

A Semantic Analysis of Daud Kamal's "An Ode to Death"

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Abstract:

The present study offers a semantic approach to Daud Kamal's poem "An Ode to Death". It seeks to analyze the different semantic meanings which the poet uses to impart his attitude to death and the temporality of life. It also attempts to show how the poet manages to create an image in the mind of reader about death and the life to come.

Key words: Daud Kamal, semantic analysis, death, mutability, life.

I. INTRODUCTION

The word 'semantics' is derived from the Greek word 'sēmantikos' which means 'significant'. It is the philosophical and scientific study of meanings that focuses on the relationship between the signifiers and the signified in a language. Semantics is the study of overall logical and conceptual meanings communicated through language (Babatunde, 1995). The study of deep and surface structures of a word leads further to the study of meanings. Semantics conveys not only meanings but also the nature of language. It investigates how language works, how an individual communicates, and how semantics is perceived by receivers

(Goddard, 1998, p.1). A speaker of any language has different sorts of linguistic abilities that figure in his lexical choices, phonological patterns, sentence constructions, linguistic background and culture. Thus, semantics deals with the study of meaning in a language by focusing on the linguistic choices of a speaker. In order to appreciate any literary piece of composition, e.g. a poem, it is important to analyze it linguistically.

Furthermore, semantics is the study of the meaning of words, phrases and sentences. In semantic analysis, there is always an attempt to focus on what the words conventionally mean, rather than on what an individual speaker might want them to mean on a particular occasion. This approach is concerned with objective or general meaning and avoids accounting for subjective or local meaning. Doing semantics is attempting to spell out what one knows when one behaves as if one shares knowledge of the meaning of a word, a phrase, or a sentence in a language (Yule, 2010, p.112).

In order to relate semantics to literature and to view literature from a semantic perspective, the present assignment seeks to analyze one of Daud Kamal's poems semantically. As a point of departure, it is worthwhile to introduce Daud Kamal to modern readers, who are not familiar with Pakistani poets.

Daud Kamal (1935–1987) is looked upon as one of the great modern Pakistani poets. His poetry presents a blend of cultural, historical and religious imagery, which was one of the salient features of modernist poetry. Kamal's poetry is marked by its use of imagery, culture, paintings and recurrent themes.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Leech, according to Sarwar (2016), has suggested seven types of meanings called Denotative, Connotative, Collocative, Affective, Stylistic, Thematic and Reflective which appear in the following table:

1. Denotative Meaning	Conceptual, cognitive or logical meaning Ordinary Dictionary everyday meaning Universal Meaning
2. Connotative Meaning	Certain emotional associations attached with a word due to its origin, culture, history, society and context etc. Communicative value Idiosyncratic association
3. Collocative Meaning	Association with words tending to occur in the environment of another word Certain associations
4. Affective Meaning	Reflects personal feelings and attitudes of the writer. Attitudinal meaning
5. Stylistic Meaning	Meaning conveys by the social circumstances of its use Social relations Choices of words: Stiff/relaxed, Formal/informal
6. Thematic Meaning	Subject Matter Linearization Order and emphasis
7. Reflexive Meaning	Subject Matter Linearization Order and emphasis (pp. 11768-69)

III. A SEMANTIC ANALYSIS OF KAMAL’S “AN ODE TO DEATH”

Semantics involves several types of meanings; outstanding among them are denotative, connotative, collocative, affective, stylistic, thematic and reflective meanings. Meanings are arbitrary, conventional and explicit. Moreover, meaning is derived from the linguistic choices of speaker / writer.

“An Ode to Death” by Kamal is a significant poem about the ultimate reality of life and death. The meanings used in the poem will be analyzed semantically in this assignment.

III.1 Denotative Meaning

As the phrase suggests, denotative meaning refers to the dictionary meaning of a word. It is connected with the surface meaning which the lexemes of “An Ode to Death” denote. The

poem is about the eventual veracity of life and death. The poem records one's journey from the cradle to the grave. As the poem's title suggests, the ode is a kind of lyrical poetry that indicates the inner feelings of the poet and the inner workings of his mind. Written in a lyrical form, the poem creates a rhythmic and musical pattern. The poem focuses on the poet's attitude towards death. To convey his experience about life and death in a subtle way, the poet uses simple and formal diction. For the sake of convenience and the achievement of denotative meaning, the poet employs several words from his poem with denotative reference, such as "archipelago" and "anchorage"¹. The two words, as well as many others used by the poet, do not have any meanings other than the denotative meanings which they represent.

