

An Investigation of Stylistic Strategies in Mohsin Hamid's *A Beheading*

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Abstract

The present study aims to investigate stylistic strategies in Mohsin Hamid's short story *A Beheading*. The present research is mixed method approach in nature. It incorporates Leech and Short's *Style in Fiction* while focusing on different levels of stylistic analysis. The findings reveal that Mohsin has very artistically and deliberately employed stylistic devices at phonological level in the form of alliteration, consonance, assonance, onomatopoeia, contractions and rhyme to blur the line between prose and poetry. Moreover, the artistic use of sounds creates a rhythmic realm and harmony in the short story. At morphological level, the story contains compounding, coinage and jargon. At graphological level, there is a deviant use of capitalization. At Lexico-semantic level the writer has employed different stylistic devices such as simile, anti-thesis, analogy, synecdoche etc. to convey deep meanings. And syntactic level parallelism and deviation play a significant role in making Hamid's style unique and interesting. The findings further suggest that Mohsin Hamid has a very unique, elegant, creative and captivating style. This short story is a well-crafted piece in very few words. The short story is written in verse style. These stylistic devices play a significant role in conveying the overarching theme of violence, hopelessness and helplessness in the short story.

Key Words: stylistics devices, artistic expression, violence. anti-thesis, analogy, synecdoche

1. Introduction

The writers and painters are artists. They portray life in their own ways. The painters portray life with the use of array of colors and writers portray life with the selection and meticulous use of words. In writing, the style of writing is of great importance. It is style of writing which distinguish a writer from other writers. Mohsin Hamid, a topical Pakistani-British author has a very unique, elegant and idiosyncratic style. His style represents something bigger in few words He is an internationally acclaimed novelist, short story writer and brand consultant. The purpose of present research article is to investigate stylistic strategies in his short story *A Beheading*. The story is told from a terror-stricken protagonist's point of view. The protagonist remains nameless. He is probably a Pakistani journalist who is being kidnapped and beheaded perhaps because of his offensive writings. The dominant theme of the short story seems to be violence in the form of kidnapping, rapping, killings and beheading. The purpose of the present article is to bring to light that Mohsin Hamid has employed artistically and deliberately stylistic devices and highly expressive diction in his short story *A Beheading* to put a great emphasis on violence, uncertainty and apprehensions of the narrator.

2. Research Methodology

The data for this study is Mohsin Hamid's short story *A Beheading*. The stylistic analysis of the short story has been conducted while keeping in mind different levels of stylistic analysis presented by Leech and Short in the book *Style in Fiction*. This study is mainly qualitative in nature. But sometimes quantitative analysis is also done to quantify the occurrence of a particular stylistic device. According to Creswell qualitative research allows the researchers to have an active participation in interpreting the experiences (Creswell, 1994). This aligns with the Mohsin Hamid's view regarding building of meaning of his work. He said that a work of fiction is basically a co-creation between the reader and the writer (Hamid, 2014).

Research Questions

The overarching questions of present research article are the following:

1. How Mohsin Hamid does employed stylistic strategies in his short story *A Beheading*?
2. How many times particular stylistic devices occur in the short story?
3. How do the stylistic strategies contribute towards the overall theme of the short story?

Research Objectives

The objectives of the present research are following:

1. To bring to surface the stylistic strategies employed by the author
2. To incorporate the five levels of stylistic analysis introduced by Leech and Short in *Style in Fiction*

3. Literature Review

Literature review aims to review the literature related to present study. The purpose is to find the research gap and justification for the present study.

Asad and Batool (2020) have conducted Stylistic analysis of the same the short story. They have delimited their research only with morphological and lexical features of the text while incorporating Paul Simpson's book *Stylistics*. The findings bring to light that expressive diction in Hamid's short story reflects the abuse of power, brutality, intolerance and violence. The researchers have identified stylistic device at two levels of stylistic analysis i.e. morphological and lexical in the form of simile, metaphor, imagery, abbreviations, merged morphemes, personifications etc.

