

## **Textual Politics of Shabd: The Absent Presence of the Author'**

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Traditionally, the author had been referred to as the creator, a friend, philosopher and a guide to the readers. Perhaps at times, the author also assumed the role of a god, who controlled the activities, existence and the destiny of his/ her characters in the text. To name a few, Victorian novelist like Thomas Hardy, Jane Austen, George Elliot, Emily Bronte and dramatists like Shakespeare, Marlowe, John Webster and others harped on the theme of moral justice and Character is Destiny, where the wrong doers were punished at the end of the story and the good won over evil. This led to the spectators' sense of psychic satisfaction as order and calmness restored at the end of the text through a process of purgation or catharsis as termed by Aristotle in Greek and Elizabethan revenge tradition. This restoration of order and moral sense of justice was controlled and manipulated by the writer's temperament and the audience's general reaction. Therefore the meaning of the text thus emerged was influential and not natural by any means. This unlimited 'power of the authors' was put into question by the post-modernist and post- structuralist critics like Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault and Stanley Fish. They found the word 'author' problematic in a number of ways. The conventional role of the 'author' suffered a major setback in the hands of the contemporary critics. The god-like figure was transformed into a non-existent entity, whose participation in the text, created by him zeroed down to a mere 'writer' only, who had no role in framing the meaning of his creation. Thus, the narratorial voice, which earlier attributed the meaning of the text, because of his / her cultural background, has no role to play in the modern times. It is only the interaction between the text and the reader through which the meaning of the text evolves.

### **KEYWORDS**

Post-modernist; post-structuralist; construction; auteur; writer; narrator.

'A close textual analysis of the visual image'<sup>1</sup> is a continuum of this project. Movies like *Shabd* by Leena Yadav, *The Singing Detective* by Dennis Porter and *Rachna* by Mohan help us to encounter the issues posited by the traditional and the contemporary critics in a completely new manner. It opens up avenues in which we can judge the 'role of the author' and how they 'function' potentially in framing the meaning of the text. Stephen Heath justly observes in his work *Nouveau Roman*:

"... the institutionalization of 'literary criticism' (in faculties, journals, newspaper reviews, etc)... depends on and sustains the author (enshrined in syllabi and examinations, interviews and television portraits). The task of criticism has been precisely the construction of the author. It must read the author in texts grouped under his name. Style in this perspective is the result of the extraction of marks of individuality, and creation of the author and the area of his value."<sup>2</sup>

Therefore, this paper examines how the 'author' assumes the role of a 'god', an 'ideological figure' or fails in his attempt, to do so. The 2005 released film 'Shabd' may not have drawn audience to the theatres, but it provides ample scope to analyze the figure of the author as a historical construction.

The film revolves round the concept of fantasy and wish fulfillment of an arrogant author. The Sanjay Dutt, Zayed Khan and Aishwarya Rai starrer film earned good reviews, but bombed at the Box-office. The term 'Shabd' in Hindi means 'words'- words which are silent or thought, spoken or written. As the prime mover of the fabricated plot Shaukat aims to 'pen a new saga with the help of words.'

In this Pritish Nandy Communications produced Bollywood, thriller drama, words act as a significant motif which link and frame the entire plot. But it also has a tale to tell. It is a story dealing with the figure of the 'author' as a 'God like entity' who seeks to control lives through his pen. 'It is a story of an artist who becomes inappropriately obsessed with his craft and allows it to consume his life.'<sup>3</sup> In this context, Dudley Andrew rightly points out in his essay *The Unauthorized Auteur today* that -"The cinema in fact imagines a piece of writing that is simultaneously under construction. The author is present in the text as a cinematic effect."<sup>4</sup>

Shaukat Vashisth, (played by Sanjay Dutt) is a Booker Prize winner, who draws critical acclaim for his latest book for being too surreal. Antara Vashisth (played by Aishwarya Rai) is a loyal and a devoted wife. She supports Mr. Vashisth unconditionally in his joys and sorrows like any other Indian women.

Everything is fine between the husband and the wife until the 'writer' decides to 'write' again after a span of two years. According to Edward Said,

"To begin to write is to redirect human energy away from the  
'world' to the page."<sup>5</sup>

