

The prophet's hair by salman rushdie essay sample

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INTRODUCTION

The Prophet's Hair is a Magical Realistic short story by the famed writer Salman Rushdie. Salman Rushdie is an Author, Novelist, Essayist and sometimes a critic. He is famous for his supreme narrative style where he blends myth and fantasy in a world of reality. This is described as "Magical Realism". It is a literary genre in which the magical elements are injected in an otherwise realistic setting without breaking the narrative flow. (Pavlovski, 2012) The short story "The Prophet's Hair" is also one such story permeated with metaphors on both small and large scale. This report aims in analyzing, and criticizing this story by studying the seven literary elements. Also this story will be perceived in a post-colonial concept.

SUMMARY

Characters:

- * Hashim: The protagonist. He is the father of Atta and Huma.
- * Atta: He is the son of Hashim.
- * Huma: She is the daughter of Hashim.
- * Sheik Sin: He is the thief whom Huma hires.

The prophet's Hair is based on a story of the theft of the Prophet Muhammad's Hair. Whoever comes into contact with this relic face miraculous or disastrous events. Hashim, the protagonist of this short story come upon this stolen hair accidentally. As greed consumes Hashim he does not return the relic. He justifies his act as a community service basing it on the Islamic views of deity. Thus Hashim turns into a religious hypocrite from

a secular person. Suddenly Hashim turns into a controlling and arrogant rich man from a wonderful and kind person.

Hashim's son Atta knowing the truth about the hair steals it from his father and tries to return it to the mosque, but fails. Atta's sister seeing that her dad keeps the hair with him all the time decides the sacred relic has to be stolen. She hires a thief to do this job hoping that they will be relieved from the curse once the hair is removed and returned. The thief steals the hair but things escalate drastically and Hashim kills his own daughter accidentally and the thief runs away with the hair. The thief is hunted down and shot by the police and the hair is safely returned. But, the thief's four crippled sons and his blind wife have been miraculously cured due to their short contact with the relic.

ANALYSIS

PLOT

Plot is “ a plan or scheme to accomplish a purpose. In literature, this is the arrangement of events to achieve an intended effect consisting of a series of carefully devised and interrelated actions that progress through a struggle of opposing forces, called conflict, to a climax and a denouement. This is different from story or story line which is the order of events as they occur.” (Plot, 2000) The plot strategy employed in this story is somewhat similar to that of William Faulkner's, “ A rose for Emily.” Yet the events do not keep moving back and forth like it happens in “ A rose for Emily”.

Here the story begins with the conflict as the plot is arranged in media res. The conflict is presented so well with descriptions plotting the minute of details so that the scene becomes live with magnified effects. Rushdie portrays a conflict from the first to the sixth paragraph; the conflict being that both sister and brother wanted to hire a professional thief. The intensity of the conflict is reinforced when Huma returns to the same place to hire a thief even after her brother is robbed and almost beaten to death. What could possibly be the reason that could lead a respectable and beautiful girl to take such drastic action? With all these questions in the head the reader is taken into a journey where those questions will be answered.

The seventh paragraph employs the technique of flashback revealing incidents that lead Huma and Atta to this stage. Flashbacks are stories within a story and they tell about a characters memory of something that happened in the past. Thus within the flashback the exposition is put to play propitiously. The exposition is the part of a story that introduces the theme, setting, characters, and circumstances of the story. The flashback here acts as the exposition. The exposition creates a solid and reality like situation as the characters and settings have been exploited effectively. Within the exposition the details of the conflict is revealed and clearly explained. The protagonist Hashim faces an internal man versus himself conflict.

He is faced with an internal dilemma and he makes his choices and justifies it himself. For instance the following verse is clearly is an example of it, "... the Prophet would have disapproved mightily of this relic-worship. ... I see it purely as a secular object of great rarity and blinding beauty." Here we

understand the reasons behind the actions of Atta and Huma. Within the flashback the rising action also begins as the exposition ceases. The rising action is usually the events between the exposition and climax.