Fieldgate (2018) in her review *Silent Frame* states that story engaged the readers into chaos in narrator's life that is being kidnapped, tortured and beheaded. There are loud voices, shattered glasses and beatings. The writer has employed short and bloated phrases to bring to light the terrific condition of the narrator who is unable to speak properly. There is a nameless protagonist stranded in an unidentified setting by unidentified kidnappers. The absence of naming creates a panic in the minds of the readers along with narrator's stream of consciousness which heightens reader's curiosity. The reviewer appreciates the artistic and impressive use of imagery and diction in the short story.

A lot of research has been done in the domain of stylistics. But a brief look at the previous researches on Mohsin Hamid's short story *A Beheading* shows that none of them focused on investigating the short story while keeping in mind the five levels presented by Leech and Short. The present research aims to analyze the short story while keeping in mind the five levels of stylistic analyses proposed by Leech and Short.

4. Theoretical Framework

The present study is based on general stylistic methods and techniques with the incorporation of Leech and Short's *Style in Fiction* (2007). Stylistic analysis is conducted because it proposes awareness about the internal patterning of the short story. In simple words, stylistics is the scientific study of style. According to Leech & Short (2008), stylistics concern with the investigation of style hardy for its own sake. It aims to describe the usage of language in various pieces of writings. They further proclaim that main focus in stylistic analysis is to examine the linguistic patterns in any text. It is an interesting approach of analysis that employs science of linguistics on literary texts. In stylistic analysis linguistic methods are used to interpret both literary and non-literary texts. A stylistic analysis follows different levels. These levels are as follows:

1. **Phonological Level:** Lodge (2009) defined phonology “the study of linguistic systems, specifically the ways in which sound represents differences of meanings in language” as Phonological level is based on examining the ways the writers play with the sounds in their writings to create a particular effect. The aesthetic use of sounds imparts a rhythmic structure to the piece of art. This rhythmic structure is not only pleasing to the ears but it also induces an emotional effect in the active readers. At phonological level, the focus is to identify the devices such as; alliteration, assonance, consonance, mete, rhyme, rhythm, onomatopoeia, etc. Sometimes writers deliberately violate the norms of standard writing and employ contractions which result in change in sounds, spellings and sometimes even pronunciation. These sound patterns contribute towards establishing the overall tone of the text in a lyrical way.
2. **Graphological Level:** According to Leech proclaims graphology to exceed orthography. Because it involves the whole writing system. : “punctuation and paragraphing, as well as spacing” (Leech, 1969). Graphology can be deployed as a device of meanings and aesthetics. Deviant use of capitalization signifies the spoken emphasis for the capitalized term as we will observe in section 5 of the present research. Leech and Short states that graphological deviation is trivial and superficial feature of style. Sometimes, it helps to build a colloquial style. This level of analysis involves focus on spelling, capitalization, spacing, hyphenation, italicization and paragraphing. Moreover, graphological elements in the texts are more conspicuous, blatant and eye-catching even a text deviates at graphological level or not. So the graphological level recognizes the overall writing system of the text not only to bring to light the poetic qualities of the text but to also bring to light the vital message of the author.
3. **Morphological Level:** Morphological level of stylistic analysis involves the process of forming new words in the terms of prefixes, suffixes, compounding (joining two free morphemes/ lexical items), blending (taking parts of two or more words), clipping (reducing a polysyllabic word into single syllable), backformation (reducing some letters of a word to change its category), acronyms (initial letters of each word in a phrase or name are taken), coinage/neologism (inventing totally new terms), nonce-formation borrowing, modification, reduplication etc. Nonce-formation is a form of new word which never used again. It is only employed author for a specific effect.
4. **Lexico-Semantic Level:** This level involves examining the lexis, vocabulary items, figure of speech etc. The focus is on the suggestive meanings. Lexical items comprise of formal and informal word (formal words in formal settings such as business meetings, interviews, offices and informal with close ones), Slangs (related to spoken discourse, sometimes offensive and not suitable for formal situations), archaic words (old fashioned words), Cliché (words/phrase/ idea which lost flavor because of overexposure) and jargons (terms related to a particular profession). Moreover at this level aim is also to identify and interpret the stylistic devices or figure of speech such as oxymoron, simile, metaphor, analogy, anti-thesis, imagery, euphemism, synecdoche, metonymy etc.
5. **Syntactic Level:** This level involves the sentence structure. For instance, the proper sentence structure has two obligatory parts: subject+ predicate. Norm is the standard of use of language. Deviation occurs when these rules are subverted. At this level observation is also made on deviations at grammatical elements such as sentence markers, contractions.