Shaukat decides to write a novel on 'woman' and her interests, passions etc with a capital 'I'. He weaves a plot (which serves as the sub-plot) through the help of 'Words'. In quest of writing something very 'real' he turns Antara as his subject and names her 'Tamanna,' who is in constant search of someone or something. She is the writer's muse in the story. Thus the development of the artist's mind is intricately linked with development of Tamanna's vis-a-vis Antara's character. The compelling muse of the obsessive writer is visualized running for some time in the movie. This search of Tamanna is nonetheless 'authors' hunt for a theme, character and situation. At this point it is distinctively clear that the 'implied author' cannot be trusted and that they have to bank on the original narrator/ director for further complications to be untwined. The authorial construction of Tamanna therefore seems unnatural and contrived since the self-centered, paranoid writer picks up real life vestiges as his raw material to scribble and sketch. The viewers' reliability thus lies not with the protagonist writer, but with the ghostly presence of the invisible narrator. Here the 'modern sriptor'<sup>6</sup> is in a dialectic relation to the 'biographer' who is actually scripting the development of the protagonist's mind in the film. In the midst of this construction and reconstruction of the meaning of the film as a potential text we as the audience realize, that another existent character becomes as important as the implied author. The writer's muse is not only a devoted wife but an independent woman whose individuality is crushed under the dominant husband's will and desire. Mrs. Shaukat is trapped between her marital loyalty and her husband's crave for art. Though he opposes the Pre-Raphaelite concept of Art for Art's sake, Mr. Vashisth (the protagonist author) is shown in a constant struggle to realize the difference between the real and the mythical. Even his make-believe world does not seem convincing, because the 'authorial' vision fails to materialize the independence required to produce something 'original'.

Shaukat as the writer of a real story envisions a friend for Tamanna. A 'friend' in whose pursuit Tamanna never took a halt till she found him. It seems as if the author's imaginative

instincts had got wings and they are ready to take a flight just as the newly introduced couple in his text. Yash (played by Zayed Khan) becomes a scapegoat at the hands of the writer's creative genius. The irony lies in the fact that a story is after all a tale, irrespective of the fact whether it is original or imaginative- which the scholarly mind fails to accept. According to Tahir Shah, 'Stories are not like the real world; they aren't held back by what we know is false or true. What's important is how a story makes you feel inside.'<sup>7</sup> However, in this film, the distinction between fact and fiction blurs as the protagonist writer consumes himself within the story. Shaukat's each attempt to capture his characters momentum and undertake situations in his control turn him insecure suspicious. The scholarly mind however fails to accept such a universal truth and it is hard to digest for the targeted audience. The two plots intertwine at this moment, as Antara meets Yash in real life. The distinction between fantasy and reality blurs for a cumulative effect. According to Rosalind Coward, "The rapid shift from genres to genres, from fantasy to reality, is foregrounded, as in one moment where..... Meaning arrives only through the culmination of juxtaposed scenes."<sup>8</sup>

The young, jolly, innocent youth turns out to be Antara's colleague. Yash, as a photographer trainer in the same college as Antara is very popular with girls because of his handsome looks. The charismatic heroine could not keep herself away from Yash for a longtime and accepts his friendship. The two bonds over some stereotyped Sardar jokes. Yash helps Mrs. Shaukat re-live her bygone fun-filled times. He takes her back to the old childhood memories through his stupid acts, which Antara enjoys. She very honestly admits her feelings for Yash in front of her husband. But the audience remains confused about Antara's true emotions. Shaukat's reaction is very positive here, because he believes himself to be successful in his endeavour. He anticipates his attempts materializing smoothly. Rosalind Coward argues in her Introduction to the essay on 'Author'-

"What *auterurism* accomplished in film was infact the beginnings of an elaboration of film Language. In attending to *how* the individual *auteur* transformed the elements of the raw material into a meaning and a style which was distinctive, this approach to film did infact bring critics into a close *textual* analysis of the Visual image?"<sup>9</sup>

Shaukat however is instrumental in urging Antara, to feel for someone she would have never gone for, by herself. Here, Antara's will and individuality is suppressed under the authorial presence of mind. She willingly submits her radical choice to her husband's words to 'let go'. The question here arises why a self-independent women of the 21<sup>st</sup> century act so foolishly? Why Mrs. Vashisth would risk her conjugal life only for an influenced fleeting moments which may be bruised at any point of time. The entangled relationship of the trio complicates the plot even more. Shaukat constantly convinces Antara to hide her marital status from Yash. He consoles her to trust him and flow with the waves. Antara's feelings for Yash looked more confusing than natural. The dual nature of Shaukat, do at times disturb Antara, but she ignores bluntly without enquiring further. That Mrs Shaukat is a victim of Shaukat's dominant nature is apparent in their conversations:

Antara: Main apse pyaar karti hun [ I love you]

Shaukat: Toh phir darti kyun ho? (Aagey baro Antara nahi toh kahani ruk jayegi. Main baad mein sab thik kar dunga.)- he says this in his mind. [So why are you afraid? Move ahead Antara or else the narrative will come to an end. I will rectify everything at the end].

When Shaukat visits Antara's college to see Yash, he feels proud of his enigmatic creation. Though Shaukat desires to become a god by controlling the characters' fate, he retains his earthly stature by excruciating emotions such as anger, frustration, guilt and passions of love and wish fulfillment.

