Indigenous Irony in Shahnaz Bashir’s “The Ex-militants”: A Postmodern Study of the Kashmiri Context

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Abstract

This research focuses on the study of “The Ex-militant” written by Shahnaz Bashir in the light of the pretense theory of irony with reference to asymmetry of affect, victim, tone and audience. The paper introduces irony in the light of the definitions by different pragmatists and theorists to reach its postmodern usage as given by Linda Hutcheon and finally locates it in the pretense theory as explained by Herbert Clark and Richard Gerrig. The research analyzes the short story through this perspective to demonstrate how it has asymmetric affects after pinpointing the victims and interpreting the tones of the main character. It also demonstrates how the main victim hides true meanings until the end and discloses through deception. The research leaves room for the application of the mention theory of irony for further derivation of meanings of the narrative of Ghulam Mohiuddin.

Keywords

Shahnaz Bashir, Irony, Postmodern Irony, Indigenous Irony, Pretense Theory of Irony, Kashmir

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1. Introduction

Derived from H. P. Grice’s (1975) debate about Utterances and meanings (p. 41-43) supplemented by Fowler’s definition of irony (“Irony”), Sperber and Wilson define it as opposite in meanings (1981, p. 295; 1-2) with Ronald Tanaka categorizing it into different types. Clark and Gerrig (1984) further expand the concept through its theorization as Pretense Theory. It, however, finds its true interpreter in Linda Hutcheon who has defines and expand it in the postmodern prism, making it a point of her argument in Irony’s Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony. Although she has researched it from diverse angels, she finally locates it in the political area, saying it relies on its meanings and attitude (2003, p. 24) with remarks that MLA has 1145 entries of irony (p. 11) and almost all in different perspectives. Interestingly, Sperber Clark and Gerrig have concluded with the types of victims, deception and discovery and the intended audience but with “powerful notion of pretense” (p. 125). It is in this light that Kashmiri short story “The Ex-militant” by Shahnaz Bashir demonstrates its true meanings.

2. Review of Literature

Leaving aside definitions and polemics over definition, Linda Hutcheon is a of the view that its definition is fraught with disagreements (p. 21) with the postmodern ushering an “age of irony” and blessing it with categorization (p. 21). She has taken in-depth view of irony through social acts to reach a conclusion of meaning and attitude of both “the said and the unsaid” (p. 24). Wyne C. Booth finds it in rhetoric as a rhetorical device (p. ix) which according to him has continued to explain that “irony can mean many different things on many different pages” (p. 6). In interpretation, David Kaufer (1983) answers various questions about its purpose, accomplishments, assumptions and functions (p. 03). His exhaustive study, however, ends on the presupposition that it is actually the theory of meaning (p. 10) which it, non-arguably is, yet its own construction could hardly be denied when other theorists explain it. For example, Allan Karstetter has found it in rhetoric saying that it has been present in rhetoric since ages, linking it to Socrates and Aristotle (1964, p. 165). La Bossiere has reviewed Hutcheon about irony, saying it is neither Socratic nor Platonic (1996, p. 359) but a political act, for Hutcheon is a “political pragmatist,” showing capacity of considerable innovation in its theorization (p. 360) which is of particular interest.

Best review about its theorization is by Herbert Clark and Richard Gerrig. They have defined it with reference to Oxford English Dictionary like several others but linked it to the exposition of Sperber and Wilson to argue that it is “a kind of pretense” (p. 121). Giving practical examples and explanations, they come to the point that the theory has four major components: asymmetry of affect, its victims and its ironic tone (p. 122), ironing the audience. However, they have concluded that “the intended audience” are of prime importance when it comes to “powerful notion of pretense” (p. 125). It means that theory of pretense has four major components, but it is an important question how it finds its rightful place in indigenous studies or literature.

Interestingly, Susan Billington Harper, a western scholar, highlights it with reference to Kipling’s words in her research about South Asia, saying it was about the description of the
Indian society in Rudyard Kipling (1995, p. 16). Yet she is surprised that even this strand of indigenization was initiated by the westerners among the indigenous people (p. 18) which rather baffles an indigenous reader into deliberation whether it exists in the indigenous cultures and narratives at all. Rest of her comments, however, do not corroborate he argument. Another scholar, O’Bonsawain questions her proposition whether such scholars have the ability to see irony in the indigenous culture and narratives (2017, p. 178) to highlight that fact lies in that the historians are not comfortable with the indigenous irony (p. 178) during translation of the indigenous archives (p. 178) and that if they do, they find that the indigenous people having used it as a “strategy to subvert, resist and deny colonial hegemony” (p. 197). Hers is an interesting and valid argument about indigenous irony as it provides keen insight into “collective psyche and values” of a group (p. 179). In other words, she is of the view that irony is a tool to resist colonialism or colonial hegemony when other tools become outdated or useless or fail.