Contracted form is not used in standard writing. The authors deviate from with the frequent use of contractions.

6. Stylistic Analysis of Short Story

The analysis of the short story is done under the various levels such phonological, graphological, morphological, Lexico-semantic and syntactic level.

1) Phonological Level

Another name for phonological level is Phonostylistics. As discussed in section 4 phonological level deals with the aesthetic use of sounds. This specific use of sounds acts as musical instruments of language which turn the ordinary sentences into symphonies of sound. Moreover; repetitions commit the message to the memory and keep the reader focused. The phonological features occur in the short story are alliteration, assonance, consonance and rhyme.

Alliteration

Alliteration is the repetition of same consonant sounds at the beginning of the closely connected words. These are series of verbal drum beats which gives the sentences in the short story a catchy rhythm. Alliteration makes the words stick into memory. Alliteration occurs 24 times in the short story.

1. Behind my back my wrists are being taped together (/b/ and /t/sound repeated)
2. I feel feverish..... (f sound repeated)
3. Malarial fever that makes me shiver (m sound repeated)
4. Pair of pliers and put (p sound repeated)
5. I don't want to watch (w sound repeated)
6. They take me into a house paint peeling off (p sound repeated)
7. I will make a mistake (m sound repeated)
8. I can't just mumble to myself (m sound repeated)
9. Sirs I say (s sound repeated repeated)
10. I have to Speak slowly (s sound repeated)
11. Many men (m sound repeated)
12. Want to watch (w sound repeated)
13. Copper colored corolla (k sound repeated)
14. The shocks are shot (ʃ sound repeated)

Consonance:

Consonance refers to the repetition of same consonant sounds at the beginning, middle and end of the words which are close together, creating a rhythmic or forceful effect. Here are some examples from the story.

- Shadows are jumping and stretching (repetition of /ŋ/sound)
- “They’re holding me under my armpits and dragging me out the front door (repetition of /m/ , /ŋ/and /d/ sound)
- “gagging and I have to let my jaw hang open” (repetition of /g/ sound)
- I’m speaking English now, slurring, and making no sense. (repetition of /ŋ/sound)

Assonance

Assonance is the repetition of vowel sounds within words that are next to or close to each other. Assonance creates a smooth melody in sentences and adds musical quality to writings making it more engaging and appealing to the ear. Mohsin Hamid has employed it to create a particular mood and atmosphere in the short story. “They open the **trunk** and **dump**” /u/ is repeated in this following statement.

Rhyme

Rhyme Scheme creates a rhythm in the writing when the ending words are identical in verse lines and prose statements. “I feel feverish, a high, malarial fever that makes me shiver”. In this statement fever and shiver have identical sounds. This artistic use of sounds in prose makes the speech effective.

Contractions

Contractions refer to the sequence of sounds where two words are reduced into single one with the use of apostrophe. Contractions are frequently used in spoken discourse. But in written discourse contractions are not the norm. Mohsin Hamid has deviated while frequently using contractions in the short story. Contractions occur in the short story..... times. Can't is used 5 times, they're 5 times, there's 3 times, wasn't once, didn't 4 times, doesn't 4 times, don't 15 times, I've 5 times, he's thrice, I'd once, I'm 14 times, it'll once, you're twice, It's 4 times, we've once, we're twice, they'll once, she's twice, I'll thrice, that's once,

The aesthetic use of sounds in the form of alliteration, assonance, consonance and rhyme scheme not only make Hamid's style poetic but it also make the horrible scene of narrator's beheading a euphemized phenomenon for the reader. The artistic and inventive use of sound constructs the horrible tone of the short story in a mild and lyrical way.

2) Graphological Level

The graphological features occur in the poem in terms of capitalization and punctuation.

Capitalization

Big Eid is capitalized and allude to Eid-ul-Azha which is celebrated in Muslim cultures. There are many things in the short story which are not clearly mentioned as the religious identity of the kidnappers and narrator. Here we can interpret that narrator is a Muslim.