The tug of war between the two-selves residing in Shaukat, due to Antara's real passion for Yash convinces the audience of his real stature. He is torn between the promises of a well to do husband and a creator, narrator or an author who can foresee futures or can maneuver people very easily through his words and mind games. His reading of Antara's psyche and her relationship with Yash makes him feel the Divine within him. He keeps nourishing his false hopes and aspirations till the end. At last when the egoistic, obsessive man asks his wife to confess about her marital status to Yash, Antara breaks into tears. The climax of the story drives the author crazy and insecure. His guilt for toying with lives overcomes his intelligence. He feels responsible for the tragic end Yash was to meet soon. Shaukat is trapped in his web this time. Here, the director's intervention as an author is observable. The two voices coincide at a point when Shaukat keeps searching for the last page of the novel which Antara had misplaced, knowing Shaukat's intention. Here the development of Antara's journey is perceptible as her character turns 180 degree when she transforms herself completely asserting her strong individuality in the midst of the heightened chaos and tension. Her realization about the self marks a culmination point. Antara's identity as an ideal figure is manifested through her bold and decisive move. The game in the hero's mind was over. He had written everyone's fate which he believes to turn true. Yash was to commit suicide discerning Antara's truth and the author was to turn psychotic. However things materialize in a different way. At this point, the audience realizes the ghostly presence of the director, the narrator of the film who is to decide the fate of the protagonist. The invisible narrator frustrates the intentions and thought process of the implied author. Although, Mr. Vashisth may be viewed as the other self of the official scribe, both the selves interrupt the progress of each other at some point of time. On the one hand where Antara establishes herself as a strong individual towards the end, Shaukat sinks as an individual, since he remains in a constant state of flux. Vashisth cannot commit himself to any role dedicatedly because the presence of the official scribe makes things unreliable. The transience trait within Shaukat enriches Antara's individuality more often than what can simply be explained. On the other hand, the young handsome, Yash decides to act maturely by moving away from the couple's life. But, the arrogant player lands to an asylum for his own fault, as he had predicted for himself. The fallen state of the protagonist, reminds us of Christopher Marlowe's tragic hero Dr. Faustus who encountered a tragic end due to his overambitious nature. The gambler's fate saddens us. He is the modified form and the modern figure of any other Elizabethan hero, who falls from the highest order due to his own actions. However, it is difficult to believe that Shaukat turned schizophrenic due to his call of the consciousness. As we had earlier witnessed that Shaukat had caught Antara's lying to him-

Antara: Ramakanth, Rajni kahan gaye sab? [Where did Ramakanth and Rajni go?]

Shaukat: lunch tak toh sab ghar par the, ab kahan gaye nai pta.... [Everyone was there till lunch, where did they disappear, I have no idea...]

Tum toh lunch pe aane wali thin na..... kya hua..... extra classes? [You were supposed to come at lunch time ... what happened... extra classes?]

Antara: haan woh..... [Yes that....]

Shaukat: pta tha... [I knew it...]

Antara: kya? [What?]

Shaukat: ki tum late ho jaogi...[That you will be late...]

(Aaj pehli baar tumne mujhse jhut bola..... ab se sab kuch mein tay karunga)-  
Shaukat speaks in his mind.

[For the first time you lied to me..... I will decide everything from now onwards].

Then how was it possible this time that the self –claimed realist author could overlook Antara’s false words? Most of the questions are left unanswered in the film.

Here, believing Antara’s word –that Yash had committed suicide convinces us of Shaukat’s make-believe world. Shaukat loves to challenge himself with ‘words’, but reality intervenes and he is challenged by ‘love’. Antara gambles on anything for her love (husband) but doesn’t realize that she is the game until it is quiet late. He is calculative and is seen desperate to prove himself a ‘Realist’ to his critics. So, the other way to look at this text is that the schizophrenic act of the moody and the vulnerable man might have only fit into his logic. His narratorial voice till the end of the film, even when he had lost his sanity of mind keeps us puzzling over his health issues.

The story ends with a note of disillusionment and disturbance. Many doubts are left uncleared in the audience’s mind, out of which the question of the ‘author’ and his functions seem prime. *The Singing Detective* by Dennis Porter raises similar issues and arguments, as the film *Shabd* by LeenaYadav (director). *Shabd* also resembles the Malyalam movie *Rachna* (1983) directed by Mohan. *The Singing Detective* is ‘about authorship’. It is about a writer named Philip Marlowe, whose fantasies built up an interesting story. In order to alleviate his personal agony Philip desires to impose his speculation on others.

Here lies the ‘power of auteurs’. The function of the authors is to fill up those inadequacies uncharted by the characters in the text. This is what Shaukat and Philip had been doing in their respective manner. Dudley Andrew argues that “this is a struggle of faith in an atheist world, for the author is surely an analogue of God, the creator and source of the world with the disappearance of God we are left with the body of the world: so, with the disappearance of the author, we are left with the material body of the text. Since Nietzsche, we have been tempted to play with that body as we choose, for readers exist and the text exists, but the author is an effect of both, an effect, moreover, brought about by distance and invisibility.”<sup>10</sup>

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