An Exploration of Symbolism and Artistry in Pakistani Film "Kamli"

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Abstract

A diversity is observed in the contemporary Pakistani cinema regarding emerging trends of representation in the art of storytelling. The surrealistic and symbolic approach of depiction is explored in the selected film *Kamli*, a masterpiece by Sarmad Sultan Khoosat. Previously, the storyline followed in the Pakistani cinema revolves around the formulaic plots and male dominance narratives, where female characters were given secondary roles and their presence signify the entertainment purposes. Whereas the subject matter of *Kamli* directs attention towards the complex, symbolic and psycho-analytical narrative, highlighting a shift in the art of storytelling in the contemporary cinema. A critical analysis of the film is carried out, concentrating on the symbolic subject matter, feminine narrative, describing the psychic conditions regarding complex norms, unfulfilled desires and social constraints through a surrealistic lens. The selected film is seen a female centric project, boldly challenging the traditional female representation in local film. The outcome of the research suggests that a surrealistic approach is selected to narrate a thought-provoking commentary on gender roles, desired love, and unfulfilled loss, playing a vital role in the evolution of Pakistani cinema. This paper underscores the film's impact in redefining female narratives and exploring deeper psychological and societal issues. The storyline strongly knocks on the mindset of the audience in accepting the transformation of female representation towards more artistic, symbolic and powerful characters and turning away from male-dominated stories.

Keywords: *Surrealistic approach, symbolic representation, female narrative, storytelling.*

Introduction

Sarmad Khoosat, a talented Pakistani film director and producer, after facing ban for its bold and diverse narrative in *Zindagi Tamash*, selected a symbolic and artistic expression for *Kamli*, concentrating on the surrealism, magical and dreamy realism. The storyline of the film is portrayed symbolically in an utopian land, highlighting the artistic style in the portrayal of female characters, their psychic behavior and unfulfilled desires. Previously, local cinema is known for its male-dominated narratives and conservative subject matters, neglecting the female representation and feminine subjects, usually presenting them as an object for entertainment purposes. In contrast, *Kamli* represents a shift in the selection of topic concentrating on the female hidden desires, emotions and thought process through a complex and symbolic storytelling in a surrealistic manner.

Symbolism in art is not a contemporary trend but present in art from prehistoric times, where mother goddesses were carved as a symbol of fertility. Whereas symbolism in modern art gained significance in the late 19th century as the artists revolted against the dominance of realistic approach, and diverted towards the symbolism to express the spiritual, imaginative, and dreamlike aspects of existence. To express the human emotions, deep feelings and inner thoughts, the artists concentrated on the use of symbols and metaphors for emotional expression.[1] Whereas Surrealism, based on the Sigmund Freud's theories on the subconscious, gained prominence in the early 20th century.[2] It aimed to convey irrational thoughts and subconscious feelings through techniques like automatic writing and drawing, challenging conventional perceptions of reality and logic. Surrealist art often features dreamlike and fantastical imagery, offering a new lens through which to understand human imagination and emotion.[3]

Various elements from the philosophies of Symbolism and Surrealism are incorporated in the film, using a rich visual and auditory palette to challenge traditional portrayals of women. Female

[1]Michael Gibson, *Symbolism: A Comprehensive Guide to the Movement* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1994), 34-38.
[2]David Hopkins, *Surrealism: Theory and Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 55-60.
[3]Dawn Ades, *Surrealism* (London: Tate Publishing, 2004), 72-76.

lead represents a character of filled with hidden emotions, unfulfilled desires and social constraints. With the blend of realism with surrealism, the story of the film revolves around the gender roles, love, and loss, with the use of symbolic imagery to explain the breadth of human imagination and suppressed emotions.

This research aims to explore the hidden symbols and surrealistic expression in the portrayal of human emotions and hidden desires. The focus is to interpret of the symbolic representations and relate this imagery with the unfulfilled desires from female lens in a conservative society. Methodology is based on qualitative research with the in-depth analysis of the cultural and social perspective, challenging conventional perceptions of reality and logic. For this purpose, various articles on Symbolism and Surrealism are consulted and various symbols are identified in the film used enhance the impact of storyline.

Storyline of the Film *Kamli*

Kamli is a Pakistani drama film directed by Sarmad Khoosat, co -produced by Kanwal Khoosat under the banner of Khoosat films. The film was released in 2022, a time when online platforms are providing thought-provoking content for the audience. The film is adapted from the storyline of a short film by Mehar Bano. Main lead characters include Saba Qamar, Sania Saeed, Nimra Bucha and Hamza Khawaja.[4] Powerful portrayal of the characters, especially by the lead actress, convey the character's complex emotions with authenticity and depth. The cinematography of the film represents rich visual aesthetics and is represented with a color palette enhancing emotional tone. The use of natural light and shadows creates a beautiful atmosphere. Traditional instruments and ambient sounds complement the setting and emotional landscape, enhancing the immersive experience.

The shooting of the film is done in Soan Valley, situated in the northwest of Khushab district. It is a valley of lakes and spring, providing views of lush green fields, dense mixed forest, mountains and wildlife.[5] The selected location of the film also helps in creating a dream like ambiance, highlighting the fantastic inner world of female lead character. Nature seems to be symbolic illustration of innermost sentiments and desires of female character. Perception and imagination,

[4]David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2016), 145.
[5] Visit soon valley- the first complete tourism website on soon valley, https://visistsoonvalley.com

both play a major role in the depiction of conceptual art.[6] This conceptual film revolves around the characters of three women and their story of restrained desires. *Kamli* unfolds the poignant tale of Hina (Saba Qamar), a woman whose life is shrouded in the mystery of her husband Saqlain's unexplained disappearance several years prior. Hina's existence is marked by a profound sense of waiting and unresolved longing, which is compounded by her strained relationship with her controlling sister-in-law, Sakina (Sania Saeed). The living space of the characters is shown as a territory confined with emotions and stifled desires, reflecting the internal struggles and societal constraints facing by the characters.