Punctuation

The writer deviated in the use of punctuation in the following statement. ‘Please. Everything is all right. Full stop has been employed after **please** rather than comma. It may suggest that writer wanted to put a great emphasis on the word please. The narrator is requesting.

I'm speaking English now, slurring, making no sense. In this sentence, the writer deviated in the use of comma. Between the words **slurring and making** comma has been placed instead of **and**. “Bigger than me” is not a complete sentence but full stop has been used which is placed at the end of a complete sentence in normative rules of English language. Moreover, the short sentences connotes exigency of the narrator.

3) Morphological Level

Morphological features occur in the short story in the form of merged morphemes, compounding, clipping, backformation, borrowing, coinage, acronym, slangs and jargons.

Merged Morphemes

In merged morphemes the verb ‘is’ is compressed into a single letter as ‘s’. Merged morpheme occurs once in the short story. In ‘**Electricity's gone**’ it turns into an inflectional morpheme while

being attached to the noun electricity. But its grammatical category is not changed. It remains verb not apostrophe. Here writer has employed it as compressed form of ‘**electricity is**’. **Compounding** Compounding involves joining two or more primary lexical items to form compound words. Compounding is used 16 times in this text. Compounding is one of hallmark of Pakistani variety of English. Mohsin Hamid has frequently employed compounds in this brief short story where phrases might be used by native speakers. Compounding is used 16 times in this text. So compounding is one of the distinctive features of Mohsin Hamid’s writing. The examples of compounding in the short story are: Everything: (Every+thing) , Electricity: (electric + city), Bedroom: (Bed+room) , Gatekeeper: (Gate+keeper), Copper-colored: Copper+colored, Sunlight: (Sun+light), Bathrooms: (Bath+room) , Anything: (Any+thing) , Something: (Some+thing), Downstairs: (Down+stair), Blindfold: (blind + fold), Skylight: (Sky+light), Armpits: (Arm+pit), Together: (to+gether), Carpet: (car+pet), Sideways: (Side+way). The writer seems to employ these compounds words deliberately to convey his message concisely, vividly and swiftly which is in accordance with the urgency of the narrator who is desperate and helpless. He is well aware of the fact the he will be beheaded at any moment. The compounding can be for the sake of speed and conciseness.

Clipping

When a polysyllabic word is reduced into one syllable this phenomenon is termed as clipping. It occurs once in the short story. The word telephone has been clipped into **Phone** in the short story.

Backformation

Backformation is a process in morphology where there occurs a reduction in the certain letters of words as one type of part of speech to another type of part of speech. For example noun is change into a verb. There are 3 example of backformation in the short story. For instance, **Prepare** (preparation), **Manage** (Management), **Cooperate** (Cooperation).

Borrowing

It refers to taking over the words from other world languages which differs from the language in which writer is writing his text. English has become rich world language one of the reason of its popularity is that it welcomes diversity. It occurs thrice in a short story. In the following examples the names of different languages can be categorized in borrowing. 1) "I don’t think its Arabic or Pashto." 2) "I say in the most groveling Urdu I can manage". These describe the names of languages such as Arabic, Pashto and Urdu. The narrator is unable to understand the language spoken by kidnappers. 3) "Chechen". Chechen refers to the Muslim tribe in Chechnya. The narrator is trying to guess the identity of the kidnappers through the languages in which they are speaking. The narrator is assuming that they are Muslims as all these above mentioned languages are spoken by Muslims.

Coinage

It is the invention of totally new term. Trade names are given to company products. It occurs at only one place in a story as in “They have a copper-coloured’81 Corolla”. 81- Corolla is the model's name of car. 81-corolla is à 1981 model of corolla.

Acronym

It is a process of forming a new word from the initial letters of a set of words. It occurs at only one place in a story as in “The other is plugging a light into a portable **UPS**. **UPS** stand for the initial letters of the Uninterruptible Power supply.

Slangs

Slangs are very informal words and non-standard expressions. They are not thought to be suitable for formal situations. These are considered vulgar. It occurs three times in the short story as in;

1. "What is it? Is it **fucking** Chechen? What is that **fucking** language? Who the **fucks** are these people?"
2. "I've already **pissed** myself and my legs itch from dried urine".
3. "I don't want anyone to **crush my balls**"

Pissed, fucks and fucking are the slangs and abusive language in the short story. It reflects vulgarity. The narrator is unable to identify the kidnappers, their motive in kidnapping and their nationality. He is assuming and trying to guess these things in an abusive language. May be their brutality and cruelty make the narrator abusive.

