Blurring Linguistic Boundaries: An Analysis of Binary Opposition through Oxymoronic Relations in Selected Essays of Shoaib Bin Hassan

Abstract

Poststructuralism believes in the unfixed nature of meanings in language, endorsing that language contains the concept of opposition and contestation of meanings. This perspective lays the foundation of this research as it aims to study and explore binary opposition in Shoaib Bin Hassan's selected essays. The objective is to study oxymoronic relations between terms, pairs, and meanings to highlight the poststructuralist viewpoint of the amalgamation of binaries. Since meanings are subject to change, boundaries between binaries are blurred and the demarcations are removed. This research traces various patterns of opposite expressions which can be used synonymously in poststructuralist texts, and explores how they are experimented in Pakistani literature with a flavor of local idiom. Literary lacunas, which mark the absence of the study of binary opposition as a poststructuralist idea in postcolonial Anglophone literature, are filled by this research. The theoretical concepts of poststructuralist critics such as Derrida, Catherine Belsey and Andrew Benjamin are used as the framework for this research. In the light of their ideas, this research paper reveals how boundaries can be merged in postmodern literature through the fusion of opposite linguistic signs. This exploration will invite further research on Pakistani Anglophone Literature through specific lens of poststructuralist theory. Unearthing the creative merger of binaries, especially in Pakistani literary essays as a less worked upon genre, marks the significance and scope of this research.

Keywords: Language, binaries, oxymoronic relations, opposition, meanings

Introduction

The history of Pakistani Anglophone literature dates back to the time of the partition of the Subcontinent. Since then, various genres and themes have been explored by Pakistani writers writing in English. One genre that is relatively less explored among these is the genre of essay. When it comes to literary nonfiction, only a few names emerge in the history of Pakistani Anglophone literature. One such name is Shoaib Bin Hassan who has introduced a new flavor to literary journalism or nonfiction. Hassan is a postmodern Pakistani Anglophone writer who is known for his distinguished writing style. His essays, taken from an anthology published posthumously titled *Aesthetics of Incompleteness*, are an emblem of his linguistic innovation. His style contains an unconventional use of language, amalgamation of binary opposites, and highly ironic linguistic expression.

The views of critics who have analyzed Hassan's work also attest this perspective. The witty nature of his essays, along with their vast historical, political and literary references, is highlighted by the author's daughter Amina Hassan who is a Pakistani civil servant. She writes in the preface to *Aesthetics of Incompleteness*:

> What I found spread before me now, was a sprawling expansive panorama of a profound, eclectic, subtle and unyieldingly witty text, enlivened by an all pervading, exhilarating humor, and encompassing the accumulated intellectual heritage of mankind, the known and unknown facets of history, receding cultures and advancing civilizations, and the entire gamut and every shade of existence, real and surreal, lofty, shady and shadowy. (A. Hassan i)

Such "real and surreal, lofty and shadowy" (A. Hassan i) aspects not only thematically permeate his essays but are also linguistically complemented by his expression and selection of words.

Highlighting the unusual combination of intellectual thought and remarkable expression, Amina Hassan highlights various literary techniques used by Hassan which add crisp to his writings. "His observations and ideas", she states in the Introduction, "… are often pleasing 'feasts of association', juxtaposing familiar words and phrases in unfamiliar and fresh, subtle and startling ways, combining both 'strength of thought' and 'happiness of language'" (A. Hassan v). Her observation shows that Hassan's prose is composed of ordinary and familiar phrases used in an unusual manner and expression which set his style distinguished from his contemporaries.

This research traces oxymoronic relations between linguistic signs and signifieds in the primary text to study and understand the poststructuralist notion of the fusion of binaries. The larger framework for this analysis is poststructuralism; however, it particularly brings into discussion the theoretical viewpoints based on opposition and contestation. Through this, it highlights the space for linguistic innovation in Pakistani Anglophone essay which is permeated with Pakistani idiom, and the scope for literary journalism in Pakistani literature.

