

Foregrounding through Punctuation Marks in the Poetry of Hamid Khan

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Abstract

This paper highlights foregrounding as a stylistic tool employed by Hamid Khan in his poetry. Here, only the deviation occurring through punctuation marks is focused and then the relative importance of such deviation with respect to social implications is surfaced. For this purpose both the poetic collections of Khan were searched verbatim, i.e. "Velvet of Loss" and "Pale Leaf (Three Voices)". These punctuation marks are as follows: dash, sign of exclamation, sign of interrogation, ellipses, and uppercase character. The poems that carry these projected punctuation marks in "Velvet of Loss" are: The Winter of 1992, April Symphony, Bliss, Space-Scape, In a Café, Winter, New Poem, Window, The City, Waiting, Velvet of Loss, Bosnia – I, N.A. Reflections, Life, Abaseen, Dark Age, Youth. The poems that carry the deviant punctuation marks in "Pale Leaf (Three Voices)" are: Hope, I Wish, Eclipsed Moon, Circus Girl, Africa.

Key Words: Foregrounding, deviation, punctuation marks, Hamid Khan, socio-cultural issues

Introduction

Hamid Khan has been writing poetry since he was a student of MA English at the department of English, University of Peshawar. He did MPhil and PhD in English, besides his lifelong public service as CSP at various capacities. At first his poetic works and short stories were published in the dailies "The Muslim" and "The Frontier Post". Moreover, most of his poetry is published in Journal of English Literary Club (a literary magazine published by the Department of English, University of Peshawar). He remained the editor of JELC, 1982-83 issue. He also published *Three Voices* in collaboration with Daud Kamal and Raja Ikram. He was awarded many times for his literary pursuits. In her introductory comments to *Velvet of Loss* (2002), Waheeda Farhat has very aptly said that "Hamid Khan's poetry manifests human feelings, human values which cannot be put to the altar of undue criticism. Human values/feelings, whatever forms they have, are the assets of humanity." (p.6). Professor Faqri Jadoon in his commentary on *Velvet of Loss* (ibid) maintains in this regard that "through small poems, more like humorous musical strokes, Hamid Khan, touches the harsh reality of life." (P. 9).

Hamid Khan uses English as a medium for spreading his messages through poetry. He highlights social problems that upset the very peace of the world in general and particularly of Pakistan. He does so through his peculiar concise and compact style which he achieves through foregrounding in both the collections, *Velvet of Loss* and "*Three Voices (Pale Leaf)*"¹. The poems that carry the projected punctuation marks in "*Velvet of Loss*" are: *The Winter of 1992, April Symphony, Bliss, Space-Scape, In a Café, Winter, New Poem, Window, The City, Waiting, Velvet of Loss, Bosnia – I, N.A. Reflections, Life, Abaseen, Dark Age, and Youth*. The poems that carry the deviant punctuation marks in "*Three Voices (Pale Leaf)*" are: *Hope, I Wish, Eclipsed Moon, Circus Girl, and Africa*.

Method

Martindale (2007), quoted in Lesley Moss (2014) avers that foregrounding is chiefly sub-categorized as deviation and parallelism. Van Peer and Hakemulder (2006), and Shen (2007) also agree to this classification of foregrounding. In this article, for the sake of brevity, only the level

¹ *Pale Leaf* is Khan's part of the collaborative work, *Three Voices*.

of deviant punctuation is chosen following Tellerman (1998) as saying that it depends upon the researcher to choose one or more levels for the analysis of literary pieces. After having analyzed all the poems of Hamid Khan through the tools of foregrounding (deviation and parallelism), the punctuation marks were used by the poet to project various themes. These punctuations marks are ellipses, question marks, sign of exclamation, dash, and uppercase characters. They are deviant and attract the reader's attention toward the implied messages embodied in the poems where they occur. The words and phrases that are part of the deviant punctuations are brought together in order to reshape them into syntactically correct sentences. These sentences give us the thematic connotations related to the socio-cultural scenario of the society.

