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Symbolism in “Sparrows” by Khwaja Ahmad Abbas

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Abstract:

Writers use different literary devices to add a layer of meanings to their writing and one such device is the use of ‘symbols’. The symbol can be an object, person, event, setting, situation or action that has a deeper meaning in context. This technique enhances writing and gives insight to the reader. K.A.Abbas is an eminent writer, who has skillfully used symbols in his short story ‘Sparrows’ and by unraveling those symbols we can connect their meaning to the story and understand it on a deeper level. Major symbols in ‘Sparrows’ are sunset, hut, sparrows and cobwebs.

Khwaja Ahmad Abbas (1914-1987), an eminent novelist, journalist and short-story writer, whose stories genuinely reflect the feelings of people. *Sparrows* is a beautiful and touching story of Rahim Khan, an ordinary man, who is being loathed and pitied simultaneously. It is the story in which apparent meaning of characters, events and setting is used to symbolize a deeper meaning. Virtually anything in the story can be taken as symbol but there are few major symbols that need mention. Abbas used symbolism throughout the work which is nicely blended with the theme.

“The sun was setting behind the mango grove which fringed the western extremity of the village when Rahim Khan returned from the fields” (28). The very beginning forecasts the upcoming doom. The ‘sunset’ symbolizes grim and death, just as sunrise symbolizes hope and life. We find Rahim Khan returning from field in the evening with plough on his shoulders. Here ‘plough’ symbolizes the burden of his unfulfilled dreams and hatred of people that he carried all through his life. During his boyhood, Rahim Khan wanted to marry Radha and to join circus. ‘Circus’ symbolize happiness and life. Both his wishes were being suppressed by his parents, who justified that Radha was a Hindu girl and circus was too lowly for them. While Rahim Khan was walking towards home “haughty and unfriendly air” was flowing which symbolize the unfriendly nature of the village peasants who never tried to understand the rude behavior of Rahim Khan and rather became critical in judging his character (28). One villager Kallu said, “There goes the hard hearted devil” to which Zalildar added that Rahim Khan almost killed his mare for straying into his field, although he did not mention that it was a deliberate act of his sons (28). These villagers symbolize the daily obstacles and hurdles which come in ones way.

Meanwhile Rahim Khan reaches his hut that “stood gaunt and aloof, at a distance from the neighboring cluster of homes” (29). Here ‘hut’ is symbolical of his alienation from the society and also his loneliness as we see that villagers gather in *chaupal* to gossip and to smoke but he never joins them. Before entering the hut, he met an old woman who told him that his wife has gone to her brother but he knew that she would never return. Rahim Khan entered the ‘dark hut’ which symbolize grave (later he is found dead in there) or a deserted place, first his two sons left him after he severely beat them and then his wife, here his ‘wife’ symbolize the only streak of light he had left in his life and after whose departure, hut was dark and deserted. His wife also represented the patriarchal society and domestic violence, and a “necessary piece of furniture” under full authority of her husband (31). On the day of Nikah, Rahim Khan “mechanically nodded” (33). Here the use of word ‘mechanically’ symbolize that he was devoid of any feelings, his shattered dreams killed the cheerful boy inside him and crushed his soul. On the first day of marriage, his wife waited for him “as a sheep awaits the butcher” (34). ‘Sheep’ is the symbol of oppression and women who suffered domestic violence. During thirty years of his marriage his wife became the tool upon whom he could venture his frustrations against his parents and society. Her escape symbolize the freedom just as in *A Doll’s House* (1879), Nora decides to leave her husband, to be free.

Rahim Khan slept all alone in the hut and next day woke up late, cursed his wife as if she was responsible for his being late. He decided to clean up the hut rather going to fields. This time the hut was different, it was “warm and alight with the rays of the sun streaming in through the open window” (35). This scene symbolizes the beginning of a new life for him and ‘open window’ symbolize that he welcomed that new life with open arms. A life, which would convert this mechanical robot into human, all over again. He started with cleaning up the cobwebs. ‘Cobwebs’ symbolize all the bitter memories he had of his past that veiled his heart and the hatred that blinded him to recognize true love and happiness in small things of life. While cleaning he saw a nest of sparrows and two parent sparrows trying to protect baby sparrows from him. When he tried to peek in, mother sparrow attacked him. ‘Sparrow’ is one the major symbols of the story as it is also the title. Different acts of sparrows symbolize different things. The way it protects its nest

symbolize that being in family one is confined to many responsibilities, in which the most important is to protect one another, which Rahim Khan failed to accomplish. In Feng Shui, birds symbolize good luck, as it happened for Rahim Khan, for whom they brought hope and filled his last days with contentment. He sacrificed himself for the sake of sparrows and died as a savior while repairing leak roof just over the nest during heavy rainfall, creating an example of true human being. They were his only companions when he died. Sparrows taught him the lesson of love and care which everyone else including his family could not.

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