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Unmasking the Inner Psyche: A Dual Approach to Understand 'Zindagi Tamsha' (Circus of Life) through Semiotics and Psychoanalysis

Abstract: *The current research delves into the exploration of visual semiotics and psychoanalysis within the Pakistani drama film titled "Zindagi Tamasha (Circus of Life)," directed by Sarmad Khoosat. This film intricately narrates the tale of Rahat Khwaja, a devout Muslim who inadvertently finds himself at the epicentre of public scrutiny and ridicule within his strict Muslim community. This unfortunate turn of events unfolds when a video of his dance performance at a wedding goes viral on social media. In light of this narrative, the research is guided by two primary objectives; the framework of a multi-modal approach, combining the principles of visual semiotics with the foundational theories of Sigmund Freud, particularly his Superego, Ego, and Id constructs. By merging these analytical perspectives, the study endeavours to shed light on the intricate interplay between the movie's visual narrative and the psychological dynamics at play within the central character.*

Key Words: Psychoanalysis, Semiotics, Zindagi Tamasha, Circus of Life, Super Ego, Ego, and Id

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Introduction

Storytelling in contemporary cinema is increasingly focused on creating visually stunning spectacles through elements such as colour schemes, set design, wardrobe choices, and more. These seemingly mundane aspects can often carry deeper symbolic meanings, adding layers of complexity to the narrative. As our comprehension of semiotics deepens,

modern filmmakers have moved beyond conventional storytelling and now employ various elements like clothing, props, and settings as symbols to enrich the story and connect it to contemporary contexts. Utilizing semiotics in this manner offers a powerful means of engaging the audience and unravelling more profound layers of the

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narrative, all through these seemingly minor details.

Muhammad Rahat Khawaja, known as Arif Hassan, is a devout individual working as a real estate broker in Lahore, celebrated for his hymns honouring the Prophet. He occupies a position of high regard within his mohalla, where neighbours often hold as much significance as blood relatives. Khawaja resides with his bedridden wife, Farkhanda (portrayed by Samiya Mumtaz), and their daughter, Sadaf (played by Eman Suleman), who pays regular visits. What sets the Khawaja household apart from their neighbours is their unconventional approach to traditional gender roles. However, their uniqueness extends beyond this aspect. Khawaja exhibits a profound fascination with cinema, particularly old heroines and their dance performances, albeit in a manner that defies convention. His fixation centres on Aasia Begum's rendition of "Zindagi Tamasha Bani" from the 1974 Pakistani film "Naukar Wohti Da," a title that also serves as the film's namesake.

During a neighbour's wedding celebration, Khawaja's friends stumble upon a delightful revelation about his childhood penchant for dressing up and emulating heroines in dance routines. Fueled by the festive atmosphere, Khawaja decides to playfully recreate Aasia Begum's provocative dance moves, initially met with lighthearted amusement. However, the ambience gradually shifts, giving way to an uncomfortable silence. To compound the situation, someone records this impromptu performance and shares it on YouTube, subsequently causing the video to go viral. Consequently, Khawaja finds himself subjected to ridicule, both within the confines of his home and throughout the broader community.

In the realm of personality analysis, various psychological theories seek to unravel the essence of human character. Among these, Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory is prominent, encompassing three interconnected components: the ID, EGO, and SUPEREGO. These elements collectively mould human behaviour and illuminate the

intricacies of the human psyche. Within the context of this research, we embark on a comprehensive exploration of the documentary's multilayered meanings. Employing a dual analytical approach that blends semiotic analysis with psychoanalytic tools, our aim is to unearth the intricate interplay between signs, symbols, and the recesses of the subconscious mind. By peering into the inner psyche of the movie's central character, we aspire to offer a profound comprehension of the intricate tapestry of human emotions, experiences, and the semiotic strategies harnessed to represent them.

Literature Review

A Brief Exploration of Semiotics Signs are ubiquitous in our surroundings and can encompass a wide range of objects and concepts. The term "semiotics," derived from the Greek word "semeiotikos," meaning "an interpreter of signs," refers to the study or science of signs. Semiotics, also known as semiology, is the discipline dedicated to comprehending these signs and their intricate meanings. Pioneered by influential figures like Ferdinand de Saussure, Roland Barthes, and Charles Sander Peirce, semiotics has given rise to various theories in this field.

Ferdinand de Saussure's seminal work emphasized that a sign comprises two fundamental components: the "signifier" (which can be a word, sound, image, etc.) and the "signified" (representing the concept or meaning associated with the sign). The relationship between the signifier and the signified can manifest in numerous ways, offering a rich area for exploration (Saussure, [1916](#), [1974](#), [1983](#)).