Jargons

Jargons are technical words or expressions used by a particular profession or group of people. As these are related to a specific field so these are difficult for others to understand. These occur five times in the short story. The examples are: Malarial Fever + Dentist (related to medical field), Acid (related to chemistry), Tripod (related to laboratory experiments), Pliers + Electrical tape (Electrical field), Cricket Tennis ball (Sports field). Mohsin Hamid is a learned author who has employed jargons from different fields of learning in the short story to enhance its effectiveness.

4) Lexico-Semantic Level

This level of stylistic analysis is concerned with lexical items and their meanings. Analyzing a text at this level means analyzing vocabulary items, diction, stylistic devices, words of tenderness or cruelty etc. Lexico-semantic features occur in the short story in the form of euphemism, imagery, digression, simile, anti-thesis, synecdoche and analogy.

Digression

Digression occurs when the writer moves away from the main idea of a text. A short story is built around a single idea. It is quite deviant on the part of the writer that he has very artistically employed digression in a short story which hardly consists of 1200 words. There is whole description of goat in a full paragraph which his parents used to buy in his childhood for sacrifice on the occasion of Big Eid. The reason for this digression might be to provide background information about the anonymous narrator.

Euphemism

The writer made the tormenting scene of his death less painful by the use of euphemism in an artistic way. "**I open my eyes to see it on the floor like ink**". He compares his flowing of blood with the spilt ink and the story ends with a mild statement "**I end before I am empty**". So instead of directly using the word death it states that body is empty of soul now. In a pleasant way it is depicted that "**I make some noise before I black out**" rather than using horrific images of crying, shouting, weeping and begging.

Imagery

Imagery is the representation of sense experiences though language. "Shadows are jumping and stretching" appeals to sense of sight. It contributes in creating a horror in the minds of readers.

Simile

A simile is a literary device which uses "as" "like" to make resemblance between similar ideas, things or people etc. Simile is used 9 times in text.

1. They're like tears
2. as old as my parents.
3. as young as my son.
4. I sound like a whispering child
5. It was like a pet
6. Blood on the floor like ink.
7. I sound like I am drunk.
8. Or like someone has cut off half my tongue

The narrator has compared himself and his conditions with 'tears', 'whispering child', and pet', sacrificial goat and drunk'. These similes reflect his fragility, aching and vulnerability.

Anti-thesis

In anti-thesis two opposite ideas are placed together at clause level. The example from the text is **"I don't want to die but I don't mind dying"**. The confusion in mind of the narrator is evident in this stamen. He is suffering from anxiety.

Synecdoche

Synecdoche as a figure is used when part represents the whole. It occurs at only one place in the short story as in **"Shadows are jumping and stretching from a multiple torches"**. Shadow is a part of human beings but here shadows represent the kidnappers. The moving shadows create a sense of horror and fear in the mind of the reader. Shadows have been personified as human being. Shadows also connote the hollowness of the kidnappers who are only shapes without form and shades without colors. It can also indicate towards ambiguity in defining their identity and individuality.

Analogy

A comparison between one thing and another typically for the purpose of explanation or clarification. It is based on the arguments and conditions. Analogy makes some sort of explanatory point. The purpose of simile, metaphor and analogy is to show comparison. Analogy is different from simile in metaphor because the purpose of analogy is not only to show but also explain that comparison. It occurs at 5 places in a short story as in:

1. "It feels like electrical tape, the kind of tape you wrap around a tennis ball for street cricket when you're a kid".
2. "He looks like we have been starving him"
3. "We used to have a car like that when I was young"
4. I think of being at the dentist, when it's already hurting and you know it's going to hurt more and you just wait and try to think of mind tricks to make it hurt less.
5. "Even then I sound like I'm drunk."
6. "Or like someone has cut my half tongue".

In almost all the above mentioned examples, a sort of argument has been built to explain. The ultimate goal is not to compare but to explain and clarify a point along with comparison. In almost all these analogous examples after the specific word of comparison **like or as** adjective or noun has not been used. But there is a clause or clauses to explain, clarify or make a point.