III.2 Connotative Meaning

Regarding the connotative meaning which the poem is replete with, it is concerned with the suggestive meaning which the poet seeks to impart to his readers through his employment of many figures of speech. The poem exhibits Kamal's pessimistic approach to the hovering image of death which affronts every human being.

In a manner reminiscent of T. S. Eliot's frequent use of allusion as a literary device, Kamal quotes Conrad Aiken's line -Your ode to death is in the lifting of a single eyebrow. Lift it and see- to draw a comparison between the shortness of life and the brevity of time and the short period during which one lifts his eyebrow. Here, Kamal resorts to connotative meaning to provide the reader with an image that portrays the transience of life, which is more easily and appreciatively conceived by the reader than when stated denotatively.

Like T. S. Eliot's highly allusive poem in which he quotes many past authors to compare between the spirituality of the past generations with the materialism of the twentieth century people, Kamal quotes the first line -Death is more than

certain- from one of E.E Cummings poems to call attention to the materialistic features of modern people. Considering Kamal's lines -Death is more than certain, says e.e Cummings,/But the clocks go on ticking as before - one can clearly see how the poet emphasizes the inevitability of death by drawing an analogy between the continuity of life and the permanent striking of the clock. Like the clock which strikes incessantly, life goes on everlastingly. For Kamal although life is durable, it will be brought to a halt by death. For Kamal, too, the exact time of death is anonymous despite the certainty of death. The use of the 'clock' by the poet materializes the notion that death is inescapable.

Stressing the possibility of hope (dreams) in such a harsh, materialistic world in which people are on the fringe of giving up the hope of a better life, Kamal optimistically sees that

And in every particle of carbon dust
There lives a diamond dream

Significantly, although carbon dust is no more than carbon particles, it more than often contains diamond, the most precious metal in the world. In a like manner, although life involves many terrible and inexorable experiences, it is still full of lovely things that make one stick tightly to the pleasures life. The dreams that people still have are what make life tolerable, despite its hardships. In this regard, Kamal uses two images in the following lines in order to assert the possibility of dreams in a world in which people no longer look forward to any beams of hope:

How many galaxies yet to be explored-
How many seeds in the pomegranate of time?

The first image, that of galaxies, which is used by Kamal to emphasize the notion that dreams are as numerous as galaxies. In addition, just as many galaxies have not yet been explored, most of people's dreams and desires lie dormant and need to be

achieved. Here galaxies symbolize ones' dreams and desires. Regarding the second image, it is related to the seeds of the pomegranate. Here the poet uses the seeds of pomegranate to stand for the countless dreams that one has in life. Like the numberless seeds inside a pomegranate, there are many numberless dreams and desires that are yet to be explored. Again, the seeds of pomegranate symbolize one's dreams and ambitions.

However, what does Kamal mean by the pomegranate of time? Or what is the relation between pomegranate and time? The plausible interpretation seems to be that time, like a pomegranate, is a limited entity. Although a pomegranate has many seeds, yet these seeds cannot proliferate because of its restricting, outside cover which allows no more seeds to grow. Likewise, although time involves countless years, yet it will come to an end someday, owing to death. This means that man will not be able to achieve all his dreams because of the mutability of his life.

Kamal proceeds with his use of images throughout the poem in order to shed light on the mutability of life and the unavailability of death, as it figures clearly in the following lines:

The pine tree blasted by last year's Thunderbolt
And the burn out match stick in my ashtray
Look so terribly alike
I have sat by your bedside and felt
Your sinking pulse.

The poet, as the above lines show, draws a comparison between the short life of 'a pine tree' and the 'match stick' and the brevity of one's life. The image here makes it clear that just as the pine tree and the match stick are perished by thunderbolt and burning respectively, man will cease to live, however long he might exist. This is a positive proof of the mutability of life and the unavailability of death.

The inevitability of death is the lot of every mortal, including the poet's beloved. As the poet admits, he is witnessing poignantly the death of his beloved. Moreover, the close intimacy between them enables the poet to feel her fading pulses. Yet, he has to accept willy-nilly the unpreventable death of his beloved, firmly believing that death is an undeniable reality.