Placing and locating irony in the postmodern studies, however, is a tricky work. Linda Hutcheon’s phenomenal, *Irony’s Edge*, reviews all the previous studies. In it, she states that the number of people arguing through this “bizarre way” rather astonishes her (p. 11). She mentions victims (p. 12), affect (p. 57), audience (p. 58) and tone (p. 59, 64) but her stress is its political usage. Besides this postmodern postulation, the major argument here is how it impacts in terms of pretense in “The Ex-militant” by Shahnaz Bashir, the context of Ghulam Mohiuddin, its main narrator, and his situation in Kashmir. Although it seems bizarre how he applies it in the indigenous environment of Kashmir, the appropriation of a western concept to the Kashmiri context does not seem an outdated and bizarre idea at the times when literary studies in terms of theorization seems to have crossed natural and physical boundaries. Therefore, Bashir’s character not only ironizes his own situation but also demonstrates pretense in terms of affects, victims, audience and tone as given in the analysis of his narrative told to an anonymous journalist or may be the writer.

### 3. Analysis of “The Ex-militants”

The short story “The Ex-militants” by Shahnaz Bashir occurs in his collection of short stories, *The Scattered Souls*. As the main title as well as the title of the short story are suggestive, they are equally ironic. “The Ex-militants” shows how a militant reverts to his civilian life, but ex-sticks to him. This militancy nomenclature having negative connotations create hurdles in the social setup where he has passed his entire life. How he wins these negative connotations is another irony of circumstances two epigraphs one by Howard Zinn and other by Khalil Gibran clarify (Bashir, 2016, p. 18). Whereas the first epigraph is about the formation of law and its application through a specific class of the society, the second epigraph talks about a person whose sincerity fails to pull him out of the cesspool of militancy despite his return to normality. Both are ironic as they relate to the story of Ghulam Mohiuddin, the ex-militant who does not seem conforming to the new social conventions and mores following the merger of the militants in the social setup despite his best efforts to lead a normal life. This irony runs throughout the story in terms of asymmetry of affect, victims, audiences, and tone of Mohiuddin and Bashir.

### 3.1. Asymmetry of Affect
Although Clark and Gerrig argue that asymmetry of affect means “positive pretense” (p. 122), they refer to Jorgensen and his colleagues to point out that the people “tend to see the world according to the norms of success and excellence” (p. 122). When appropriated to the case of Ghulam Mohiuddeen in “The Ex-militants,” it seems that he has adopted positive pretenses in the beginning though this is a holistic interview by a journalist in which the narrator, Mohiuddeen, laments the social apathy toward him and his sufferings. Although the writer (in the garb of a journalist) does not have any capability to do Mohiuddeen any good, Mohiuddeen still expects something positive out of him. He tells him that “you are a writer. And so, you still have that human element alive inside you” (Bashir, p. 18). Although the rest of the conversation is bereft of positivity, when he recounts his involvement in the rebellion brandishing Kalashnikov, he clearly seems saying in pretense “what a freedom!” and seems jubilant over crossing the border, becoming the boss (p. 21) and taking part in the rebellion. Yet, this temporary affect does not last long, and he, again, comes to his senses saying, “I could never kill” (p. 21). This could be an ironic regret, but it has a tinge of negativity. This asymmetry of affect plunges into finger-pointing at victims and self-victimization.

3.2. Victims of Mohiuddin’s Irony

The first victim of Mohiuddeen’s irony is the upper class. Clark and Gerrig distinguishes two types of victims; the person himself and the persons addressed (p 122). The first one is due to this own misjudgment and the second is due to his uncritical acceptance (p. 122). In both the cases, the case of Mohiuddeen is interesting.