This research answers the following questions:

1. What role does the merger of binaries play in endorsing literary nonfiction in Pakistani Anglophone literature?

2. How does blurring of linguistic boundaries defy the Structuralist notion of a fixed center?

Literature Review

One of the most prominent aspects of the Poststructuralist philosophy is to challenge the demarcation between binaries in language. The idea suggests that opposition does not define the existence of an entity; rather it can exist as one with its binary, thus eliminating the difference between both. Several poststructuralist critics hold this perspective that in a pair of binaries, one term necessarily contains impressions of the other term. A similar viewpoint is given by the British literary critic Catherine Belsey. "If meaning", states Belsey, "depends on difference, the meaning of the self-same always bears a trace of the differentiating other. In other words, the signifier necessarily alludes to the terms from which it differs" (49). This highlights that a term can contain both binaries in it by referring to what it is not, implying that both opposite meanings are present in a single term. This notion can be applied to Hassan's work because under what is said humorously, another thing is being said, often opposite in meaning and in a tongue-in-cheek manner.

The structuralist idea of a staunch distinction between opposites is also challenged by the French philosopher Jacques Derrida. Derrida's philosophy rejects binary opposition labeling it as the foundation of hierarchical structures. In the words of a contemporary critic, Derrida's ideas can be explained as supporting the stance that "the interpretations and the hermeneutics based on binary oppositions were called into question [in deconstruction], since there was, as Derrida believed, no true opposition between a pair of conceptions" (Shafieyan 195). Deconstruction believes in the arbitrary relationship of the binaries as one concept can contain both opposites in an oxymoronic fashion.

The opposition in a single term suggests a continuous refusal of meanings where meanings are at contest with each other. This idea has been propounded by a contemporary Australian philosopher Andrew Benjamin in his essay on deconstruction. Benjamin thinks of deconstruction as "the continual refusal, though it is a refusal that also deploys the opposition between the public and the private, a deployment complicated in this 'letter' by the public having been linked to a signature rather than to an actualized public presence, means that the status of what is said is opened up" (86). This refusal is grounded in the opposition between public and the private, suggesting that the familiar meaning is juxtaposed to the unfamiliar or figurative meaning of the term and both oppose each other – a process through which the term is deconstructed and analyzed. Therefore, introducing unfamiliar connotations of a signifier, the expression gives way to accommodate both binaries together and to let them exist in coherence often interchangeably.

Benjamin further reflects on the constant conflict between meanings, and highlights that a continuous process of affirmation and negation takes place between them. "That there is no way", he describes, "out of this situation defines the interplay between what has already been identified as 'contestation' and the affirmative" (85). Both processes can also be analyzed with regard to binary opposites because, as mentioned above, a term carries both meanings in it; thereby affirmation and negation takes place alternately. Moreover, another implication of contestation is suggested by him whereby the nature or placement of words decides the affirmation or negation of their meanings. He writes: "The letters, due to the simple fact of their presence, make a demand. The nature of that presence, however, makes a further demand. Taken together these two demands can be interpreted as 'contesting'" (87). Therefore, the nature of presence or the placement affects the meaning of the given term and a contestation between

signifieds occurs because of the difference in their presence or place. The identical phenomenon can be found in Hassan's prose writings where the placement of words is of crucial importance. These perspectives are further explored in the textual analysis.

Research Methodology

This paper is a subjective and content-based deconstructionist analysis of Hassan's essays. It is based on the idea of binary opposition; thereby it traces pairs of opposites from the primary text and unearths terms which encompass two binary signifiers, and discusses how boundaries and demarcations are blurred in poststructuralist texts. It studies oxymoronic relations between words or expressions, and examines public and private meanings. The methodology used for analysis is the deconstructionist analysis of language in general, and linguistic signs, techniques, style in particular to understand the binary relation and defy the meta concept of fixed opposition in language. Derrida, Belsey and Benjamin are the critics through the philosophical ideas of which binary opposition has been explored.

The primary limitation that this research encountered is that much criticism is not available on local and South Asian literature; books, articles, journals and research based on Pakistani fiction, non-fiction, and criticism are less, and not readily and easily available which hurdles the hermeneutic activity. However, this research adds to the repertoire of formal criticism on Pakistani literature.

