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THE IDENTITY MASK: COLONIAL MIMICRY AND PSYCHOANALYTIC DEFENSE MECHANISMS IN *THE OVERCOAT* BY GHULAM ABBAS

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Abstract

The research paper The Identity Mask: Colonial Mimicry and Psychoanalytic Defense Mechanisms is written with the purpose to understand the interaction between colonial social values and psychological defense mechanisms and it influences upon the protagonist's identity. In particular, the present study aims at exploring the elements of colonial mimicry due to post colonial social aspirations and how it results in the identity formation of the protagonist and how the use of psychoanalytical defence mechanisms leads to fragmentation of identity and to the falling down of the protagonist. The study uses qualitative research approach and the method of data analysis is textual. The study's sample is the short story The Overcoat by Ghulam Abbas which is one of the most significant works in Pakistani literature. It is analyzed that the protagonist's overcoat serves as a symbol a psychological mechanism of safeguarding oneself. His imitates the elite culture which is a sign of the assimilation of colonial values. He focuses highly on to avoid the feeling inferiority and be excluded socially. However, he suffers from within. In short, The Overcoat will be thrown away, and the truth which lies beneath the fake mask of respectability will be exposed.

1. Introduction

1.1 Introduction

The post 1947 era of Pakistan has seen tremendous change in the realm of Pakistani literature. The writer's greatest concern was the social, political and cultural realities of a newly independent nation. The after effects of partition, the increasing urbanization and economic differences and difficulties were highly prominent in Pakistani Literate. The authors tried to depict the problems of common people, especially the class ridden, poverty stricken and socially unjust society. This era was especially out-shined by the great works and writings of of the many progressive and intellectual writers of Pakistan, whose ideals were realism, social criticism and marginalized communities. The writers strictly abandoned the idealistic portrayal of life and unveiled the social issues and miseries faced by many Pakistani people. This medium was a challenge to social stratification, economic oppression and paradoxes in postcolonial society. One of the leading writers of this period was Ghulam Abbas, who was considered one of the most important Urdu

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writers of short stories in Pakistan. Abbas has left a landmark in Pakistani Literature for his realistic depiction of the society, his sharp social criticism and his symbolic narration. His artworks frequently show the difference between reality and idealistic appearance and the hypocrisy of social life. He works use a direct direct style with very simple stories and common place characters to explore deep psychological and social truths concealed within the common people of Pakistan after independence . One of his most popular stories is *The Overcoat* which speaks of the socioeconomic conditions and psychological anguishes of the people of postcolonial Pakistan.

1.2 The Overcoat by Ghulam Abbas

The Overcoat is about a young man who lives under the heavy stones of challenging economic conditions. He wants to appear respectable and dignified, not inferior and socially excluded. He has a stylish overcoat, a green hat, a walking stick and other accessories which make him look like a rich and refined gentleman, although he is poor. In public his image is of a respectable and successful person. The young man is highly fond with these status symbols since they let him avoid the shame of being poor. He looks good and seems as if he has a lot of money. However, under that polished outer appearance is a bitter truth concealed. He has a tight financial budget and is physically weak. Moreover, he doesn't have sufficient funds to even cover his basic needs. As the plot unfolds, the difference between the "apparent" and the "real" is unveiled. The main character still keeps up his appearance in spite of his poor health. At some point, he becomes very sick and is admitted to the hospital. There, his fancy exterior that hid his truth, *The Overcoat*, is taken off. The doctors and attendants discover a weak and poor body. The story culminates in a sad ending, and the message is that one cannot find self-worth or social recognition in the world through outwardly appearances.

1.3 Research Problem

The Overcoat by Ghulam Abbas has been studied as a social and stratified society critique, but the exploration of how postcolonial social hierarchies influence the protagonist's psychological development and identity formation is yet to be explored. There is a lack of awareness about the amalgamation of colonial values, class system, mimicry and psychological defense mechanisms that the protagonist uses and creates a fragmented identity. *The Overcoat* is explored in this work with regard to both the post-colonial and the psychoanalytical aspects.