The first victim of the irony is Mohiuddeen himself. The irony in his case is that he belongs to a lower class and knows full well that almost all the militants or mujahids taking part in the skirmishes and encounters with him belong to the upper class. For example, Irshad belongs to a rich Beigh family that has vast areas of apple orchards (p. 22-23). It is logical that his parents would spend more money to win his release from Kot Bhalwal jail where he is thrown after their arrest (p. 23). Similarly, Mohiuddeen also knows that Fayaz’s father is a rich person (p. 23). Obviously, he would go from pillar to post to win his release. Mohiuddeen also expresses his jubilation as well surprise at his release. Yet it is ironic that he does not know Fayaz’s father could have bribed the entire jail staff and this knowledge is just his self-deception. This is the worst sort of irony of which he himself is the victim (p. 23). Also, when he knows that all others belong to the rich family and have killed the troopers at will when he refuses to fire, he must have known that their families would make compromises and grease every other machine in the government machinery to win the release of their militant sons. The only thing that proves seductive for him and traps him in this vicious cycle of law is the freedom which he could not understand. The only freedom Mohiuddeen is the more vicious issue of being an ex-militant. When his parents has had hard times to get their son release from the prison, Fayaz goes to Bangalore to study engineering and the things end up in their favor instead of the commander, Mohiuddeen (p. 23). This is how the world works which Mohiuddeen has not understood due to which his life has turned topsy turvy, and he himself has become the victim of his irony.

It is also due to his misjudgment. The misjudgment of Ghulam Mohiuddeen lies in two unfulfilled expectations. The first expectation is to win freedom and the second is underlying hope of equality. The first one stays clear and transparent but the second one ambivalent and deceptive. As far as freedom is concerned, he and other fighters hope that after getting training,
brandishing Klashnikovs and wearing “multi-pocket ammunition jackets” (p. 21), they could win freedom. It also lies in his new status as the area commander or boss (p. 21). However, the fact is that he is not the boss but just a plaything in the greater game of the freedom in which the social standing and caste count and not the new status of the people. It is like closing eyes to confront the reality. The reality dawns upon Mohiuddeen in Papa 2, the torture center where he, along with other mates, are subjected to tortured (p. 22). It further opens to him when he is sent to Kot Bhalwal where having greater resources and connections find it easy to live and win release, while his parents could not afford that (p. 22). This misjudgment of his status in the society, his newly won post, subsequent arrest and release cost him dearly in terms of settling down following the death of militancy in the valley. He could not judge that the situations is going to stay the same come what may.

Whereas the uncritical acceptance of his new role and his new situation is concerned, it is also his own doing. The first new role is as a militant. He does not think of the consequences that after being arrested, he would become a pariah and that his wife and siblings would have to face the stigma (p. 18) that despite having fought for the cause of Kashmir, he still has to show up in the police station every day to prove his loyalty and innocence (p. 18). The second new role is as the area commander. He does not forestall it earlier that he and his comrades would lose, and that they would end in jail, or that they would have to face a different destiny. He states it later that “It is actually my fault, or perhaps that of my stars. I don’t know” (p. 18). This shows that he uncritically accepts his role as the boss of the militants, showing courage not to kill others but when others did and also showed their faces, he just felt besmirched (p. 18). Now this role is costing him dearly everywhere. First, he faces issues in getting his daughter, Insha, checked at hospital where the authorities call him by his caste and not by his name (p. 20). Second, he faces the humiliation of showing up in the police station constantly to get checked that he is not reverting to his former role (p. 18). Third, the acute poverty is staring in his face in that he is unable to make both ends meet through his rickety autorickshaw that is costing him in maintenance and upkeep. Also, the other victims include the innocents killed during crackdowns and others who underwent brutal punishments merely for being their compatriots. He comes to know about several deaths of his near and dear ones during his stay in Bhalwal which seems an irony of fate for him that instead of freedom, he was facing the new reality of “the loss of the group mates” (p. 23). Instead of making others victims, he himself becomes victim of the irony of fate here. And the worst comes in the end of the story when he runs from pillar to post to make things easy for his daughter so that she could continue her education in a private school. However, he faces the stark reality again that “only the trustees can help in this case” and the irony is that his subordinate in freedom, Fayaz Shah, is the in the board of trustees and he must approach him to make a formal request to waive off the fees of his daughter, Insha (p. 29). In the end of the story, he sees his former comrade in arms when he talks about him to the journalist saying;

Fayaz Shah returned from Bangalore without any degree in engineering. He, like many ex-militants, slid into mainstream politics. When I was on my way to meet the principal of my daughter’s school, I saw Fayaz. He looked clean in his white Khansuit and jet black waist-coat, supervising men who were tying
buntions of Janta Party all over the place. It had become difficult and awkward for me to meet him and remind him of the old days (p. 26).