Analysis

Use of Sign of Exclamation as Deviation

The foregrounded use of sign of exclamation is also pointed out in the poems of Khan, though they do not occur in the poems in abundance. In the table below the first three occur in *Velvet of Loss* whereas the last two occur in *The Pale Leaf (Three Voices)*.

Table of the Deviated Sign of Exclamation

P. No	Deviation	Poem
17	No activity!	The Winter of 1992
17	No meaningful event!	The Winter of 1992
40	Perhaps!	April Symphony
32	Love!	Bliss
32	The rest!	Bliss
32	Heresies and nothingness!	Bliss

The sign of exclamation makes meaningful connotation if connected with the title of the respective poems. They occur after words and phrases that have violated normal syntactic rules. This deviation connotes thematic views when connected to the title of the poems in which they occur. The twice occurrence of the exclamation sign in *The Winter of 1992* foregrounds the severity of the winter. It is a season that, in most parts of the world, confines people to their homes, hence no meaningful activity or event is not supposed to take place. The specific mentioning of the year personalizes the severity of the winter and suggests greater pain and sadness inflicted upon the poet by the Nature.

Similarly, through the deviational use of the sign of exclamation after the word *perhaps* in the poem, *April Symphony*, the ray of hope for better life is foregrounded. April is the month that is normally associated with productivity and multiplicity of the living things. It suggests freshness and vitality that furthers the prospects of improvement in human condition in general. Through the deviational use of *perhaps*, the doubt is made ironical and the hopefulness is maintained.

In addition, the poem, *Bliss*, carries three signs of exclamation at different places after words and phrase that highlight the importance of true and sincere love. They foreground the idea that apart from true love, all other things are simply the negation of true belief. The title of the poem contextualizes the selflessness in affairs of love. Love is bliss to those who are sincere; those who are not true to their love are going against the true spirit of religion. In this regard, it foregrounds love for the entire humanity without any material gains in mind.

Use of Dash as Deviation

The foregrounded use of dash in the form of deviation is shown through the following tables. Dashes occurring in both the collections are separately shown.

Table of Foregrounded Dash in *Velvet of Loss*

P. No	Deviation	Poem
17	But not for long –	The Winter of 1992
23	Singing eerie songs –	Space-Scape
24	Sitting next to you –	In a Café
29	a butterfly –	Winter
39	Tearing a piece of paper –	New Poem
39	Love –	New Poem
39	Estrangement –	New Poem
42	A human voice –	Window
45	Tiny limbs –	The City
45	Extinct eyes –	The City
45	I cannot speak –	The City
51	Of you and me –	Waiting
61	And me –	Velvet of Loss

All the above words/phrases and sentences, occurring in *Velvet of Loss*, are connected for meaningful suggestions and social implications apart from the context in which they are used. They are shuffled and rearranged in order for bringing syntactic order in them. For this purpose, some words are added to complete the sentences with. They are underlined. Thus, we get the following:

A human voice is singing eerie songs of love, estrangement, tiny limbs, a butterfly, and extinct eyes. Sitting next to you, but not for long, I cannot speak of you and me, and me, hence I am tearing a piece of paper.

The singing of the songs and human voice foreground the prophecies and worries of the poets about the alarmingly worse human condition in general. They take life as a whole, as is balance is maintained by the words, *love* and *butterfly* with *estrangement* and *extinct eyes*. The phrase, *tiny limbs*, foregrounds the bodies of the children – both alive and dead. Keeping in view the inability of the poet to speak, the phrase *tiny limbs* highlights the scattered body parts of children, possibly due to war. In this regard, the overall effect of the dash after the tabulated words and phrases is that of the horrors and drawbacks of war.