Certain that terrestrial life will soon come to an end, the poet admits that any mortal will become ashes in his grave. This kind of life, as the poet thinks, contradicts with the life in the hereafter, where there is no room for death.

How long does it take for the eyes
To dissolve in the grave?

The employment of connotative meanings figures once again in the poem when Kamal quotes the following line from Sylvia Plath:

I have seen the "stars plummet to their dark addresses"

The falling stars suggest the death of all mortals, including those who are very close and dear to Plath. Plath, as well as Kamal, believes strongly that death is the fate of human beings just as falling is the ultimate end of stars. This eventually means that all creatures are doomed.

III.3 Collocative Meaning

Concerning the collocative meaning, the poem teams with many collocations which serve to enhance the meanings of the poem. For instance, such collocations as 'diamond-dream', 'naked rocks', 'match stick', 'carbon dust', and 'floating island' display the author's familiarity with language use and make the poem much more convincing to the reader.

III.4 Affective Meaning

The affective meaning of the poem manifests itself once again when the poet expresses his attitude towards his own loss and

helplessness. He wonders if he "was . . . on a floating island". Not only does he have concern for the demise of his beloved, but he also sympathizes with and grieves his own sense of loss and frustration. His state is like the state of a person who is marooned on a floating island. The use of 'floating island' is significant, since it indicates instability; an island which keeps floating or moving adds to the feeling of loss and instability.

Furthermore, what adds to the poet's feeling of frustration is his ending up "wanderer[ing] in a forest of symbols". Who will go into a forest and not get lost?' one wonders. The use of the two words —island and forest— reflect the poet's feeling towards his own lived experiences. He is like someone deserted on a remote island or in a vast forest. However, the only ray of hope left for the poet is to 'clutch[sic] to the harlots of memory,' or rather his past, undesirable encounters. Sometimes the poet finds solace even in the worst experiences which he once underwent. At length, he comes to terms with the ultimate reality of life and death. He has eventually come to realize that the cherished people who have departed cannot be back to life again.

III.5 Stylistic Meaning

The social conditions of language use are the major concern of stylistics. Stylistic meaning by implication evolves from the stylistic devices which the author uses to make his message clear to his readers. In this regard, Kamal makes use of the dramatic monologue, a long piece of dialogue by one character that reveals the character's inner feelings, to record his personal emotions and conflicting experiences about death. He contends that man's preoccupation with materialistic life blinds him to the inexorableness of death. He further claims that people show instinctive propensity to fool themselves, despite their awareness of the inescapability of death. Again, the dramatic monologue manifests itself in the following lines in which the poet appears as a character involved in a dialogue

which reveals his feelings and experiences, particularly about death:

"Who was the deceiver and who the deceived?

Was I on a floating island?

And were you on the shore?

III.6 Thematic Meaning

The major theme of Kamal's poem seems to be the mutability of life and the inevitability of death, the bitter reality which people try to shun since time immemorial. Not only human beings are subject to decay but everything in this world e.g. materialistic things are subject to death. The certainty of death is bolstered up by the uncertain time, demise and decline. Another theme which is evident in this poem is the materialistic attitude of people towards life and their worldly pursuits.

III.7 Reflective Meaning

The poem obviously involves a reflective meaning. It reflects a religious belief adopted by Muslims. It is by saying "two streams mingle in a forgotten river, / Between the eye and the ear" that the poet echoes the Muslim approach to eternity. According to Kamal, the soul and physical body engage in the luxuries of life, disregarding the eternal life in the hereafter. Besides, the attachment of the soul with the body and the eye with the tear is a metaphor for the co-relativity of one thing with other. "Sleep and silence" stands for the eternal peace in the life to come.

IV. CONCLUSION

The present study offers a semantic approach to Daud Kamal's poem "An Ode to Death". It seeks to analyze the different semantic meanings which the poet uses to impart his attitude to death and the temporality of life. It also attempts to show

how the poet manages to create an image in the mind of reader about death and the life to come.

Notes

This and subsequent references to Kamal's poem are taken from Kamal's *Before the Carnations Wither: Collected Poems* (1995), p. 13.

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