The introduction of the character of Zeenat (Sana Buccha), a struggling artist whose creative expressions are deeply intertwined with her personal turmoil, bring more depth to the plot. Her artistic work revolves around the subjects of identity, self-doubt, searching for the meaning of her own existence. Her meeting with another character named Hina brings turns and twists in the storyline, resulting in a series of surreal and transformative events.

The story of the film mainly revolves around Hina's enigmatic connection with another character named Amaltas (Hamza Khawaja), adding mystery to the storyline as his presence blurs the boundaries between reality and imagination. The name of male character Amaltas is the Urdu name of Cassia Fistula tree, signifying charm, beauty and the seductive nature of illusions. His imaginative character plays a vital role in the perceived fantasies of Hina, highlighting the dreamy and fantastic representation of narrative. Further, the surrealistic approach in the presentation of an utopian land and highly symbolic representation in the film exaggerates fantasy and distorts reality. Symbolic representations are derived from nature and plants, trees and leaves are used to portray the deeper psychological and existential themes, blurring the boundaries between reality and imagination. The intertwining of Surrealism and Symbolism turns the narrative into the psychological exploration of Hina's inner emotions, concentrating on the complexities of human emotion and desire, offering a unique and thought-provoking cinematic experience.

Symbolic Aspects of the Film

Symbolism is a universal characteristic to illustrate an emotive experience in art.[7] The film

[6]Anne Sheppard, *Aesthetics, An Introduction to the Philosophy of Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 22.
[7]Anne Sheppard, *Aesthetics, An Introduction to the Philosophy of Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 34.

explores many symbols to highlight the emotional behavior of the female characters. Furthermore, to enhance the intensity of suppressed desires and explain the inner fantasy world, these symbols are represented from a surrealistic lens.

The Representation of Women: Hina symbolizes beauty and tradition on surface, controlling her inner desires in-depth as her life marked by sadness and unfulfilled desires. Similarly, the character of Sakina with physical disability, blindness represents denial and control, reflecting her refusal to accept her brother's disappearance. Whereas Zeenat portrays a character of an artist battling insecurities and obsessions, mirroring her struggle with identity.

Amaltas and Harmala: Cassia Fistula the English name for *amaltas* tree represents overwhelming beauty and the consuming nature of illusions. It signifies how Hina's fantasies dominate her reality. Whereas Harmala plant with white wildflower (Peganum harmala) is known for its hallucinogenic properties.[8]These white flowers signify the beauty, emotions and fantasy by blurring the lines between reality and imagination.

Birds and Animals: the depiction of animals as symbolic representation is not new and is used by many artists in their work to express emotions, feelings and characteristics indirectly. In the film, rabbits and Peafowl are depicted to enhance the fantastic surreal atmosphere, symbolizing innocence and beauty amidst the darker elements. Peafowl signifies beauty and in east, this bird is considered the portent of rain, personification of ecstasy and royalty. As the natural opponent of the snake, it characterizes non-attachment and control over desire as well as a remedy to the serpent's poison or demonic vigor.[9] In the film, the bird signifies beauty and self-control in relation with the character of Hina, who appeared as a beautiful young woman while controlling her inner emotions. Whereas the death of the kitten signifies the unhealthy environment of Hina and Sakina's home.

Water: Flowing water is considered sacred in the East. In India, water is a source for purification as in Rigveda, water is described as a source who brings life, strength and cleansing both spiritually and physically. Water from rivers flows to sea and gathers there, this situation is

[8]N. S. Gill, *Symbolism of Plants in Myth and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 78-82.
[9]Sonia C. Tidemann and Andrew Gosler, *Ethno-Ornithology: birds, indigenous peoples, culture and society* (London: Earthscan, 2012), 145, 147.

associated with attaining nirvana in Buddhism.[10] The water in the film symbolizes transformation and the subconscious. Hina's fall into water marks her journey into a surreal realm, akin to "The Shape of Water."

One can observe the depiction of symbols and surrealist approach to blur the line between reality and imagination, reflecting how characters cope with unfulfilled desires and harsh realities. Central themes exploring unrequited love and the human need for connection. Hina's longing for her absent husband and her tragic love for Amaltas underscore these themes of love and loss. This film can be seen as the social commentary on the requirements of conservative society, where it is automatically expected from the women to follow the strict cultural and social norms. The film criticizes the rigid representation of gender roles and directs attention towards the resilience of women navigating societal constraints.

Conclusion

Kamli is a film discussing female narrative based on psychological issues and confined emotions and cinematography of the film drive the audience to the surrealistic land of symbols. The complicated content is combined with highly artistically conceived visuals and bold performances, significantly contributing to the evolution of Pakistani cinema. The significance of the film lies in challenging the conservative gender roles and patriarchal narratives as the story revolves around the complex female characters. The storyline challenges the stereotype representation of women in the previous cinema by highlighting emotional unfulfilled desires, exploration of psychological complexities and societal constraints. To address these sensitive topics and to avoid the possibility of banning the film, Sarmad selected the Surrealistic and Symbolic approach to the art of storytelling, providing a thought-provoking and liberating cinematic experience that underscores the complexity of human emotion and desire.

[10]Jean Chevalier and Alain Gherbryant, *The Penguin Dictionary of Symbols* (London: Penguin Books, 1996), 810, 1086.

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