1.4 Research Objectives

1. To examine how colonial mimicry is represented in the protagonist's adoption of elite and westernized outer appearance.
2. To analyze how the protagonist uses psychoanalytic defense mechanisms in giving meaning to identity formation, fragmentation and ultimate downfall in The Overcoat.

1.5 Research Questions

1. How colonial mimicry is represented in the protagonist's adoption of elite and westernized outer appearance?
2. How does the protagonist use psychoanalytic defense mechanisms in giving meaning to identity formation, fragmentation and ultimate downfall in The Overcoat.

1.6 Theoretical Framework

This study integrates the postcolonial concepts of Homi K. Bhabha with the psychoanalytic theories of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan to examine how the protagonist constructs a identity that is outwardly false and in response to socioeconomic oppression.

The assumption of this framework is that the colonial social structures create feelings of inadequacy and inferiority among marginalized individuals. These feelings are psychologically internalized through defense mechanisms, producing an identity that ultimately collapses under reality's pressure.

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2. Literature Review

The research paper Unveiling Appearance and Ideology in the short story Overcoat by Ghulam Abbas: A Critical Discourse Analysis was written by Sadia Nazir, Dr. Fareeha Javed and Dr. Sana Baig in the year 2025. This research paper aims to "presenting a comprehensive textual, discursive, and social analysis of the narrative, this study unwraps how the elegant attire of the protagonist acts as a semiotic device to exhibit class identity, and how institutions like the hospital function serve as ideological disseminators" (p. 543). The findings state that, "By implementing Fairclough's three-dimensional CDA framework, this study exhibits how the short story Overcoat by Ghulam Abbas establishes, disrupts, and critiques social identity in Pakistani postcolonial society"(p. 551). In this study, Critical Discourse Analysis is used as analytical approach to analyze The Overcoat directly. It shows how the appearance is the construction of identity and the role of class ideology in language and social institutions. It reinforces the present argument that the concept of identity in the story is socially constructed and unstable, particularly in terms of outward appearance and class performance.

The reaserch paper The Exploration of Speech Acts and Politeness in Anandi and Overcoat: A Pragmatic Analysis was written by Hafiz Syed M. Yasir, Arbab Fatima and Aqsa Riaz in the year 2024. The study aims to analyze that "how speech acts and politeness contribute to the portrayal of societal image and the theme of appearance versus reality" (p. 629). The findings state that "This use of politeness, based on the negative face strategy, aims at reforming societal behaviors. The analysis underscores that politeness, as a pragmatic strategy, plays a significant role in conveying deeper meanings and facilitating social critique" (p. 635). The present research examines the relationship between the communicative patterns and the politeness strategies in The Overcoat. It strengthens the present framework by explaining how social identities can be created through interactions and actions and that identity comes as a performance.

The research study Style in Fiction: A Stylistic Analysis of Overcoat by Ghulam Abbas was written by Mumtaz Hussain, Dr. Wasim Hassan Malik and Sabeeha Rehman in the year 2022. Hussain aims to "study analyses a short story Overcoat (2014) written by Ghulam Abbas under the perspective of Leech and Short's (2007) model of stylistic Analysis"(p. 95). The findings state, "It can be concluded that appropriate use of lexical items, figures of speech, point of view distinct grammatical features and style of narration play a key role in the development of the story.The writer has skillfully presented the theme that we should judge people morally not materially as several people pose to be wealthy try to conceal their poverty and deprivation because elite class looks down upon them" (p. 106). This paper analyzes language structure, imagery, and narrative style. It is a good aid to the present study, because it gives some textual background in the construction of meaning in terms of symbolism, particularly clothing, which you are using in your psychoanalytic-symbolic interpretation of the overcoat.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Paradigm

The research is of qualitative paradigm as it analyzes the story The Overcoat by Ghulam Abbas through the lens of postcolonial theory by Homi K. Bhabha (2012) and psychoanalytic theory by Freud(1923) and Lacan (2006).

3.2 Population

The population comprises of the the literature that is on the problem faced by people of Pakistan after postcolonialism.

3.3 Sample

The sample comprises of the story The Overcoat by Ghulam Abbas.