Table of Foregrounded Dash in *Pale Leaf (Three Voices)*

P. No	Deviation	Poem
25	Do not look down to earth –	Hope
25	The dust is frightening –	Hope
27	Flying high –	I Wish
27	And universe/ all ours –	I Wish
28	Eclipsed moon –	Eclipsed Moon
28	Men without manliness –	Eclipsed Moon
36	To the swinging bar –	Circus Girl
36	For another show –	Circus Girl
36	And a thumping heart –	Circus Girl
41	The newsboy heralded –	Africa
41	Crowded around him –	Africa

All the above deviated words/phrases and sentences, occurring in *The Pale Leaf (Three Voices)*, are connected for meaningful suggestions and social implications apart from the context

in which they are used. They are shuffled and rearranged in order for bringing syntactic order in them. For this purpose, some words are added to complete the sentences with. They are underlined. Thus, we get the following:

The newsboy heralded that the dust is frightening, so do not look down to earth. Men without manliness crowded around him for another show. And for flying high to the swinging bar, we need a thumping heart, as all the universe and eclipsed moon are ours.

Through the qualification of the dust with *frightening* the overall effect of terror is maintained. The situation at earth is reeks despondence. The only hope that comes to solace a desolated human heart is from the sky or God. The whole universe is made for humans; they only need to muster up courage and soar high with hope in their heart. The *swinging bar* foregrounds continuation of misery if there is lack of the *thumping heart* – the courage and valour that is needed in bad days.

Table: Use of Ellipses as Deviation

Ellipses as deviation occur only in the collection, *Velvet of Loss*.

P. No	Deviation	Poem
53	Ethnic cleansing...	Bosnia-I
55	Emerald green...	N. A. Reflections
56	Moving along...	N. A. Reflections

Through the use of ellipses, the number of casualties is kept hidden for the reader to probe and assess the situation on their own in the poem, *Bosnia – I*. On one side, it gives a sense of complete silence, on part of the poet, due to the excess of sadness, and on the other, it suggests genocide.

Similarly, the poem, *N. A. Reflections* bears ellipses at two points. At both the places, the ellipses foreground a sense of continuity and growth. The phrase, *emerald green* takes one to the pleasant scene beside some hills and flowing water. Such a place renders freshness and vivacity. It reflects joy and serenity. The same idea is also incorporated through the ellipses followed by the phrase, *moving along*. It gives the idea of smooth flow where there is an avoidance of obstruction, if any. This furthers the point that life is going on without any hurdle in its way; the hurdles that are felt by humans are connected to human values, follies, and weaknesses – life in itself is indifferent.

Table of Use of Question Mark as Deviation

The use of sign of interrogation occur only once in the collection, *The Pale Leaf (Three Voices)*, hence it is shown in the table at the end. The rest of the foregrounded question marks occur in *Velvet of Loss*.

P. No	Deviation	Poem	Question Type
16	What is life?	Life	Wh-question
37	Why I don't write?	Abaseen	Wh-question
37	...Some Olympian god?	Abaseen	Yes/no-question
38	How much/ truth/ and where/ to abandon it?	Dark Age	Wh-question
40	...On a remade world?	April Symphony	Wh-question
40	Tomorrow/ Or the day after?	April Symphony	Wh-question
45	Can you?	The City	Yes/no-question
53	How many/ more metaphors/ do we need now?	Bosnia – I	Wh-question

25	Why force/ Loneliness upon ourselves?	Youth	Wh-question
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The *wh-questions* about life and writing are interrelated as writing something represents life, hence it gives the writer's interpretation of life. If someone is unable to write, it means that they cannot explore life; they fall short of inquisitiveness and power of understanding. This highlights the importance of exploring the world around us and trying to keep pace with the changing mood of the world. Life is a book that must be read by everyone, hence the question as to what is life is asked from every sane person on the planet.

The *wh-question* about the number of metaphors highlights the excess of problem being faced by the Muslims specifically in Bosnia and generally elsewhere in the world. Similarly, the poem, *Youth* carries a rhetorical question that foregrounds that there is no need to live in isolation, rather one must come out and take part in the improvement of human condition. Problems will be there but the youth should muster up courage to solve all of them in the larger interest of humanity. The world has become a wasteland, hence it needs refurbishing.