5) Syntactic Level

It deals with how words group together to make phrases and sentences. The syntactic deviation in the short story occurs in the form of connotations, parallelism, contractions etc. The analysis at the syntactic level unveils the prevailing tone of the short story. The first three sentences of the short story connote the stream of consciousness of the narrator throughout the text. He states twice: “The words are just dribbling out of my mouth. I can’t stop them. They’re like tears”. Words come out from his mouth as tears come out from eyes. The writer has employed mostly short sentences. Sometimes, so short even consist of only single word such as **please** or phrase “**as young as my son**”. “**Bigger than me**”. The writer has deviated at syntactic level while sometimes using sentences without proper subject and predicate. In the context of the phenomenon of kidnapping of narrator, these short sentences may invoke a sense of urgency and tension. This may be contributing towards the overall tone of the short story which is of tension, horror, torture and urgency.

Connotation

A Feeling or idea that is suggested by a word in addition to its basic meaning something suggested by an object or situation.

- “Bigger than me”. It connotes that kidnappers have the power and the narrators is weak.
- “We are the same. We are the same. We are not different from each other”. The assertion on sameness between kidnapers and the narrator connotes humanity. As a human being we are all same. There are our societies, beliefs, and religions etc. which play their role in bridging gaps, difference and enmities.
- Big Eid, Arabic and Pashto, Chechen connotes the identity of the kidnappers who are Muslims by religion.
- Is it fucking Chechen? I wish I could remember how to say my prayers? I say in the most groveling Urdu I can manage. I never petted it but it was like a pet. Adjectives like **fucking** and **groveling for** Chechen and Urdu languages spoken by Muslims connotes some sort of irreverence for its speakers. In the context of short story it seems that narrator is specifically assuming those among these speakers who are kidnappers, killers or extremist.

Parallelisms

Parallelism as a stylistic device occurs when parts of a sentence are grammatically same or similar in construction. There can be a repetition of word, phrase or an entire sentence. Such repetition is as effective, rhythmic and compelling as repetition of sounds. I wish...is an example of repetition of statements. It is repeated 3 times in text.

1. I wish I wasn't my age.
2. I wish I was as old as my parents.
3. I wish it didn't have to be me telling my wife to stay where she is).

This parallelism reflects the troubled state of mind of the narrator. Parallelism stresses that the speaker is totally helpless.

- ✓ I hope.... is another example of parallelism in the short story. Again, the reader gets an idea of the troubled state of the narrator who is unable to help himself. Here the speaker hopes his family is safe and is not kidnapped like him. It is repeated 3 times in text.
- ✓ I hope they didn't kill my son and wife and my parents.
- ✓ I hope they didn't rape my wife.
- ✓ I hope whatever they do to me they don't use acid on me.

I don't...is another example of parallelism. The reader has continuous thoughts about his family, and he keeps on negating himself which further worsens his mental state. It is repeated 6 times in text. His circumstances are not in his control. He is desperate. And this desperation is reflected in his utterances.

1. I don't want to die but I don't mind dying.
2. I don't want to be tortured.
3. I don't want anyone to crush my balls.
4. I don't want this car rife ever to end.
5. I don't want this.
6. I don't want to be that goat

Deautomatization of Automatic Expressions

One of the features of foregrounding in stylistics is the Deautomatization of automatic expressions. It occurs twice in the short story.

He looks like **we have been starving him.** The automatic expression could be "He looks like a starving man". Another example is "I wish I was as old as my parents". Here deautomatization occurs because usually people wish for the pleasures of past, childhood or adulthood. No one wishes to become old as the narrator wishes to be. The reason seems to be that he wants to be oblivious of that sense of responsibility which he has to fulfill as a young man.

Conclusion

To conclude we can say that the writer has deliberately employed different stylistic strategies in the short story. There is a deliberate amalgamation of poetic devices in the short story which make Hamid's prose work highly unconventional in form. The repetition of different devices creates harmonious effect, commits the message to the memory of the readers and keeps them focused on the overarching theme of the story. Stylistic features of the short story create a specific effect, determine the tone and highlight the overarching theme of terror.

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