

CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF DECEPTIVELY SIMPLE QUESTIONS IN TALAT ABBASI'S SHORT STORY "SIMPLE QUESTIONS"

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ABSTRACT

This paper intends to analyze the multilayered narrative and discourses of the Nameless Narrator in Talat Abbasi's short story "Simple Questions" whose poignant life and shattered discourses represent her status at her home in particular and society in general. The major purpose of this research is to explore and understand the psychological point of view of the Nameless Narrator whose only identity is mentioned by the writer and that is Haleema ki Maa. Haleema ki Maa, void of any proper identity, asks questions from the Ustani ji (the school headmistress) regarding her life, her circumstances, her haplessness in giving her husband a baby boy and the extreme poverty she is facing. These questions, according to the Narrator, are the simple ones, but they demonstrate the harsh truths of life. The questions asked by the Narrator or Haleema ki Maa and the responses by the Ustani ji which have also been communicated by the Narrator have been analyzed while keeping in view the Critical Discourse Analysis. This specific analysis has been incorporated in the research to understand the structural expressions of Abbasi in this short story. In this short story, Abbasi has established a strong narrative and discourse structure to make the reader realize the complicated and chameleonic status of Narrator's discourse. With the help of various theorists' approaches related to Critical Discourse Analysis, this research has made an attempt to explore and analyze this specific short story by Talat Abbasi to find out people's response to unheard questions and their failure to recognize the harsh realities faced by a common individual, especially a woman.

Keywords: Discourse, simple questions, psychological point of view, identity, social pressure, helplessness.

INTRODUCTION

Talat Abbasi's short story, "Simple Questions" (1987) exposes the deprived characters in society who are not given the opportunity to express their agony and pain through words. Abbasi, Karachi based, British short story writer, focuses on the individuals belonging to middle and lower middle class, and they are specifically females whose reticent expression, muted narration, and perpetual state of uneasiness. In her collection of short stories, Abbasi's narrative style is simple, yet austere, vividly descriptive yet complex, and strong yet it echoes narrator's emotional deprivation. The purpose of this research is to do in-depth analysis of critical discourse analysis of the narrator's anguished

discourse which has overshadowed her feelings, motherhood, and damaged strength. This paper aims to analyze the discourse of Narrator (Halima ki Maa) who asks *simple questions* (my italics) to Ustani Ji ("queer headmistress women" (Abbasi, 1987, p.118)) about her life, her nameless existence and her troublesome household while applying the different approaches of Critical Discourse Analysis to Abbasi's short story, "Simple Questions". The major focus of this research is to critically evaluate the shattered discourse of the protagonist, (female nameless Narrator), and her eternal depleted soul. Her questions are deceptively simple, and her discourses are disfigured, and she wants answers to

her questions from the Ustani ji who visits her house occasionally as the Narrator believes that Ustani ji knows everything, and she would help her in finding out the solutions for her perplexed existence. This paper will also focus on certain diverse Discourses within the story which help readers to explore and expose the agony within the dialogues of female protagonist. Female protagonist's Discourse is both individual and collective, simple and complex and also personal and universal. The Narrator's Discourse does not only focus on language, but it goes beyond that as her discourse involves multiple expressions and diverse behaviors. As James Gee points out:

Discourses, then, are ways of behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, speaking, and often reading and writing that are accepted as instantiations of particular roles (or 'types of people') by specific groups of people, whether families of a certain sort, lawyers of a certain sort, bikers of a certain sort, business people of a certain sort, church members of a certain sort, African-Americans of a certain sort, women or men of a certain sort, and so on through a very long list. Discourses are ... 'ways of being in the world'; they are 'forms of life'. They are, thus, always and everywhere social and products of social histories. (Jee, 1996, p. viii)

According to James Jee, Discourse involves multiple social, cultural, and political themes and issues and these themes and issues are related to any social to expose diverse human responses towards their existence and surroundings. According to Jee, these social discourses are both products and representative of social expressions. Abbasi's "Simple Questions" offers multilayered discourses to the reader to understand the ideological expressions of the characters.