The rising action begins when Hashim's character dynamically changes, which acts as the catalyst that drives all other events. Along with beginning of the rising action the story gradually takes a transition from the past to present and the actions takes the reader into an even more suspense and thrilling journey. Huma hires the thief and also Atta is in a very critical situation fighting for his dear life. Hashim sleeps alone and the theft is cleanly planned and this setting arises as much question as possible and flings the reader suddenly into the climax of the story.

The climax is the highest point of interest and the turning point of the story. The reader is made to yearn to know what is going to happen next. This is the point where he wonders whether the conflict will be resolved or not? The intensity of the thrill and the suspense takes a peak when the thief takes the vial containing the hair and Atta lets out his last breath. Things take a sudden divert in the course of action and Hashim unknowingly kills his daughter and extinguishes his own life persecuted by remorse.

This is the climax of the story. The falling action is the unfolding of events in a story's plot and the release of tension leading toward the resolution and denouncement/resolution is the end of the story. The events and complications begin to resolve and the reader knows what has happened next and how the conflict is solved. Then as the falling action ceases it transitions into denouement; this is where the final outcome of the events or

the untangling of the event takes place and the story. The story here comes to a tragic end with the demise of the Hashim's family, his wife driven to insanity and the thief killed and the prophet's hair returned to its rightful place.

CHARACTERIZATION

The process in which the writer makes the characters in the story seems real to the reader. (Meyer, 2011) The main in the characters in this are Hashim, Atta, Huma and the thief. Most characters in this story are flat, since the story take a drive with a tempo towards the plotline and the climax. Below is a deep analysis of each character in the story. Hashim:

He is a flat dynamic character that experiences conflicting feelings concerning religion and greed. He is the protagonist of the story. Hashim is portrayed as a self-satisfied hypocrite not only in concerning the religious side of his character but also of his business. He justifies his cruel acts saying that this is a lesson that he teaches the less fortunate people, "to teach these people the value of money; let them only learn that, and they will be cured of this fever of borrowing all the time ..." (Rushdie, 1981)

We are also made aware about Hashim's pride in inculcating his proud and hypocrite ways to his children "the virtues of thrift, plain dealing and a healthy independence of spirit." (Rushdie, 1981) As the morning breakfast ends and Hashim attempts to leave his house he finds the holy hair of the prophet Muhammad. There is also a bit of foreshadowing here as Rushdie explains how Hashim sees the hair "...he feasted his eyes on his find."

(Rushdie, 1981) We understand that Hashim is highly interested in the relic although he thinks of returning it. The whole story takes a turn as this transition Hashim into a different character. This is where Rushdie shows us how Hashim uses religion to justify his greed and passion.

He says "... the Prophet would have disapproved mightily of this relic-worship. ... I see it purely as a secular object of great rarity and blinding beauty." (Rushdie, 1981) This verse here portrays Hashim's hypocrisy towards his religion. Hashim's character totally changes from- "...living honorably in the world." (Rushdie, 1981) – To a totally disastrous man. He becomes ironic to his old character and his vision. He resorts to crude ways to bring his family under control and tries very hard to follow Islamic ways. He faces a huge conflict which he finds hard to resolve. Moreover Hashim understands that usury is bad in Islam and when a debtor comes in asking for more time he "...attacked the fellow with one of his large collection of bull-whips." (Rushdie, 1981)

This action as we know was against his morals in the initial stage. We see Hashim devolving or evolving into a totally different and unpleasant character. Later in the story Hashim becomes paranoid and keeps the relic with him all the time. Further he discloses disastrous information about him having a mistress. Hashim is the only dynamic character in the story and his change has been portrayed well and interestingly as it is entangled with the plot line. Atta:

Atta is a flat and static character. He is the son of Hashim. Also he is one of the antagonists of the story. There is not much description about Atta. But as

the story proceeds and Atta tries to return the artifact we understand more about him through showing. Although Atta has his best interests in returning the artifact it does not have anything to do with religion but selfishness.

