

QUALMS OF MEANING AND DREAMS IN JORGE LUIS BORGES' "THE ZAHIR", A POSTMODERN OUTLOOK

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Jorge Luis Borges is a renowned Spanish writer and is accredited for his contribution in the world of postmodernism in shorter forms of literature like short stories, essays and poems. An Argentine writer Borges is acclaimed as “probably the greatest twentieth century author never to win the Nobel Prize.” His short story “The Zahir” translated in English from *The Aleph and Other Stories* with the title *El Zahir* in Spanish talks about a thing named “Zahir” that can obsess a person to such an extent that he is not capable to think anything but Zahir.

Postmodern fiction makes use of almost every technique that has so far been employed in the narrative tradition. However, postmodern narrative theory invents a new terminology that deconstructs the whole narrative tradition, focuses on the fictionality of a work (surfiction), on the writing process (metafiction), on the ambiguity of meaning (narrative within narrative), on the lack of authenticity (intertextuality), and plays with the narrative language (parody and pastiche). The postmodern author uses different narrative elements to problematise the relation between fiction and reality, and argues that there is nothing outside the text that may be supplied. That is, *reality is textuality*.¹

Symbolism is the practice or art of using an object or a word to represent an abstract idea. An action, person, place, word, or object can all have a symbolic meaning. When an author wants to suggest a certain mood or emotion, he can also use symbolism to hint at it, rather than just deliberately saying it.² “The Zahir” is a story in which Borges talks about his preoccupation with a twenty centavo coin which he received in an exchange from a shopkeeper. Zahir is a mystery, Borges trying to resolve. A Zahir can be a compass, a tiger, a stone, anything. Once beheld, it

cannot be forgotten. Zahir received by Borges in the form of coin can have several meanings. People who once come under the spell of the Zahir remember nothing and lose their contact with the remaining world. It can allude to the materialistic obsession of men.

In the present world, where money is the only thing that makes sense, Borges says that money is the root of all the evils. He gains Zahir (in the form of coin) as a change and ironically this change changes his life. He says, “money is abstract . . . money is future time.” Money is abstract that means it can represent or take form of anything around us. Zahir in the form of coin refers to money’s obsession. This could probably be taken as one of the hidden meanings of Zahir. Another allusion to be found in “The Zahir” is to the erotic love. We may notice that before Borges gets obsessed by the coin he came from the burial of Clementina Villar. Her life shows a contrast; from a fashion icon to a scandalized and financially ruined woman. Borges mentions that he was touched by the death of Villar. Coin can be symbol of Clementina Villar and Borges is obsessed by her love. But Borges plays very smart with his narrative technique and distracts his readers from this meaning of the coin through making its reference and finding its meaning in *Urkunden zur Geschichte der Zahirsage* by Julius Barlach in which he found an original manuscript of study done by Philip Meadows Taylor.

Belief in the Zahir is of Islamic origin, and seems to date from eighteenth century. . . Zahir in Arabic means ‘notorious’, ‘visible’; in this sense it is one of the ninety nine names of God. . . ‘beings or things which possess the terrible property of being unforgettable, and whose image finally drive one mad.’³

In the study made by Taylor he also came across the grip of a man by the magic tiger (Zahir) in Bhuj. That person fled to Mysore where he painted walls of palaces with the figure of tiger. “This tiger was composed of many tigers in the most vertiginous fashion : it was traversed by tigers, scored by tigers and it contained seas and Himalayas and armies which seemed to reveal still other tigers.”⁴

Yet another meaning of the coin can be God. Like money God is also abstract. We believe and sometimes doubt on His miracles. The questions regarding the existence of God can lead to a chain of thoughts leaving one engraved in them eternally. It is through the Zahir that Borges finds himself disturbed by the notion of God playing a part in the acts of life in forms of various objects. The Zahir, in a form of coin, presents itself as a philosophically sound object. Zahir shows itself to be an object of great importance to Borges. He views this coin as something that represents a divine understanding of himself and the use of God. He later determines that Zahir is proven to be something that exceeds the queries of man and deities. The line stated in the end

"was God on the other side of the Zahir?" shows that his query about the coin had caused him even to question if God had a part in the way he had acted. The Zahir in turn shows that the fabric of God can be interpreted through the littlest things that carry meaning. Mohammed Al-Yemini to whom Taylor narrated the story of man preoccupied with tiger said, "God is inscrutable."

On ontological level Borges shows qualms in the meaning of Zahir. In the very beginning of the story this uncertainty is reflected when he presents various allusions of Zahir, that in Gujarat it was a tiger, in Java; a blind man, in Persia; an astrolabe, in Mahdi; a little compass, in Tetuan ghetto a bottom of well. Then borges shares his view of Zahir, which is in the form of a coin. He presents an absence of single correct meaning or interpretation of Zahir. Borges fails to find the ultimate meaning of Zahir or understanding in totality which is also an interpretation of failure on the part of human beings to understand the world in its totality. So in the end he decided to leave his arms and lose himself in the ninety nine names of God until they lose meaning (like Sufis).

Julia Kristeva has said that creativity does not assume the existence of an earlier process, material and model. Productivity, on the other hand, assumes a pre-existing raw material. Each so-called new text is a reworking of existing body of literature. Texts have discrepancies and inconsistencies arising from the fact that their various elements, parts, and layers are brought together.⁵ Intertextuality signifies the inseparability and inter-involvement of one text with other texts through allusions, citations, assimilation of formal and substantive features of other texts or by participation in linguistic and literary conventions that have always existed. Any text, therefore, is in fact an intertext, an intersection of numberless other texts that have already been written and that are going to be written in the future.⁶

"The Zahir" carries inside it intertextual references when Borges talks about the fictitious nature of the coin. This intertextuality is visible in the use of the books which discuss about the meaning of the Zahir in Islamic tradition which are *Koran* and *Talmud*. Both the texts are authentic. Borges also mentioned a versed commented in *Gulshan i Raz* cited from *Asrar Nama* which says that one who is obsessed with Zahir will soon see a rose. Borges also cites some fictitious as well as real characters in this story. He stated Flaubert for his perfection, Clementina Villar as his beloved who is a fictive character. He writes even a story within a story to divert his mind from the image of coin. In this way he presents the real and the imaginary collectively.

Dreams play a significant role in Borges' stories. He uses the element of dream to bring the unconscious mind on paper, to explore the uncertainties and to show a difference between fact

and fiction. Thinking about the coin when he goes to sleep, he had a dream in which he was “coins guarded by griffon”. He also states that thinking about Zahir is like seeing a dream.

According to the teaching of Idealists, the words ‘live’ and ‘dream’ are rigorously synonymous. From thousands of images I shall pass to one; from a highly complex dream to a dream of utter simplicity. Others will dream that I am mad; I shall dream of the Zahir . . . which will be a dream and which a reality – the earth or the Zahir?⁷

For Borges dream and reality are one and the same. He knows that after some time he will remember nothing but Zahir, he would be fed, bathed, taken care by others. He would be completely dependent but the blessing is this that he wouldn’t be aware of this condition of his. Whether he lives in this world or the world of dreams where there is Zahir, it makes no difference to him.

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