Analysis

Since structuralism states that words allude or refer to their opposites as their individuality is marked by their difference from the opposite, post-structuralism defies this narrative by suggesting that both opposites can be present in one word, and language possesses the capacity

of suggesting an amalgamation of binary opposites. One word, while being different from its opposite, still contains the traces of it by being different from it. Catherine Belsey writes in this regard: "If meaning depends on difference, the meaning of the self-same always bears a trace of the differentiating other. In other words, the signifier necessarily alludes to the terms from which it differs" (49). Hassan's essays display various examples and aspects of such binary opposition which disregards the structuralist idea of a stark distinction between two binaries. Such opposition does not only exist in terms of language but also in the stylistic and thematic structure of his writings.

The twelfth essay of the anthology bears the title "To Hiroshima with Love" (43). The phrase itself is oxymoronic as it contains two opposing concepts: Hiroshima is often associated with death, destruction, massacre and damage, whereas 'love' suggests connection, empathy, tenderness, warmth or intimacy – all the meanings stand opposite to that of the first term. The relationship established between both terms by connecting them in this title suggestions an amalgamation of both opposite meanings in these terms: Hiroshima, by being associated with the term 'love' suggests the signified of love; and love, when connected to Hiroshima, offers an element of sinister and cynicism to bring forth sarcasm. As this complete essay highlights various hidden details regarding the destruction of Hiroshima in World War II while employing dark humor to adopt an ironic tone, the essay thematically contains binary opposites throughout. Considering this title, it can be declared that in this case, each "signifier necessarily alludes to the term from which it differs" (Belsey 49). However, this allusion does not mark a stark difference; rather it reveals a combination of both while transcending demarcations.

Binary opposition also contains a continuous refusal of each opposite as the signifieds in such conditions are at contest with each other. The refusal of one signified leads to the presence

of another which clashed with the previous one because both stand as the opposites since Benjamin considers deconstruction as: "the continual refusal, though it is a refusal that also deploys the opposition" (86). Analyzed from this stance, Hassan's following expression offers an oxymoronic flavor to it where the term 'freedom' has been altered to make it a pun in "Technology's sinister concept of free doom/ freedom" (43). Associated with the concept of technology, the term 'freedom' brings forth double meaning. On the one hand, technology offers freedom from the toil of manual work, long distance travelling and communication, and petty household chores; while on the other hand it brings with it doom and destruction for mankind in the form of weapons of mass destruction, ammunition, and machinery causing environmental deterioration which, although, designed for human safety, complementarily brings devastation with it. Adding an 'o' in 'freedom' as a signifier, the meaning becomes completely opposite to the prevalent one, as 'freedom' contains positive connotations which is rejected and refused by 'free doom'; thereby, a continuous refusal can be traced between the two binaries. It also goes in accordance with Benjamin's idea of the "opposition between public and private" (86) as both are present in the pun created on the word 'freedom'.

Similar is the case with the following expression: "Fuss and Fun go Together" (Hassan 54). With this title, the essay throws light on various political tussles and relations based on them between different European and Asian states as well as the USA, while also hinting at the endeavors of developing states to prosper, such as Japan and Norway. The title, in general, suggests how adventure and excitement have an element of risk or menace which complementarily generates the thrill. This phenomenon has been applied, by the author, to the political quests of many countries since such political tensions contain both turmoil and excitement because they are responsible for setting new chapters in history; thus, giving the

whole idea a humorous flavor. The alliterative nature of 'fuss' and 'fun', with the identical syllables f and u in both, not only thematically draws an analogy between them, but also linguistically highlight their similarity. Thus it can be said that the author deliberately chooses two linguistically seemingly similar words which have opposite meanings, and describes how both go hand in hand. Thereby, where there is fuss, there exists fun due to the excitement and vice versa. The boundaries of these binaries are blurred in this manner as deconstruction believes in "no true opposition between a pair of conceptions" (Shafieyan 195).