Roland Barthes extended this framework by introducing the idea that signs possess cultural and ideological representations. He distinguished between denotative meaning (the literal signification) and connotative meaning (the implied or suggested interpretation) of signs (Barthes, [1975](#)).

Charles Peirce contributed to the field by categorizing signs into three distinct types: icons, indexes, and symbols. An icon is a

signifier that closely resembles the signified; an index is indirectly linked to the signified, and a symbol bears no resemblance to the signified (Peirce, [1992](#)).

In essence, signs can be interpreted in diverse ways and may carry different connotations in varying cultural contexts. Within the realm of cinema, semiotics plays an increasingly prominent role, as filmmakers harness it to enrich their narratives, infusing layers of meaning into even the minutest details.

Semiotics in Film: As previously mentioned, a sign can encompass virtually anything that conveys meaning, from the colours of objects to the objects themselves, from words to physical entities. Filmmakers have wholeheartedly embraced semiotics, using it as a storytelling tool to imbue subtle elements with profound significance. These intricate details can contribute to character development or advance the plot.

Visual social semiotics, a relatively recent subfield defined by Jwitt and Oyama (2001), focuses on describing semiotic resources and how images and other visual communication methods can be employed to convey messages and interpretations. Filmmakers adeptly utilize film language and techniques to harness these representations. Elements such as character attire, the setting of the narrative, colour schemes, actor movements, and more can all serve as subtle yet potent signifiers. These cinematic choices often symbolize aspects of society or communicate specific messages, contingent upon the filmmaker's intent.

The orchestration of these semiotic elements falls upon the collaborative efforts of production designers, directors, cinematographers, art directors, and various other departments. Through meticulous attention to mise-en-scène and the overall visual composition, filmmakers can convey intricate narratives beyond mere dialogue or plot progression.

The Intricate Dance of Super Ego, Ego, and Id in Film Within the realm of cinema, the concepts of the superego, ego, and id, rooted

in Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory, manifest prominently in character development and narrative themes. These psychological constructs serve as invaluable tools for delving into the intricacies of human behaviour and motivation within cinematic storytelling (Selvi, [2015](#)).

The Superego in Cinema: The superego constitutes the moral and societal facet of an individual's psyche, encapsulating internalized values, norms, and ideals that govern one's actions. In films, characters personifying the superego often emerge as moral lodestars within the narrative. They make choices guided by ethics and societal expectations. An archetypal illustration can be found in the character of Atticus Finch, portrayed by Gregory Peck, in "To Kill a Mockingbird" ([1962](#)). Atticus epitomizes the superego as he steadfastly upholds justice and morality in the face of racial prejudice, serving as an unwavering moral compass in the story.

The Id in Cinematic Expression: In stark contrast, the id represents an individual's primal and instinctual desires, relentlessly seeking immediate gratification without concern for societal norms or consequences. In cinema, characters driven by their ids frequently engage in impulsive and hedonistic behaviours. A prominent cinematic representation of the id can be observed in Alex DeLarge from (Kramer, [2011](#)) directed by Stanley Kubrick. Alex personifies the id, driven by raw urges for violence and pleasure, exemplifying unbridled and unfiltered desire. In simplified terms, the id is often linked to the biological component of personality, while the ego pertains to the psychological aspect, and the superego encompasses the social dimension (Hall & Lindzey, [1993](#)).

Harmonizing the Superego and Id: Many films explore the internal conflict between the superego and id within their characters, leveraging this tension as a source of dramatic conflict and character development. For instance, in "Fight Club" ([1999](#)), the narrator, portrayed by Edward Norton, grapples with the internal struggle between his mundane,

rule-bound existence (representing the superego) and his alter ego, Tyler Durden, portrayed by Brad Pitt, who embodies the unbridled id.

The concepts of the superego and id remain fertile ground for character exploration and thematic examination in cinema. Filmmakers often employ these psychological constructs to probe the intricate facets of human nature and behaviour, providing audiences with profound insights into their characters and the narratives they inhabit (Pradipta, 2019).