3.4 Delimitation

The research is delimited to just one short story, The Overcoat by Ghulam Abbas. Furthermore, it is analyzed through the lens of postcolonialism theory and psychoanalytic theory only. Lastly, the focus is just only one

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character, who is the protagonist of the story, an unnamed man.

3.5 Data Collection Technique
The data is collected through purposive sampling technique.

3.6 Data Analysis Technique
The data is analyzed by using the technique of textual analysis.

3.7 Conceptual Framework
This study uses a postcolonial theory and psychoanalytic theory as a framework for analyzing *The Overcoat* by Ghulam Abbas for the element of identity formation and defense mechanisms used to defense his fragmented identity. This examines the psychological state of the person who is marginalized and as a result of the discriminated social structure of the colonizers. The study is based on the assumption that the protagonist's search for social acceptance is influenced by postcolonial realities and the difficulties he faced , and a sophisticated appearance is a psychological approach that he chose for himself to deal with the sense of inferiority and social exclusion.

3.7.1 Postulates of Postcolonial Theory
This research study is mainly based on the postcolonial ideas of Homi K. Bhabha (2012).

3.7.1.1 Colonial Mimicry
Bhabha states that a colonized person tends to mould the language, actions, body language and culture of the dominant group or colonizer. This is a form of imitation which reflects social legitimacy and acceptance. This mimicry is demonstrated in *The Overcoat*, as the protagonist dresses in the fashion of the colonizers and dresses in a gentlemanly manner.

3.7.1.2 Identity Crisis
Postcolonial theorists propose that colonialism may create divided identities. Colonized subject face problems of accepting personal reality with the socially desirable ideals. This battle is seen throughout the story in the protagonist's constant attempt to hide his condition behind a well put together mask.

3.7.2 Postulates of Psychoanalytic Theory
The study also uses the theoretical framework, psychoanalytical theory of Sigmund Freud (1923) and Jacques Lacan (2006).

3.7.2.1 Defense Mechanisms
Freud suggested that people use defense mechanisms unconsciously, as a way to protect themselves from anxiety, embarrassment and emotional suffering. In the story, the protagonist learns how to cope with his feelings of inferiority by using several defense mechanisms. His outer refined look turns into a mental barrier to avoid social degradation and exclusion.

3.7.2.2 Compensation
Compensation takes place when someone is trying to compensate for a weakness through an alternative. The main character tries to make up for his lack of money by spending a lot on his outward appearance and social image even though his health degraded.

3.7.2.3 Repression
Repression is the mental process of suppressing the things, that are too painful to bear, into the unconscious. The main character in the book denies his own harsh truth of poverty, sickness and deprivation and instead lives life in an illusion.

3.7.2.4 Ego Ideal and Ideal Self
It asserts how persons imagine themselves in response to the social expectations by the use of the concepts such as the ego ideal by Freud and the idealized self of Lacan. The main character cultivates an ideal self, based on which he is seen as an affluent member of the society.

3.7.2.5 Split Identity
According to Lacan, individuals can have a conflict with their self and what they want to be. This dichotomy can be seen in the character of the protagonist. He faces difficulty

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in balancing his actual real self and the role he would like to play.

Data Interpretation

The most significant part of the story is its postcolonial characteristics; the central character's main means of obtaining social acceptance is by appearance. The protagonist comes to believe that in his society respect and dignity can be earned through outward display of symbols of colonial prestige and upper class status. For Homi K. Bhabha, "mimicry" is used to describe the way the colonized or marginalized subject mimics the language, dress, behavior and cultural practices of the dominant group so as to gain legitimacy and acceptance. Abbas states, “He had on a brown overcoat with a cream coloured half-opened rose in his button hole and a green felt hat which he wore at a rakish angle. A white silk scarf was knotted at his neck. One of his hands was slipped into a pocket of his overcoat while in the other he held a short polished cane which every now and then he twirled jauntily”(p. 1). It's an example of mimicry, meaning that they're symbols of sophistication, authority and social class.