As VanDijk defines Ideology:

[Ideology is defined] as the interface between the cognitive representations and processes

underlying discourse and action, on the one hand, and the societal position and interests and social groups, on the other hand... Ideologies mentally represent the basic social characteristics of a group, such as their identity, tasks, goals, norms, values, position, and resources. (Van Dijk 1995, p.18)

According to Van Dijk talks about the cognitive expressions, social relations and identity crisis that transform the context into various discourses established, written, and spoken by the characters. The discourses offered by the protagonist in Abbasi's short story:

I know. Slima! Get back.
There is nothing to see. You
Leave her alone. And me too.
All of you out. Yes, you
leave her alone. And me too.
Haseena. And shut the door.
Thank goodness. Quiet at
last. She's upset because I
shouted at the woman...my
head's splitting and Amma
ji's awake now and shouting
visitors for Begum Sahib,
Rani, Maharani...(Abbasi,
1987,p.130)

Halima ki Maa, the Narrator of the story expresses her frustration, anger, hopeless through her multi layered discourses in which she not only expounds her personal agony but also reveals how she interacts with others and how she exposes her repulsion towards the situation which she is forced to exist. The purpose of this paper is to analyze the narration, multiple discourses and the fractured ideologies demonstrated by the female protagonist, narrator and the only character who speaks through the course of the short story.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Qualitative Research Methodology has been incorporated in this research while applying the critical discourse analysis to Talat Abbasi's short story, "Simple Questions" to explore and analyze the complex discourse of the narrative and her bruised emotions towards her family in particular and society in general.

DISCUSSION

Abbasi's Narrator begins her story with the first-person narration. Halima ki maa, mother of five girls, faces social and familial agony as everyone in her house wants a son from her. Surprisingly, she does not receive any backlash from her husband but other people around her, her insensitive mother-in-law, and her failure to give birth to a son have totally changed her position. She wants to ask lot of ask and during the course of the story, she does ask questions to Ustani Ji, who is a school headmistress where her daughters go for studies. From the very first line of the story the Narrator exposes her inner pain and emptiness. Abbasi's protagonist exposes her inner turmoil, agony, and frustration. As in the beginning of the story:

But then I end up feeling sorry for he, for that Ustani ji, that queer headmistress woman for she is feeling foolish though it's not my fault she can't answer a few simple questions. She's supposed to know everything, but she doesn't know what to say now to this poor illiterate creature who's right after all. (Abbasi, 1987, p.119)

This is how the story begins, not from the beginning but from the point where the narrator is completely exhausted and frustrated to get some response to her poignant questions. If protagonist's discourse is analyzed from a different perspective, one can view pain and disappointment in her expression. As she mentions that she ends up feeling sorry for Ustani ji because she does not have any answer to her questions as those questions are deceptively simple. The narrator herself is an uneducated individual and to her Ustani ji is an individual who can answer all her questions; questions she can only ask her, questions which are feeding on her. But Ustani ji gets into rickshaw and leaves the house hurriedly as she is scared of her simple questions as Narrator mentions, "So I quickly shut the door, leaning against it and smiling. Just a few simple questions and she vanishes like a genie!" (Abbasi, 1987, p.119). Narrator bitter and painful smile reveals the helpless of her and Ustani ji and this also reveals that they might have the same

predicament as they both belong to same class. Abbasi, in this short story, has a nameless narrator who seems fed up with life and she is the only one who reveals other people's feelings, surroundings, their social approach and her personal confusion. Female protagonist is in search of peace and poise and in her life, it is sometimes quite short lived and sometimes totally missing.

Deceptively Simple Question and Critical Discourse Analysis

In this short story, instead of showing what's going on in the plot, Abbasi focuses on the feelings of the protagonist and his struggle to be understood by the other characters. Other characters do not speak much in the course of the story or sometimes they are totally muted, and their response and approach are conveyed and communicated through the protagonist. If Abbasi's style is analyzed within the framework of Critical Discourse Analysis. The purpose of Critical Discourse Analysis is to expose the social, political, and familial critique of the text as Teuna A. Van Dijk points out:

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is a type of discourse analytical research that primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context. With such dissident research, critical discourse analysts take explicit position, and thus want to understand, expose, and ultimately resist social inequality. (Van Dijk,2001, p.352)

Van Dijk focuses on some important aspects of critical discourse analysis which brings together resistance, independence, and social exposition. Critical Discourse Analysis also reveals the expression which has been written between the lines. Discourse analysis, according to Norman Fairclough involves "analyzing the relationship between texts, processes, and social conditions, both the immediate conditions of the situational context and the more

remote conditions of institutions and social structures” (Fairclough, 1989, p.26). Structurally Intricate discourses of Abbasi’s Protagonist expose her bitter expression and reveals what social standing she as a female has. Her discourse is simple, smooth yet stifling and complicated. She feels suppressed, subverted, and tired, “I don’t think more for suddenly everything inside me is rising to my mouth. I clutch the edge of the cot and just hang my head down and let it all come out. From the mouth, from the nose and even the eyes...And while it’s all coming out, I’m feeling horrible.” (Abbasi, 1987, p.119) She is in severe pain as she is going to have a baby soon and the taste and sourness she feels in her mouth and throat make her life and condition more miserable. Abbasi uses language not as a medium of expression but a medium of exposition of repression. The Narrator is talking about herself but at the same time she tries to make the reader realize what actually her feelings are. The diction Abbasi uses in the above-mentioned excerpt from the story helps the readers to comprehend social and individual circumstances of the Narrator or Haleema ki Maa.