We understand this by what Atta feels as he finds out that he lost one of the most important relics of all time, "...Atta's initial surge of chagrin was quickly replaced by a feeling of profound feeling of relief." (Rushdie, 1981) He is contented that his family will be returned back to normal. We at one point at the beginning also perceive Atta as a brave young man with a desperate need. Atta's character does not change in the whole story because he maintains his loyalty towards his family at all times. Huma:

Huma is a round and static character. She is the daughter of Hashim and one of the antagonists of the story. Her character is blended with innocence, bravery, and smart as well as desperate. We are able to understand that she is brave and desperate because she came back to the same place where her brother was beaten and robbed. She is also portrayed as a smart person when she comes in search of a thief as she tells everyone in the vicinity " I should say that I am carrying no money, nor am I wearing any jewels;

My father has disowned me and will pay no ransom if I am kidnapped; and a letter has been lodged with the commissioner of police, my uncle to be open in the event of my not being safe at home by morning." (Rushdie, 1981)

Unlike her brother she was smart enough to keep the thieves at bay and get job done. She is a confident and a very beautiful young woman. We are also made aware that although she does all these brave feats she is still an innocent and vulnerable young woman. She flinches at the mere sound and

pats she receive when she is about to meet the thief. She is also loyal to her family and her brother and wants her family back. Sheik Sin:

Sheik Sin is a flat and static character. He character depicts evil, cruelty, and ignorance. Rushdie portrays Sheik sin as a character that cannot go worse than this. He is known as the “ The thief of thieves” (Rushdie, 1981) Sheik sin is old, yet he still hopes to have a luxury life.

He does not care how he acquires the money to reach his goal but he badly wants it, “...so in the extraordinary commission he had accepted from the moneylender’s daughter he saw his opportunity of amassing enough wealth at a stroke to leave the valley forever”(Rushdie, 1981) His parenting skills and his ignorance are portrayed through verbal irony as Rushdie tells us what he did to his sons out of love and care, “...he [Sin] had made sure they were all provided with a lifelong source of high income by crippling them at birth, so that, as they dragged themselves around the city, they earned excellent money in the begging business” (Rushdie, 1981)

Sheik Sin is neither religious nor honorable, all his cravings are for money and luxury, “ As for the prophet’s hair, well, neither he nor his blind wife had ever had much to say to the prophets...” (Rushdie, 1981) Sheik sin is sick and old and his cravings for money are so deep rooted that he is desperate enough to do this theft once and for all even though he knows the effects of stealing such an object. He is also a selfish and vile character who would not hesitate even to murder, “...was just deciding whether to dive beneath the bed or brain the moneylender good and proper...” (Rushdie, 1981) He is also

an antagonist of the story. These are the four main characters that play an important role in the story.

All of the primary characters including the secondary characters (Hashim's wife, the flower vendor who finds Atta, Sheik Sin's Wife and Children) in this story can be categorized into two groups; those whose god is money and those whose god is an actual deity that is Prophet Muhammad in this case. The thieves who beat Atta and robbed him of his money in the first paragraph are inarguably motivated by money; same applies to the flower vendor who finds him, " The flower-vendor moored his craft and by stooping over the mouth of the injured man was able to learn the poor fellow's address...whereupon, hoping for a large tip, the hawker rowed Atta home" (Rushdie, 1981)

The main person that portrays greed and money is Sheik Sin, whom Huma hires in the hope to rid her home of the curse. We understand this as he agrees to the job under the condition that Huma provides him with a lot of money, "...so in the extraordinary commission he had accepted from the moneylender's daughter he saw his opportunity of amassing enough wealth at a stroke to leave the valley forever" (Rushdie, 1981) Moreover Hashim himself is under the spell of money until he comes across the relic where upon his allegiance changes towards religion. This triggers the main conflict which begins the rising action.

Even his family is under the spell of money as he and his wife instilled all of their values into their children as well. The only characters in this story that can be portrayed as a religious are the sons of Sheik Sin and his wife. We are

enlightened of this fact at the end of the story, where we find them being rewarded for the piety. Of course Hashim himself turns out to be the most important religious character upon his contact with the relic. He accepts Islam as his religion and attempts to right all his wrongs.

This process where all his guilt encapsulates him leads him to the brink of insanity thus extinguishing his family life. Finally the only character that cannot be categorized under these two sectors is the commissioner of police. Rushdie uses him to portray a justice figure. He uses this character to elicit that there are bigger forces than money. He also seems to be a personification of the government in the story. What's in a name?