An identical example from the text is "Secular Sermons From History" (Hassan 61) which is the title of another chapter. This section discusses several moral or didactic lessons which history offers to mankind quoting the examples of Alexander and Tiresias, referring to the history of Thebes and Athens. The sermons are secular because they are not a segment of religious narratives yet they still qualify as sermons because they offer man a deep insight into history and civilization to learn from them. Analogous to 'fuss and fun', 'secular sermons' can be considered binaries as the adjective refers to a lack of spirituality whereas the noun is publicly known for a lecture based on religious enlightenment. However, by combining both, Hassan diminishes the distinction between them by using both in an unfamiliar manner. The similarity is not only created by their thematic context but also through their linguistic and phonetic placement using the alliterative and fricative sound of s and that of r in both. In this example, not only the opposition between a pair of opposites in deconstructed (Shafieyan 195) but also a refusal between their public and private meanings (Benjamin 86) is brought forth.

In a similar way, the title of the anthology: "Aesthetics of Incompleteness" (206), is itself oxymoronic in nature whereby two apparently incongruent concepts have been combined and the dichotomy between them has been removed. Incompleteness is generally taken as a flaw

referring to a lack of something whereas the term 'aesthetic' is used in a praiseworthy undertone being concerned with beauty or art as these are the "public" (Benjamin 86) signifieds of the two terms. Since most of the essays in this anthology satirically bring forth various personal and political follies of individuals and countries from history, the title illustrates the artistic quality of this sarcastic description. As Hassan uses a tongue-in-cheek style throughout, the incompleteness can also be associated with his expression where one thing is implicitly said, and the rest of it is left unsaid or incomplete for the reader to understand. In such a way, incompleteness becomes artistic rather than appearing to be a defect while having a "private" (Benjamin 86) meaning.

Hassan employs such phrases in his writings as combine binaries in an uncanny yet aesthetic manner. The undertones are often euphemistic; an instance of it is the following phrase: "Poor, extremely rich in wretchedness" (100). Writing an essay on D.H. Lawrence, Hassan depicts the pathetic financial condition of his family through this line. Herein the difference between poverty and richness is abolished. Since poor signifies an underprivileged or deprived state and rich is a signifier for abundance and a state of being well off, poverty being associated with an abundance of anything, though it is wretchedness, loses its usual meaning. Similarly, the term 'rich' also contains a quality of being poor because of the ample misery mentioned in the phrase; thus the two signifeds merge. Again, the opposition between two binaries is eliminated in this example by introducing an untraditional connotation.

With regard to the binary distinction between a pair, Benjamin writes: "That there is no way out of this situation defines the interplay between what has already been identified as 'contestation' and the affirmative" (85). The contestation in this context refers to the relationship of opposition between two terms, whereas they are also employed in such manner that their signified is affirmed by each other because the opposites are combined as one. This suggests that

both contestation and affirmation take place between the signifieds of the binaries. An example from the primary text which can be supported by this stance is: "All history is contemporary history. All great literature is contemporary … Even a blade of glass is a weapon or you are not well read in literature" (Hassan 65). The given statements contain two pairs of opposites thematically. The first pair is of the terms 'history' and 'contemporary' which stand opposite to each other as history is defined as a collection of past events, and contemporary time refers to the present or current time that a generation lives in. The second pair is of 'weapon' and 'blade of grass' because the former is powerful enough to cause destruction and death, whereas the latter immediately gives off the idea of fragility. The first pair signifies the importance of history in contemporary times as examples from the past always play a significant role in the present. Analogously, the second pair reveals that signifiers, through their context, can imply a completely different connotation from what they appear to carry as a blade of grass can act as a weapon. Thereby, the contestation exists between the pairs due to the existing opposition between them on the basis of their individual meanings; however, the removal of this demarcation by giving them another signified generates affirmation between them. Another statement by the author that supports this stance is: "Man no longer lives in 'nature' but in history and civilization where narrow or extreme 'Twosim' cannot work. Between black and white as in other opposing pairs there are inexhaustible different shades, whosoever fails to take notice, stumbles" (19). The shades between opposing pairs contain the qualities of both which somehow shows that both are a part and parcel of each other, and extreme or strict opposition cannot exist in this case.