Abbasi’s Narrative & Interrelatedness of Discourses

Abbasi’s narrative is in simple present which perpetuates the situation of the protagonist and the relevance between the social and individual discourse. The Narrator is engrossed in her feelings and her morbid surroundings. Her language as well as her choice of words represent a muted resistance. Wodak and Reisigl points out:

A complex bundle of simultaneous and sequential interrelated linguistic acts, which manifests themselves within and across the social fields of action as thematically interrelated semiotic, oral or written tokens, very often as “texts”, that belong to specific semiotic types, i.e. genres. (Wodak & Reisigl, 2001, p.66)

Wodak and Reisigl focus on the complex linguistic expressions which not only involve written discourse but also establish a strong connection between the said and the unsaid. As

Abbasi’s Narrator reveals her relationship between her and her husband, “I don’t tell him. I let him go off to work without telling him for I see he’s in pain again, closing his eyes and passing his hand over his stomach again and again for that’s where it burns like a bed of live coals” (Abbasi, 1987, p.121). there are diverse themes in this story, as husband is presented by the Narrator not as a bad man but a helpless and hapless creature. The Reader does not find him talking or interacting with anyone, not even with his wife, rather he has been presented as a creature who is tired and dissipated and seems totally consumed by the situation. His tired expressions and feelings are manifested by his wife who herself wants to get away with the situation. According to the Narrator, her husband is suffering from some digestion issue and for that “Doctor Sahib” has prescribed him to take milk without realizing that her husband cannot afford this luxury. She wanted to say this to Dr Sahib, but her feelings could not support her words and voice. She and her husband suffer in silence. The whole story is narrated in silence and the entire narration is manifested through pain and suffering and the suppressed suffering is communicated through distorted expression. Wetherell, Taylor and Yates (2001) also describe CDA as:

the study of talk and texts. It is a set of methods and theories for investigating language in use and language in social contexts. Discourse research offers routes into the study of meanings, a way of investigating the back and-forth dialogues which constitute social action, along with the patterns of signification and representation which constitute culture (Wetherell, Taylor & Yates, 2001, p. i).

According to Wetherell et al, Critical Discourse Analysis not only explores the diverse interpretations of the text, but it helps both reader and the character to establish the social and cultural expression from the text. The Narrator in this story herself conveys the responses of Ustani Ji and her mother-in-law to the readers. The Reader is not sure of the questions asked by the Ustani ji, but narrator does communicate her responses:

She Will! That's the tragedy of it! Born in the Darkness, dead before they can live. Like... like...a stillborn child! That at least I do Understand?

Oh yes, Ustani ji, I do! Three died in the stomach you see, before Munni. That's her on the rubber sheet. And it's sad like you say, when they die like that... I must have done some terrible wrong for two out of three were boys! Would you be!. (Abbasi, 1987, p.129)

Reader can sense anguish, distress, and disappointment in the Narrator's discourse as she belongs to lower middle class, living hand to mouth and her mother-in-law wants a male grandchild from her failure in compliance with her will has derived her life to utter wretchedness. She is tired, exhausted, and void of any peace and contentment. In the above-mentioned excerpt, the Narrator narrated what happened to her and the babies. She has given birth to still babies which has destroyed her whole life. She is vexed and feels a constant sense of shallowness. Roger Silverstone points out:

Mediation involves the movement of meaning from one text to another, from one discourse to another, from one event to another. It involves the constant transformation of meanings, both large scale and small, significant, and insignificant, as media texts and texts about media circulate in writing, in speech and audiovisual forms, and as we, individually and collectively, directly, and indirectly, contribute to their production. (Silverston, 1999, p.13)

Though Silverstone focuses more on media, this excerpt is important to understand the character of the Narrator in Abassi's "Simple Questions" how she projects her agony and disturbed soul. The Narrator mediates between the reader and her narration to make the reader realize her feelings and the context. The narrator also tries

to mediate between what she experiences and what she wants to communicate as she is the only one who shares what the other characters feel and their responses. The Narrator (Haleema ki Maa) is fed up with everyone and all the people around her. She feels alone and lost amongst the people who are reluctant to help her or fail to take care of her. Language used by the Narrator exposes angst and histrionic expression. She mentions other characters and their approach towards life as her frustration and helplessness is reflected through her pungent expression:

After he's gone, I called out to Halima, come, and massage my forehead. Yes, massage her forehead and crack her knuckles like she's some Begum Sahib, Rani, Maharani! Cackles the Old woman and guffaws in her bed on the Veranda. It's like that all the time she's awake. Begum Sahib, Rani, Maharani! Like there's a parrot in a cage repeating the same words day after day. (Abbasi, 1987, p.122)

While talking about her, Narrator also adds the comments made by her mother-in-law who ridicules her position by calling her with different titles. From the beginning till the last line of the story, she exposes each and every individual around her while using multi layered discourses. Her flustered yet complicated discourse prepares readers to understand the other discourses which are hidden in her point of view. In this regard, discourse in this short story focuses on the emptiness and hollowness of social and domestic expression. As Fairclough (1995) points out that that Critical Discourse Analysis:

...[intends] to make visible through analysis, and to criticize, connections between properties of texts and social processes and relations (ideologies, power relations) which are generally not obvious to people who produce and interpret those texts, and whose effectiveness

depends upon this opacity.
(Fairclough, 1995, p. 97)

According to Fairclough, text exposes the social processes and the effectivity of the discourse spoken or written by the character or the narrator. Abbasi, in her story, presents manifold discourses within one discourse. Her Narrator expresses her fear of blood and death, fatigue, sense of loss, and insensitivity on the part of society through her narratives:

Ustaniji, Amma, Ustaniji, My goodness! So that's who she is! That headmistress woman who sent that long letter. Both sides of the sheet it covered. I kept turning it over and wondering now who'd be writing to us. And why...Because of Halima's dropped out of school and she wants to know why...Send her back, you must! Oh, that's an order, is it, I laughed, and knew right away she was queer.
(Abbasi, 1987, p.125)

Now in the above mentioned excerpt, she mentions two different discourses, first one is delivered by herself and other one is an indirect one done by the Ustani ji. The Narrator focuses on two different discourses and these discourses expound the situation the narrator faces and what is Ustani ji's reaction towards her deplorable predicament. As Fairclough (2001) points out:

How discourses are structured in a given order of discourse, and how structurings change over time, are determined by changing relationships of power at the level of the social institution or of the society. Power at these levels includes the capacity to control orders of discourse; one aspect of such control is ideological - ensuring that orders of discourse are ideologically harmonized internally or (at the societal level) with each other (Fairclough, 2001, p. 25).

Fairclough focuses on the structure of the discourses and the relationship between the power of discourse and its ideology. According to him, ideological expression exposes the diversity within

the discourse, and it makes it complicated. The discourse in Abbasi's story expounds multifaceted themes along with the revelation by the protagonist. As it is noticed through the Narrator's discourse, she adds dialogues by others and by herself without using any punctuation needed for the dialogues. Her discourses involve other discourses, dialogues, and expression to transform them into single holistic approach as the protagonist points out:

Sit down, Ustani ji, do! And I half get up as I point to one of the beds. But she shakes her head for of course it isn't proper to sit on beds. A chair then for Ustaniji, Halima! Try next door first, otherwise the tea stall. Mine, a nice comfortable one with arms. (Abbasi, 1987, p.126)

In the abovementioned excerpt, language has also become a character and it makes the discourse more complicated. The Narrator uses first, second and third person narrations to explore and expose the convoluted discourse of the story. She shares what she feels and reveals what others could be thinking and assuming about her. Life for Halima ki Maa is not easy as she is facing lot of issues; pregnancy, wish to have a son this time, poverty, absence of help and moral support. Despite this fact that her husband is not a typical eastern man, yet she needs moral and emotional support that she fails to get. She is tired, exhausted, discouraged, and disoriented. She tries her best to establish some sense in her behavior yet fails while facing all the ordeals of life.

CONCLUSION

This research has focused on Talat Abbasi's short story "Simple Questions" and its understanding keeping in view the Critical Discourse Analysis. The Narrator in the story belongs to the lower middle class, struggles with poverty, pregnancy issues, familial pressures, and illness. Her discourses expound what she feels, her feelings express her inner agony and through her agony she reveals other characters whose discourses are communicated by her. Point of views of different theorists of Critical Discourse Analysis have been discussed and analyzed in this paper to understand the multilayered

discourses uttered by the protagonist or Nameless Narrator which has been given the name by the writer Haleema ki Maa because she does not have a separate identity. Norman Fairclough, Van Dijk, Roger Silver and other theorists have been discussed to explicate the inner turmoil of Haleema ki Maa and this will help the readers to understand Abbasi's presentation of malaise and agony of the Narrator not only as a character and as a marginalized member of the society.

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