The Name Hashim has an Arabic meaning when translated means the “destroyer of evil”, this gives us an idea as to how it has been interwoven with his dynamic character and his newly found love for Islam. Huma on the other end means “spirit” which represents innocence and purity.

This is also true according to the story. Atta has a totally different meaning; it means “Egoistic”, which is at first sight true. He tries to return the hair not out of devotion but to get rid of the blunder and the curse the hair has brought. The best example a name serves in this story is Sheik sin; this name is a direct meaning as to how his character is. “Sin” is generally connected to evil and vile actions. Thus Sheik Sin here is used to depict the bad side of human beings. Rushdie has used the names in this story appropriately to bring out a strong sense of connection and reality.

SETTING

The story takes place in the early 1980's during winter season in a rural area called Srinagar in India. Srinagar is a Kashmir valley. This story also depicts a setting that can be assumed as the beginning of the 20th century where religion and government structures were reaching its heights. The story begins in a glum winter evening as Atta reaches Srinagar from Shalimar. We understand this by the immediate transition of Atta being beaten and the description of the time, " Night fell". (Rushdie, 1981) The story is surrounds only two places: One a beautiful city Shalimar, which depicts happiness and brightness; two a glum and dark village Srinagar, which depicts darkness, sadness, fear and sins.

It is highly interesting as the story transitions back and forth from these places. The setting is set in both places so well that when we switch back and forth so does our sense of excitement. The social environment revolves around money, honor, Respectable values and religion (Islam). Every character is concerned about his place in society and his greed for money. This story is set in two places in India. Certain characters hope to get rid of their position in their own society as a means of escapism.

The setting is ideally placed because Hashim as a wealthy person has a lot of wealth yet that becomes his guilt. Sheik Sin the thief is already in a bad place and wants a window out from his wretched life and sees money as a gateway for it. Yet, it consumes him and he still falls into darkness. The setting evolves entangled with money, greed, piety, religion and community in a wonderful framework that elicits a wonderful sense of display.

POINT OF VIEW

The Prophet's Hair by Salman Rushdie is written in third person Omniscient point of view. The writer as he describes the setting propitiously moves from character to character narrating the story. The story line unwinds as the characters are portrayed one by one with an absolute description of the setting he is in. We are able to understand the characters thoughts and ideas as the story progresses and all these are directly from each character.

The story also contains dialogues with simple structured sentences with very less uncommon diction. As the writer switches between characters the reader feels the change in pace, tempo and also the feelings of the character in context. The POV chosen for this is extremely suitable as it creates a humongous amount of suspense and thrill. Also it gives a huge amount of insight as to how each character feels and thinks in response to an action or situation.

SYMBOLISM

The Prophet's Hair by Salman Rushdie is a short story that is permeated with metaphors and symbolisms. This story shows a lot of symbolism through the hair of the prophet. In this story symbolism is elicited through the hair as a religious artifact, a secular object, a human heart and as a reverence. The hair symbolizes religious relic as its sacred imagery is brought out perfectly. It was restored to the Hazratbal mosque. However the loss of the hair has brought changes in the families and its ramifications handled. The symbolism of the hair can be viewed as a secular object as it is relocated to its shrine. Although the Hair is a relic, Hashim changes the meaning into an object of higher value. Even though Hashim changes the meaning of the relic

according to his motives the hair still has its powers. Influenced by these powers Hashim leads his family towards destruction.

The hair can be viewed as a Human heart, as we perceive Hashim spitting out his awful truths and secrets to his family. This hair makes him confess how he feels about his family, wife and children. Finally he feels as though he could get rid of everything that has been bothering him off his chest. The hair can be seen as an object of reverence. It symbolizes the prophet and the religion. Every year the hair is on display for all the Muslims to visit and see. People all over the world come and wrap their hands and kiss it.

But ironically this is not how someone should respect a prophet, at least not by just kissing body parts. The proper way of showing love and respect towards the prophet is to follow his ways and follow the religion he preached. Also each character symbolizes certain aspects of life. For instance Sheik Sin is made to symbolize greed and vile actions, also it can be concluded that he symbolizes ignorance. Hashim symbolizes selfishness and hypocrisy. Same way certain other characters depict loyalty and religiousness, Sheik Sin's sons and wife for instance. The Commissioner of police depicts law, justice and government.