Opposition also occurs in the form of two opposite expressions which contain a binary relationship between them. In the following example, this relationship is created in one

expression through two opposite meanings that it generates: "The destruction of Hiroshima was clean, quick, one-go affair, capital intensive, entirely sinless – no looting, no plundering, no raping. Rounding it off with a prayer: 'O, Our Father in Heaven, Give us our daily bread and more Hiroshimas'" (Hassan 59). The massacre is called clean and quick because there was no looting or raping which usually take place in wars; however, the destruction and inhumanity exceeded far more in intensity as it was a nuclear attack. The lack of these crimes give the act the attribute of being 'sinless', yet the implied meaning is opposite to that because of the massive and historic destruction, which contrast with each other. In a similar way, the prayer includes the request for daily bread and more Hiroshimas – a pair in which two entities contrast as opposites because bread symbolizes sustenance whereas Hiroshima stands for destruction and death due to its history. Moreover, prayer itself appears to be a signifier of spirituality and sanctity whereas the desire of getting more Hiroshimas reveals a lust for power, an animalistic instinct, and a nefarious motive. Such binaries contest with each other in their implied meanings yet they go in accordance with the idea of no specific boundary between opposites as an affirmation takes place between them (Benjamin 85) based on their association with each other.

Another apt example of affirmation and contestation is the idea that in a pair of binaries, one term makes the reader think of the other one. In such a case, two expressions are presented which are opposites in one way or the other but are often associated with each other. "Think of doors," writes Hassan, "and almost automatically windows come swinging into your mind, like sun and moon, day and night, Romeo and Juliet, Heer and Ranjha … Laurel and Hardy … These pairs have two things in common. They are/were almost near or dear contemporaries, and linked together in such a way in human mind that one immediately recalls the other" (120). Herein the terms can be called binaries since one term is what it is due to the fact that it is not its opposite –

a discourse supported by structuralism. However, since one term carries the idea of its opposite in itself reveals that it is both itself and its opposite since it alludes to both. The example is that of doors which qualify so because they are not windows, yet they allude to windows, which is an idea that they contain in themselves. Similar is the case with the following example: "There was Heraclitus who said: the way up is the way down: the opposites meet and mate and are one … Life and death, creation and destruction are one and the same thing" (Hassan 437). The first statement in this quote can have multiple connotations: First, it suggests that climbing a path upwards necessarily leads one to a path down, just as in case of mountain climbing, the top further leads downwards on the other side. Secondly, it also denotes the idea that the higher one goes in terms of monetary and material pursuits, the lonelier one is in terms of socialization, therefore going upwards in one way brings one downwards in another manner. Third, it also signifies the mystical philosophy that the higher one goes in worldly pursuits, the lower he is in terms of spirituality because only when one sees beyond the material and bodily desires does one become able to cater to the soul. Fourth, it can be a metaphor for the journey of life where one goes up in terms of age but the countdown lessens the remaining years of his life. Likewise, life leads one to his death and death is the beginning of another life. Thereby, in all these connotations, the opposites are meeting as one and their boundaries are eliminated so that no explicit demarcation is left between them.

As mentioned above, Life and Death constitute a pair of binaries which is one of the most common examples to suggest opposition. However, the author often refers to them in a way different from the prevalent one as he states: "If there is a death in the neighborhood it pleases me with the fond hope, perhaps this death will make these people, for a day or two, think about life, their life" (121). The fact that death signifies life shows that it can prove to be a basis of

initiating introspection and causing an epiphany by being associated with afterlife which can

make humans reconsider the purpose of their life. Thus death carries an indication of life in it

which blurs the difference between them. In this way, there exists a continuous refusal of own

self which results in the affirmation of another signified (Benjamin 85).

In his writings, Hassan also highlights words which are used synonymously and suggest

opposite signifieds through them. One example of this technique is the following statement:

"Pregnant is abstract, pompous, serious and mysterious: big with baby is concrete, visible,

almost funny, not serious or mysterious, short, down to earth" (130). Though both expressions

are generally used to denote the same meaning, they carry opposite connotations according to the

author. Since 'pregnant' refers to a state of being filled or loaded with something, it is used in

broader context such as a pregnant pause; whereas 'big with baby' offers a graphic description of

the expression. Analyzed through this stance, the former term appears to be grave as it is a

mysterious and abstract state, whereas the latter phrase is comical and direct without any

generalization. It can, therefore, be contended that synonymous expression can contain binaries

as their signifieds. The distinction between such binaries, which exist in the form of signifieds of

these phrases, is removed by associating them with two synonyms working as their signifiers.