When Mohiuddeen narrates this incident, he is clearly ironic in an implicit manner and also points to the major victims of this irony. The victim is Mohiuddeen himself who is facing the hardship when his former comrade and subordinate is in a position of authority. Mohiuddeen is now at his beck and call to get the fees of his daughter, Insha, waived off. Interestingly, the same militant is now in an opposite side, Janta Party, despite his being a former militant with a record of attacks and killings, while Mohiuddeen, who has not fired a single bullet, is carrying the stigma of an ex-militant with a bad record in the police station. This shows how Mohiuddeen becomes the victim of the irony of fate and irony of situation. However, the audiences of this ironic situation are multiple having different backgrounds and perspectives due to the story being in English language.

3.3. **Audiences of Mohiuddin's Narrative**

Although the irony in the utterances and narrative of Mohiuddeen is not directed at specific people, as he is just narrating his story to the journalist, it is clearly directed at the audiences. His narrative has two audiences, or for that matter, Bashir has two audiences: the English-speaking world and the indigenous people understanding English language.

Whereas the first category of audiences is concerned, Bashir seems presenting the situation of Kashmir and downtrodden or leftover militants to the world to show how they face the worst after demanding freedom and fighting for them, while the world looks silently at them. The double irony lies in this fact that when the world supported the freedom struggles, people like Ghulam Mohiuddeen has been left over and forgotten, while the real culprits and comrades have won rewards (p. 25-26).

The irony of circumstances targets the audience in the first epigraph. This epigraph relates to the circumstances Ghulam Mohiuddeen faces post-militancy. He not only finds himself mired in acute poverty, his formal caste, too, has come haunting him that even the hospital authorities call him by his caste (p. 18). He does not seem to have a respectable residence, while he has also married in the court (p. 18-19). These circumstances following the crumbling of the ideals of freedom and complete failure in militancy show him that rich people like Fayaz and Irshad not only win release from the clutches of law, but also become icons of law-abiding citizens (p. 25-26). It is only the poor who suffer the most. The English-speaking audiences understand this irony put into the words of Howard Zinn, an American writer (p. 18). However, the indigenous audience have to process the double irony to understand the real situation of Ghulam Mohiuddeen. This is the irony of circumstances in which Ghulam Mohiuddeen is trapped and irony in the presentation of his story by Shahnaz Bashir.

Through the story of Mohiuddeen, Bashir targets his audiences both in the world as well as in Kashmir. He shows it to the world how the occupying forces treat the freedom fighters when they try to amalgamate in the society. The second is how the society continues with its status quo, the upper classes reaping the benefits and the downtrodden facing the wrath of law. Third, he shows the irony of the freedom itself. Bashir intends to prove to the indigenous English-
speaking readers that until the social status does not witness changes, the situation will remain the same whether they (Kashmiris) fight for freedom or not. In mid-between, Mohiuddeen wants the journalist to be his audiences. He conveys the flipside of the struggle which is that the indigenous people, who need freedom, are ending up in the same situation they pull themselves up to fight for it. This is the irony of situation that he wants to show to the journalists so that they could convey it to the world that law and friendship does not stay the same and the worst comes worst, only those suffer who are at the bottom of the social ladder (p. 18). This also shows how Bashir has tackled various audiences through his writing and through his character, Mohiudddeen. He also shows how the occupiers treat the militants and ex-militants, trap those who could not afford and join those who could create issues for them. Interestingly, the tone of Mohiudddeen also plays an important role in conveying the ironic meanings of his narrative.

3.4. Ironic Tone in “The Ex-Militant”

Most readers understand tone as two different things; the writer’s attitude and tone of the utterances of the main characters. As tone in pretense theory of irony is the tone of utterances (Clark and Gerrig, p. 122), it has been taken in similar meanings but in Hutcheon, it is the overall tone of the writer in a literary piece (p. 25, 40, 56). If analyzed from both perspectives about tone, “The Ex-militants” seems entirely an ironic painting of the lawless Kashmiri landscape.