THEME

The main theme around which the story is woven is how money and religion affects people. Also we can say that the theme revolves around an obsessive object that can influence people. The main theme deals with money and religion where both are satirized. The writer uses the characters and the Hair

to effectively elicit this theme. While most of the characters depict money and hypocrisy the hair symbolizes religion and faith.

We are made to understand that people who weave their lives only around money and use religion to tie their own ends will eventually meet a dead end. The theme of this story instills in explaining the corrupting nature of money and fundamentalist religion. Money and religion are perhaps the two most significant motivations that drive a human being, may be this story tries to comment in the nature of humanity's need for these motivations and its ramifications.

STYLE

Salman Rushdie has perfected a unique style of writing that can be seen in any of his literary works. Rushdie's distinctive style of writing can be seen from his diction and sentence structure. He uses a combination of words native to India to bring a sense of belongingness and authenticity. Even though the story is written in a slightly elevated form of language and diction it can still be easily understood by a layman. Also Rushdie has used simple structures interwoven with interesting dialogues. The use of these dialogues and diction that depict a cultural and geographical background makes the setting more interesting and appealing.

TONE

Rushdie uses a tone that as a whole brings out a mock against the people who use religion to their own selfish ends and those who live motivated by money. There is also satire in the use of words and names.

IRONY

This story holds a lot of ironies. Also of ironies such as situational and verbal are used. Whatever Hashim says and does is totally different. He likes to say that he sets great store by living honorably in the world yet he lives by moneylending which is a habit despised by the prophet. Secondly, although he desires the relic more than anything he verbally justifies it saying that he desires the silver vial more than the hair. Most importantly Sheik Sin tries to use Huma's contract as a means to escape from his wretched life but falls into the pit of darkness because of it. Here situational irony takes play. Ironies are filled in all walks of this story and they hold deeper and intellectual meaning.

POST-COLONIAL PERSPECTIVE

The usage of Indian diction and the setting of the story itself portrays post-colonialism. Similar to many third world stories this story also brings out cultural and social norms and views. Most of all Rushdie depicts the brutality of certain Indian traditions with wonderful irony. This is shown as Sheik Sin crippled all his sons so that they would have a lifelong income and would earn excellent money in the begging business.

CRITIQUE

The Prophet's Hair by Salman Rushdie was a fantastic short story to read and re read. This story contains mystery, magic, and more significantly, morality as an overt theme that is carried throughout the story. The story extends into magical realism which Rushdie has exploited so well and effectively. The

form of the story is such that the tone is crisp, swift and pointed. It moves with a slightly paced tempo and is filled with rising actions and suspense. The opening paragraph captures the reader's eye and raises a lot of questions that compel the reader into finishing the story. Also this story was quite interesting as it revolved around the two most significant motivation of man: Money and religion.

As I read this story I learned certain lessons as to how one should not use religion to his own selfish ends and also to live by a middle path. This story acts as a fable. Most of all the veiled satire that Rushdie employs to bring out his view interested me, yet the outcome was a bit unexpected. Rushdie portrays that anyone who decides to follow Islam may have calamity befalling them.

He does this by showing what happens to Hashim and his family as Hashim decided to become pious and righteous. But when I viewed it from a broader perspective where I saw Islam as a tool to depict all religion I understood the story in a totally different way. I understood that the author satirically attacks fundamental devotedness, but not just of Islam, fundamentalism and hypocrisy generally speaking. Because of his quite oriental style of writing the story is a rather difficult to grasp immediately. It requires the reader to pay close attention and read more carefully.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, through a thorough analysis of this story from a post-colonial perspective I have understood how the author uses significant tools to bring

out a deeper meaning. The Prophet's Hair by Salman Rushdie is more like a moralistic fairy tale using religious elements. Through the analysis of the characters I have been able to grasp how these characters can be more than what they surface out to be. Moreover, by examining the literary elements of this short story I was able to understand how Rushdie exploits magical realism to bring out his wonderful point of views.

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