Thereby, in this case, the affirmation takes place between the signifiers but the refusal exists

between the signifieds.

Similar is the following example in which the signifieds are at contest with each other

and stand as binaries whereas the signifiers are identical in meaning which minimizes the

contradiction or opposition of signification. "For a gardener", writes Hassan, "Urdu has two

words – baghban (Persian) and mali (Hindi), one polysyllabic, and impressive, the other

monosyllabic and insignificant. Baghban has been completely appropriated by Urdu poetry as a

metaphor for all grand father-figures who care and look after others, while mali remains earth-bound, low and prosaic: nothing higher and poetic about it" (131). Due to its linguistic formation, the first term appears to be poetic and deep whereas the second, as a linguistic sign, appears to be casual and mundane. These two signifieds – grandeur and insignificance – are determined by the linguistic formation of the word which makes the terms exist as particular kind of signifiers though both are identical in meaning. However, by associating two binary concepts with identical terms, the opposition is reduced as the opposite qualities merge as one when one meaning is deduced from them.

Another instance where words which generate identical meanings yet contain opposite qualities in dissimilar contexts, can be taken from the dichotomy between the words 'dog' and 'doggy' which are apparently the same. The author describes: "Here a dog is a doggy, dismissive thing, untouchable and unclean. Out there in the Western world, a dog is a dog and more than a dog. Clean, faithful, respected and respectful, companion and companionable both in life as in cultural imagery" (90). Herein 'doggy' seems to be derogatory term which demeans or undermines the character of the animal; whereas dog appears to be an honoring and gratifying word. Discussed above in the second part of this section, it has been mentioned that these differing concepts are established with respect to the difference between East and West because in a local environment, the animal is usually associated with filth and garbage, but in Western culture, it is considered to be a loyal pet. Thereby this signifier generates binaries but again, the difference between them is minimized because they belong to the same category, that is, the characteristics of one entity. Therefore, if an entity can be associated with both cleanliness and filth, respect and derogation, it disregards the opposition between the binaries, and it can be suggested that no true opposition exists between them.

Binary opposition in deconstruction is disregarded on the basis of the fact that they generate unnecessary hierarchies between a pair; thereby, it is argued by critics like Derrida and Benjamin, as discussed above, that real opposition does not exist between words, and the differences between them are just various shades of meanings. The examples from the primary text support this idea, and the opposition between public and private meanings has been diminished by using one signifier for them which encompasses both binaries. In the manner discussed above, Hassan, through his work, deconstructs the meta-narrative of binary opposition given by structuralist philosophy.

Conclusion

This paper focuses the philosophy of binary opposition and especially deals with its employment in Pakistani literature bearing a flavor of the local idiom. It is primarily based on the oxymoronic relations between signifiers or signifier and signified. Since deconstruction disregards the idea of true opposition between a pair, this paper proves, through several examples from the primary text, how two opposites exist as same shades of one entity, and can be present in one signifier as signifieds. It reveals the capacity of language to encompass binaries within the frame of one word, and this idea has not only been proved linguistically but also stylistically and thematically which suggests a variety of meanings as well. This opposition has been proved, first, through the idea of refusal whereby a relationship of denial exists between two signifieds, and both exist simultaneously; secondly, through contestation and affirmation existing between opposite signifieds; and third, through the idea of public and private meanings. Thereby, this paper highlights a lack of real opposition between a pair. On a larger level, the research suggests that binary opposition, as a primary aspect of poststructuralist theory, plays a vital role in establishing a connection between Pakistani nonfiction and Poststructuralism. It discovers that the creative

technique of the employment of binaries through the use of Pakistani idiom marks the quintessential defiance of structuralist metanarratives in local Anglophone literature.

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