Whereas the writer’s attitude is concerned, it is obvious through both epigraphs. The first one is about the law that it always protects the rich and that whenever they commit a crime, they find refuge in law. This tone is apparent in the story of Ghulam Mohiudddeen that he is not a rich man, therefore, law cannot protect him, and it happens truly the same. Zinn’s argument that the rich hire clever lawyers (Bashir, p. 18) fits the case of Fayaz and Irshad that both are free, while the narrator, Ghulam Mohiudddeen, becomes the victim of his own devotion to freedom and ends up not only in jail but also in acute poverty. This shows that Bashir wants to be ironic about how the law of the occupier treats the militants differently and to top it all, the relevant society follows the same laws and norms and does not extend the same treatment to all. The worst criminal is the best citizen and the good is bad has been shown through the character of Fayaz and Mohiudddeen in that Fayaz ends up becoming the head of the trustee to waive of the fees of the daughter of Mohiudddeen (p. 26).

Another tone lurking behind this tone is that friendship in one context does not mean the same in another. When the freedom movement provides chance to some to win laurels, Irshad and Fayaz become the best friends of Ghulam Mohiudddeen that otherwise would not have been possible. This tone is self-evident when Mohiudddeen says that he hates his own name;

Ghulam Mohiudddeen! I hate my name. I become angry with my late father for giving me an elderly name such as this. Why on earth couldn’t he think of a younger-sounding one? Maybe Fayaz, like Fayaz Shah, my companion from the outfit I had worked for. He was older than me by years, but younger in name (p. 20).

This is the second time that he recalls his name. First is when his wife calls him by this name. It has ironic undertones that he does not consider it worthy of respect and honor as his friend
Fayaz Shah has won despite being his junior in years. This tone continues even when he mentions about their arrest and subsequent crackdown. For example, when the adversity of Papa 2 and military arrests befall on them (p. 21-22), all of his friends leave him in lurch. Their affluent parents purchased their release from the prison. Worst, they become icons of political ideals in the Kashmiri landscape despite their being ex-militancy background, while one of their comrades becomes a pariah in the same social fabric. This tone of irony reverberates in the last sentence when he comes to know that he would have to request Fayaz to waive off the fees of his daughter (p. 26). This irony is not only directed at the audiences/readers but also at the Kashmiri readers and the journalist through the tone of the narrator.

Second is the overall tone of the story. This tone, too, is ironic and highly mocking. This is ironic in that it presents a story of a militant who has left his former life behind with several other militants but faces the worst treatment merely because of his inaccessibility to resources. The police, the army and the government spies are still after him despite his being in the worst poverty, looking for some treatment for his ailing daughter. Yet, the government and the local society treat him worse, making him unable to pay the dues of his daughter and make both ends meet. This tone, however, does not follow his personal tone toward the journalist, who happens to be the author, Shahnaz Bashir, and it is sans irony and full of love and reverence as he tells him “you still have that human element alive inside you” (p. 18). As the story ends and the journalist might have not done something for this poor ex-militant, its irony becomes obvious.

4. Conclusion

Although “The Ex-militants” seems a tragic story of Ghulam Mohiuddeen who finds himself misfit in his society, it shows the ironic side of the society, individuals and the governance system. The upper strata always legislate for its own benefit, and win in the end. Fayaz Shah and Irshad belong to the upper strata and their inclusion in the mainstream politics and exclusion of Ghulam Mohiuddeen shows the ugly side of this social fabric. Shahnaz Bashir has created asymmetry affect of the pretense theory of irony by presenting Ghulam Mohiuddeen joining the outfits with verve and jubilation and ending up in jail and ultimately in the dingy streets of Srinagar to live in poverty. The victims of the irony of fate, circumstances and situation are the audiences as well as the narrator, Ghulam Mohiuddeen himself. The audiences are victims as they do not expect that he would meet this end and he is a victim as he has never expected that he would come to this point that he would have to beg his junior comrades for concession in the fees of his daughter. Besides, the tone of the writer, Shahnaz Bashir is also ironic as two epigraphs given in the beginning of the story show. His views are clear that the laws in Kashmir are protecting the rich and trapping the poor and the second epigraph of Khalil Gibran is also clear that not all friendships have a happy ending. The tone of Mohiuddeen, too, is despairing and uninviting as it has ironic undertones of self-recrimination and social criticism. However, there are various other tones that runs behind the lines and require a separate research from the point of meaning theory of irony.

5. References


