

Ambiguity in “Scorpion, Cave, Pattern”

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ENVER SAJJAD, a contemporary Urdu short story writer, uses a post-realistic, minimalistic narrative structure in his short story “Scorpion, Cave, Pattern”³¹ that is highly visual, as is fitting for someone who has also written for the screen. Sajjad’s dramatic style creates a story that is both gripping and elusive. However memorable, though, the story relies too strongly on the narrative to carry the meaning of the work. The highly compressed style of writing creates images that are very powerful, yet the story leaves a reader with a curious dissatisfaction, for the lack of real characters or motivations for their actions make meaning attribution difficult.

“Scorpion, Cave, Pattern” relies heavily on the engagement of the reader, for the meaning of the story is never clear, and only hinted at. Whether the reader is to envision the characters—the scorpions—as representative on a symbolic level, or to consider them as representations of human life, is left open, as the characterization is not developed sufficiently to allow such a determination. The “super-realistic” portrayals of the scorpions in this story are intensely focused presentations of tangible and microscopically detailed visual portraits of their world and their actions in it. But beyond a certain intoxicating quality to the onrush of exhaustively and minutely presented visual images, there is not enough substance in the story to create a lasting work of art.

The disembodied “camera-eye” narration presents its own difficulties in interpretation. There is no persona narrating the story: “If the gaze is lowered” (p. 181) and the “union of vision, on which the present eye’s curtain has fallen” (p. 182) comprise the narrator. No narrator means no point of view, no perspective from which an interpretation can be confidently attempted. All the reader sees is what is presented to the narrating eye (although this may be an oxymoron). But this unity of vision is not

³¹In Muhammad Umar Memon, ed. *The Tale of the Old Fisherman* (Washington, D.C.: Three Continents Press, 1991), pp. 181–5. Hereafter page numbers to this item appear in the body of the text.

sustained consistently, for the narrating eye contains within its vision the inner emotional states of the scorpions, as in “The female is not bored by all this activity...” (p. 183); the omniscient eye also gazes upon the male, who “feels intoxicated” (*ibid.*). The female starts out with “no special purpose” (p. 184). The scorpion’s body in the glass jar is “a target for the sun’s rays,” suggesting volition on the part of the sun, aiming rays at the scorpion (p. 185). The narrating eye purports to give the reader only surface, visual presentations of the objects of its apprehension, and yet slips into another mode of representation, reaching deeply into the interior psychology of its “characters.” Whether this inconsistency is purposeful or merely sloppy is impossible to determine within the parameters of the story itself.

Time distortions add another dimension of uncertainty to “Scorpion, Cave, Pattern.” The story progresses in a linear fashion, punctuated by inexplicable shifts in the narrative’s presentations of characters in action. For example, the female scorpion, having mated with and subsequently killed the male, rests. “The magic of this event of the darkness becomes an ocean wave in her stomach and raises its head, flings her whole being against the hard surface. Then from the central hole in her stomach five microscopic children emerge one by one” (p. 184). Fertilization is followed by immediate birth. This time compression may be purposeful, as there is a geometric, puzzle-like quality to the structure of the story.

The blocking of the story is episodic, and the episodes are seemingly interchangeable. If moved around into a different configuration, the blocks would still fit together, but produce a different pattern. The glass jar on the windowsill is seen in the opening of the story, and plays again prominently in the ending, framing the story between two concrete images that suggest and foreshadow the inevitability of the female scorpion’s death. The description of the female scorpion with her five children precedes the mating with the male, and returns to the narrative after she has given birth to five baby scorpions. There are not enough clues within the story to allow the reader to know if this is one female scorpion in two different, out-of-sequence episodes, or two separate female scorpions with no plot connection. Sajjad seems to be presenting the reader with episodic images without an intervening causality between actions—moving the blocks of the story around would create a different structure, and the meaning-outcome could or could not be the same. The meaning is elusive, evocative, ambiguous. One is tempted to stray into the parlor of traditional symbolic analysis, although there is a danger of over-interpretation in such a move.

Human endeavors provide the frame within which the story is situated, suggesting the possibility that the scorpions are allegorically symbolic of human life. All the episodes take place in a room within a human shelter replete with drain, window and blind, windowsill, a glass jar, a piece of white paper. Shadows of passing humans punctuate the sun shining through the window, and the sounds of the city provide the auditory backdrop against which the narrative is projected. The female scorpion, a creature with a deadly sting in her tail who is also a dutiful parent to her offspring, emerges from the oily, murky water of the primal swamp of the drain, a fetid pool of breeding insects. The dual images of the female, deadly but dutiful, are reflective of many stories from mythology which paint the female as the creator and the destroyer, symbolic of the attraction and danger men find in women.

The dichotomy is amplified in the mating dance of the scorpions: the male, intoxicated by his sexual drive and thus unable to avoid the encounter which could spell his doom, recklessly embraces her. Another male appears, the rival, who attempts to supplant the first male, but is defeated and retreats, leaving the victorious male to be pursued by the female. "Then the male begins to move backwards, it seems as though the female is pushing him" (p. 183). Here the female of the species, focused on mating, dances the dance of procreation and death celebrated in countless myths. Once the union is complete, the male attempts to flee, but is trapped by the teeth on her genital organs. The female, having accomplished her desired task, stings the hapless male to death and proceeds to eat his head, finally leaving him as meat for the advancing crowd of worms, the inevitable victors in the cycle of life and death. Cosmic retribution is then visited on the female, who is baked to death under the concentrated rays from the sun, the antithesis of her place of dwelling, the dark and oily waters of the drain. But this suggestive symbolic analysis does not seem to be very satisfying. If the story is to be taken as allegorical, and such a steamy interpretation is to be sustained, more needs to be done within the narrative to support such a garish symbolic flight of fantastic meaning attribution.

In a sense, "Scorpion, Cave, Pattern" presents an image that reflects the ambiguity of meaning that is so problematic in the story. The five microscopic scorpion children begin dancing and jumping on the piece of paper laying on the floor, and "one by one impress like a pattern on the piece of blank white paper the burden of the oily muddy color of the water on their bodies, feet, arms, claws, tails, and stingers, a pattern ..." (p. 185).

The random marks on the paper, if they were to be found by a human being, a meaning-making creature, are open to interpretation. The interpreter would be faced with a dilemma: is the pattern meaningful, and if so, what meaning should be attributed? The marks are on the page, a pattern exists, and no clues are available as to the proper way to interpret the pattern. The image is an objective correlative of the difficulties in interpreting Sajjad's story.

The images in "Scorpion, Cave, Pattern" are undeniably crisp, arresting, minutely crafted, and powerful. They provide a pattern that is dense and richly visual, and are presented in such a way that their onrushing flow compels attention. But the over-reliance on super-realistic and minimalist narrative structure creates serious problems in suggesting and carrying meaning. As Muhammad Umar Memon states in the introduction to the collection *The Tale of the Old Fisherman*, the "...fiction is distinguished by a multiplicity of incidents, but in the absence of flesh-and-blood characters, mere incident can scarcely engage the reader at a human level or sustain his or her interest in it" (p. 31). □