The main character knows that people in society make judgments based on physical appearance, rather than situations. He, therefore, deliberately uses the symbols of respectability in order to defy the disreputation of poverty. His nice clothes enable him to walk in the streets, and he can be admired and give attention to because of his nice clothes. But, his change is superficial, as it is confined to what is seen on the outside, "almost the same, but not quite". His distance from himself and his role, his distance from who he invented himself to be, shows us that the basis of mimicry is unsteady. The protagonist's appearance is Abbas' criticism of a society which values man through materialistic means and not through his value.

In addition to mimicry that the protagonist engages in is a sign of the colonial ideology that is present in postcolonial city of Lahore. After the direct rule of the West became obsolete, western clothes and lifestyles are still associated with social prestige. The desire for the protagonist to imitate these signs reflects the internalisation of colonial values in the society. He is trying to live up to the expectations that marginalize him rather than challenge, and demonstrates the power of colonial discourse on identity.

One may attempt to psychoanalyze the motives of the protagonist, as a response to an intense sense of inferiority which is founded. The idea of inferiority is much more in common with Adlerian psychology, but it also fits in with Freud's concepts of psychological defense mechanisms. The main character is well aware of his status as a poor, lowly person. He knows that he is a part of a minority in society, and has a sense of shame and inferiority because of his position. He tries to deal with these emotions, which are painful, by using compensation. Just like the psychological protection; compensation is an attempt to make up for what they think they lack by over emphasizing other aspects. The main character does not have the power to change his economic situation, but can change his appearance to the world. So appearance is of paramount importance to him.

Overcoat is an alternative to wealth, status, self-esteem. When he wears it, he feels superior, and this helps him to forget his condition. He uses the overcoat as his assortment of self-esteem, and it's a phony self-esteem. He takes his confidence from the object he is based on, instead of from the intrinsic qualities of the object. That is a dependence that shows that he is in an unstable condition of mind, for he does not have his own support. As long as he wears the overcoat, he feels respected and important. Otherwise, he will be forced to accept his social standing.

The main character's posture suggests pride, indicating that the overcoat serves as a symbol of his identity or self-worth. The clothes provide emotional comfort and he is given a sense of psychological security by the clothes, which help him to cope with a world in which he is constantly reminded that he is not enough.

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The overcoat is the focal point of the story and has several levels of significance. From a postcolonial point of view it is a sign of social aspiration and the wish to achieve the status of elite culture. From a psychoanalytical perspective, a mask which covers emotional pain and protects the protagonist from psychological suffering. Freud believed in the human tendency to build up defenses to block out the anxiety-producing elements in the world. The role is this in The Overcoat – the overcoat's role is to be an overcoat. It helps the protagonist to hide his poverty, and the anguish of social exclusion. Whenever he puts on the coat, he separates himself from the world. This barrier doesn't allow others to see his condition in its true light, and it also prevents him from seeing it in its true light. The contrast between the appearance of the coat and what it actually is imparts a symbolic meaning to the coat.

The main character is a good-looking, successful guy. Inside he is insecure, lowly & fragile. The coat is then a visual expression of what is different between the public self and the private self. It evokes an image of how one can construct identity based around a fantasy, in order to evade uncomfortable truths. An overcoat's mask is not only for disguise, it's for the protagonist's disguise, too. He continues his game of the good man and begins to behave accordingly and puts his trust in creation. This is a self deception, which testifies to the strength of defence mechanisms and gives a clear idea of how much his identity relies on fantasy.

Considering the concept of the overcoat with respect to Freud's ego ideal and Lacan's theory of the idealized self provides another explanation for the protagonist's attachment to the overcoat. The ego ideal is the idealized image that people aim for, reflecting the notion of perfection, as seen through the eyes of society and ones self. As the novel progresses, the main character constructs a self-image, a self-portrayal which embodies the respectability, sophistication and social stature that he desires throughout the novel. These values of the society in which he lives part of this ideal self. Abbas talks about his sleek and shiny hair, his careful appearance, and details about how he created this identity.The protagonist learns to put himself in the “clothes” and “manners” of the better class of society, for these are characteristics of social status and his imagined identity is acquired from these characteristics. He begins to see himself not as a dirty old man but, as a handsome man that is mirrored in the image of the coat.

