir: 'Do you have some reason to reproach me that you decline my offer of charity?'* (page 2)

The reproach is cultural code. In some cultures, it means if a needy person does not accept your alms and charities, then it is considered as reproach and a bad thing. Similarly, in another place in the story when the prince kills a tiger and the prince returns safe and sound, the king orders:

*'... a large dinner should be prepared and given to the poor, the thank God for having saved his only son from the man-eating tiger and for having endowed him with so much strength.'* (page 4)

This is the particular practice of Islam that whenever somebody is saved from an accident or any other evil thing, *sadqa* (charity) is given to the needy. It can be in any form e.g., in the form of money and food. This is a cultural code where it is believed that God will prevent them from any sort of disturbance and disruption in the future. It is also thanks giving to the God for having saved a person from disturbance.

As this short story is taken from the collection of Pashto folk short stories, so there are many things in this story which are quite relevant to Pashto culture. One of such cultural code is the concept of *parda* (veil). It is said about Gulandama that

she wore a veil which she used to remove only once a month. The old man while narrating his story says:

*...one year I took some merchandise to China. I happened to arrive in one of the cities on the very day that the princess Gulandama was due to remove her veil. It was the custom in that country for the princess to wear a veil that she would remove once a month. (page 5)*

There is another cultural code which again is quite relevant to Pashtun culture is that of *swara* or *badla* (exchange). It was the custom of Pashtuns—now rarely exists—that usually there was exchange of women for the purpose of marriage. The same thing happens here when Sarasa is given in exchange to the emperor for the princess. It said:

*'Sarasa is my sister, but she is not there to be given in exchange for the princess.' ... Then there is no alternative but for Sarasa to marry the emperor,' concluded Sayfun. (Page 15)*

Another Pashto proverb is mentioned here when the prince says:

*'When there are too many butchers, the cow is not slaughtered.' And he said: 'There is no need to call anybody, I shall go alone.'* (Page 9)

All the above mentioned examples show that Ronald Barthes' cultural code is very clear in this short story.

### **Semantic or Connotative Code**

If one carefully examines this short story, it becomes very clear that it is not as simple as it seems to be. It is not only a story of *deo*, *jinn* and prince and princess, it has a deeper meaning. In other words, it has connotative meaning. Here this connotative meaning has a strong link to feminism. In this story, first, an old man falls in love with a beautiful princess Gulandama. Unable to get her hand, the old man makes a statue of her resemblance and thus tries to quench his thirst for Gulandama. Here, the connotative meaning is that a man with white beard can demand a beautiful young princess. It means that a man, no matter whatever his age is, can spoil the beauty of a young lady. Secondly, in this story, females are dealt with as an object meant for pleasure. Whenever a female with beauty is seen, she is kidnapped. First, Ruch Afza, who is married to Sayfun, is kidnapped by a *deo*. Later in the story, Gulandama is also kidnapped by another *deo* named Toroban. In both the cases, *deo* has connotative meaning of man, who whenever finds a good-looking lady, considering her an object of beauty, takes her away. This shows man patriarchy.

### **Symbolic Code**

Symbolic code which is made of antithesis and opposites is very rare in this short

story. But still there are some examples which bring symbolic code to the front. For example, in the very first expedition, Prince Bahram confronts a man-eating tiger. There are two extremes: one prince Bahram who is a bold and courageous person, the other is the tiger which is also known for its bravery and courage. They both are the antithesis of cowards and weak. This leads us to another antithesis of rich versus poor. While going out in the jungle, Bahram's father orders Bahram not to do wrong with the poor. Later on when he fought with the six brothers of Sarasa and defeated them, prince Bahram decided to kill them. At that time Sarasa reminds the prince his father's advice:

*'Have you forgotten the advice of your father gave you when you were leaving the home not to injure or wrong the poor?'*

*... But they are rich, not poor,' said the prince.*

*'They are poor because they are under your power,' said Sarasa (Page 8)*

Here opposition of the rich and poor and then controlling the rich and turning them into poor or powerless, symbolizes the tension within the story which is mostly because of the female. The females are considered as weak. Throughout the story this poor and rich, weak and strong, asleep and awake relationship symbolizes the struggle between male and female. The female is considered as something weak, asleep and powerless.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, we would say that the story, which is set in Pashtun culture, has all the parameters of a story that Ronald Barthes plead for. The structure consisting of five codes give it a unity encompassing theme, actions, suspense, enigmas and cultural connotations.



## **Reference**

- Ahmad, A. & Boase, R. (2003). *Pashtun Tales: from the Pakistan-Afghan Frontier*. London: Saqi.
- Brewis, A. (1970). The white stocking: A structural Analysis of DH Lawrence's short story. *The Journal of the DH Lawrence Society of Australia*, 15 (1), 20-25.
- Dino, F. (n.d.). *Modules on Barthes: On the Five Codes*. Retrieved from <http://www.purdue.edu/guidetotheory/narratology/modules/barthescodes.html>
- Kenan, R. (2002). *Narrative fiction: Contemporary poetics* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed). London: Routledge.
- Prince, G. (1982). *Narratology: The form and functioning of narrative*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co.
- Propp, V. (1968). *Morphology of the folktale*. Austin: University of Texas Press.