The *yes/no question* in the poem, *The City*, is a rhetorical question that foregrounds that idea that the worse human condition make everyone deaf and dumb. The poet cannot express himself fully as the situation is gruesome, and, definitely, the persons whom he address would also be as sensitive to the occasion as he himself is, hence they cannot talk any more on the miserable plight of the people due to the *centipede* evil that surrounds the area. This multidimensional evil that has fallen on humans suggests war, greed, narrow-mindedness, corruption, and poverty, to mention a few.

The contrast, with which the *broken men* and *remade world* are put together in the *Wh-question*, makes it a rhetorical question that foregrounds the thought that it becomes very difficult for the bereaved and the down-trodden to enjoy the advent of progress after they have been devastated. This highlights the aftermaths of a war-torn place where only rubbles are seen and screams are heard. This idea is stretched to the next rhetorical question, in the same poem, *April Symphony*, in which the time adverbs are mentioned. This further foregrounds that there is no hope that these people will take delight in the rehabilitation process.

The *yes/no-question* about the order of some Olympian god is a rhetorical question that foregrounds the idea that some writers have nothing new to express their thought with, rather they stick to the repetitive theme of showing regrets in their works. Similarly, the *wh-question* about truth and its abandoning is also a rhetorical question that highlights the view that no matter how much one tries to avoid truths and facts, they cannot. In the tussle between falsehood and truth, the truth wins at the end; hence it is no use avoiding it. Everyone should face the harsh reality and try to show tolerance and patience in time of trial and tribulation.

Uppercase Characters as Deviation

Uppercase characters occur only in the poem, *Africa* that falls in the collection *The Pale Leaf (Three Voices)*. They are *ARMED RACE*, and *AFRICA*. It foregrounds that the African people are dragged to fight for their survival. They are armed and there is a cause to this effect. They have been used as slaves by the so-called civilized world. These people have little to react, but if someone inflicts insurmountable pain, then definitely they will react to opposing and deadly circumstances. This constant struggle for survival has led them to parish. They are tired of the foreign aggression as is suggested by the phrase, *moribund Africa*. So, the element of despondence is highlighted through the capitalization of the key words.

Conclusion

The deviant punctuation marks make meaningful connotation if connected with the title of the respective poems and the related words and phrases, especially when they are united for structured sentences. These issues are related to the cultural and social set up particularly of Pakistan which can be generalized as well. There is personalization of the severity of the winter and suggests greater pain and sadness inflicted upon the poet by the Nature. Again, we are taken to the idea that apart from true love, all other things are simply the negation of true belief. Similarly, the horrors and drawbacks of war are also projected along with the courage and valour that is needed in bad days. More importantly, it is also highlighted that life is going on without any hurdle in its way; the hurdles that are felt by humans are connected to human values, follies, and weaknesses – life in itself is indifferent. Life is a book that must be read by everyone, hence the question as to what is life is asked from every sane person on the planet. Another point that is projected is that problems will be there but the youth should muster up courage to solve all of them in the larger interest of humanity. Moreover, the world has become a wasteland, hence it needs refurbishing. In addition, the multidimensional evil that has fallen on humans suggests war, greed, narrow-mindedness, corruption, and poverty, to mention a few. That there is no hope that these people will take delight in the rehabilitation process is also highlighted. In the tussle between falsehood and truth, the truth wins at the end; hence it is no use avoiding it. Everyone should face the harsh reality and try to show tolerance and patience in time of trial and tribulation. Similarly, constant struggle for survival has led humans to perish. Lastly, the element of despondence is highlighted through the capitalization of the key words. Thus, Khan has used the punctuation marks to foreground some of the basic problems faced by people both in the context of Pakistan and elsewhere in the world. His peculiar stenographic style embodies a lot to be explored. His words and phrase coupled with various punctuation marks that he has used in his own way lead the reader circumnavigate and ponder over the happenings of the routine life that affect humans in one way or the other.

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