Lacan's theory adds to this understanding. Lacan says that people go with idealized images which provide the impression of wholeness and completeness. The protagonist has an overcoat as an image. It makes him feel self-confident, respected and accomplished. It is, however, a false image as it hides rather than resolves the contradictions that lie in his life. The protagonists' striving towards the ideal self is a manifestation of the psychological consequences of social inequality. He gets caught in a vicious circle of performance, and never gets it right. So his identity is not real, but aspirational and it's very undefined.

A second prism that can be used to ponder about the protagonist's experience is Bhabha's idea of hybridity. Hybridity is the production of identities that lie in between cultural or social positions. The protagonist is a man who lives in a small space, as he is in between two worlds. In terms of material status he is poor, marginalized and socially vulnerable. But superficially, he seems like an upright man. These two truths are lived in the same person, giving rise to a split between them. He is not only the poor man he is, but also the high caliber individual he claims to be. This is a very close resemblance to Lacan's ‘split subject'.

This is the protagonist's true identity vs. his perception of himself. In each encounter, he has to choose between one of these two identities. This gives him a life which is always under stress, worry and tension. Fragmentation of identity is the most tragic part of the story. The protagonist is not able to reach his psychological wholeness because he is trying to prevent himself from being marginalized in society. The mimicking act only exacerbates his

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insecurity and he is left with a task that he must achieve, which is impossible.

Repression is a major psychoanalytical theme of this story. According to Freud, repression is the act of blocking out the conscious mind of unpleasant thoughts, memories, or experiences. On the other hand, the protagonist avoids facing his situation of poverty, illness and social exclusion and thus represses. He chooses to ignore these factors and obsessed with maintaining his appearance. The overcoat becomes being a way to avert reality: He focuses on his outward appearance, and temporarily avoids the emotional load of his situation. Important to remember here is that these coats serve as a physical covering for the body, while painful truths are hidden from view, psychologically, through repression. The symbolism is especially strong since the underlying message is what is behind the protagonist's social behavior is what is under the coat. There's weakness, suffering and deprivation hidden underneath the elegant exterior. Abbas suggests that repression can make one feel better for a while, but of course it cannot remove the reality. The protagonist's plight remains if it is well camouflaged. There is a reigniting of the repressed which brings with it the destruction of the soul.

The climax of the story is when the protagonist is taken to the hospital and his overcoat taken off. The one moment that spells the end of the postcolonial and psychoanalytical frameworks that have kept him alive is this one. The removal of the coat indicates a lack of mimicry from a postcolonial point of view. Symbols are the same, respect was once obtained through their use, but now is not. Society is beyond deception by mere appearances and the sense of social mobility is shattered. The scene represents the collapse of defense mechanisms, from a psychoanalytical point of view. Faced with reality, his repression, compensation and fantasy are no longer able to support him. The secrets that have been uncovered throughout the story come to light. His physical weakness, poverty and vulnerability are all on display. The exposure is significant because it demonstrates that it is possible to nowhere be let go of by reality, and nowhere is it possible to stay. The protagonist's carefully-constructed identity comes to an end right when the object that holds it together is taken away. The scene shows that his confidence, his sense of dignity and his sense of identity was always based on an external sign rather than a solid basis.

Conclusion

The tragedy of the protagonist in the short story *The Overcoat* by Ghulam Abbas is a result of the impact of the interaction of the social oppression and bow it took a huge tool on his psychological state. He was born in a society that had a colonial ethos and command and a class structure that was deeply embedded in his feelings of inferiority and a motive to be accepted by mimicking the dominant classes. Alongside, he uses the multiple coping mechanisms of compensation, repression and building of an ideal self to avoid emotional distress. *The Overcoat* by Ghulam Abbas is now the materialization of these processes, both as colonial symbol and as psychological veil. The stripping away of the overcoat unveils the concealed fragility of an identity based on imitation and illusion and shows that mimicry and repression are never enough to mask the truth of poverty, and create an unrealistic identity. The symbolism that Ghulam Abbas used is a powerful critique to the stern social structures that lead to sufferings, as much as an unveiling of psychological impacts of living under this heavy burden.

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