Image A

Protagonist rahat khawaja recording naat in the studio



Psychoanalysis: (Super Ego)

In the realm of cinema, the concept of the superego, representing internalized moral and societal standards, finds its manifestation in a variety of ways within movie characters. One common portrayal is that of the conscience, where the superego becomes the character's internal voice guiding them towards morally upright decisions. A prime example of this is image A where Rahat Khawaja, the Naat Reciter embodies unwavering moral principles, writes and recites sacred hymns in praise of prophets, shaping his actions and choices on the code of Muslim religion throughout the film. Furthermore, morally upright characters who steadfastly adhere to a strict moral code, even in the face of adversity, are often seen as embodiments of the superego. In this movie, Khawaja is highly respected in his area, as he is a well-known Naat Reciter and is invited everywhere to religious gatherings and social gatherings as a code of respect. In essence, the

portrayal of the superego in the character of Khawaja serves as a powerful tool for exploring fundamental questions about ethics, morality, and the human capacity for moral growth and transformation. Khawaja's character at the beginning of the movie becomes a conduit for conveying moral lessons and encouraging viewers to reflect upon their own ethical principles, making them integral to the narrative fabric of the film.

Semiotic Analysis

The image presents the character of Khawaja in action. He is standing in a local recording studio, dressed up as a Naat Khwan, recording Naat for his album to be released on Eid Milaad u Nabi. The image is inserted in the beginning short of the movie, where he wants to portray the protagonist as an ideal character, liked and honoured by society.

In this image, the framing is a mid-shot, emphasizing the participants from the knees up, with a far personal distance conveying a non-intimate relationship. The frontal angle showcases the Khawaja's strong engagement with viewers, while the medium camera angle signifies equality in power dynamics. In the textual meta function, the New is a Khawaja's character, placed on the right side of the margin with no interactive connection. The colour scheme used in the image has blacks, greys and similar dull colours, that overall complement the dark theme of intolerance of society in the movie. Moreover, Khawaja draws attention due to size, attire, and his act of reciting hymns, making him a figure of idealism.

Image B

Protagonist rahat khawaja dancing to an item song at a wedding



Psychoanalysis: (ID)

Khawaja, the central character in the narrative, embodies a complex interplay of psychological elements, with his actions and behaviours revealing a distinct presence of the ID, as per Freudian psychoanalysis. The ID, often considered the most primal aspect of the human psyche, operates on the pleasure principle, relentlessly seeking immediate gratification of desires and impulses, often disregarding societal norms and consequences. Khawaja's intense passion for films, especially the performances of old heroines, exemplifies his ID-driven tendencies. His fixation on Aasia Begum's dance in the 1974 movie "Naukar Wohti Da" vividly portrays this infatuation. Here, the ID is evident in his immediate and unfiltered attraction to the sensory pleasure derived from such performances. Khawaja's unwavering focus on the TV screen underscores his captivation by the visual and auditory stimuli, aligning with the core principles of the ID. Furthermore, during a casual conversation at a neighbour's wedding about his childhood habit of emulating heroines and their dance routines, Khawaja's suppressed desires and impulses come to the forefront. In a moment of indulgence and spurred by the festive atmosphere, he succumbs to his ID-driven desires and decides to recreate one of Aasia Begum's provocative dance sequences. This impulsive act, while initially met with laughter, disrupts the conservative societal norms and leads to unforeseen consequences. As Khawaja embarks on this impromptu performance, his friends' reactions shift from amusement to uncomfortable tension, highlighting the clash between his unfiltered expression of ID-driven desires and the societal superego, which enforces strict cultural and moral norms. The situation escalates as someone records the performance and shares it on YouTube, leading to its virality and Khawaja's subsequent ridicule.

Khawaja's character in the narrative provides further insights into the presence of the ID and its influence on his actions and choices. The ID, as per Freudian psychoanalysis, is driven by innate desires, instincts, and needs, and it operates without

moral or ethical considerations. Khawaja's behaviour and the consequences he faces exemplify the dominance of the ID in certain aspects of his character:

Unrestrained Desires: Khawaja's deep-seated fascination with old heroines and their dance routines reflects his unrestrained desires. The ID seeks immediate gratification, and in Khawaja's case, the sensory pleasure derived from watching these performances becomes an irresistible desire. This unbridled attraction is a hallmark of the ID's influence on his psyche.

Impulsivity: The ID is characterized by impulsivity, and Khawaja's decision to spontaneously recreate a provocative dance sequence at the neighbour's wedding is a clear manifestation of this trait. He succumbs to his immediate impulses without considering the potential consequences. This impulsive behaviour is a hallmark of the ID, which often disregards rationality and forethought.

Conflict with the Superego: Khawaja's actions, driven by his ID, directly clash with the societal norms and moral values represented by the superego. The superego acts as a moral compass, imposing cultural and ethical standards. Khawaja's decision to perform a provocative dance in a conservative social setting highlights the tension between his unrestrained desires (ID) and societal expectations (superego).

Consequences and Social Ridicule: The consequences of Khawaja's ID-driven actions are significant. The recording and viral sharing of his dance performance resulted in social ridicule and humiliation. This serves as a stark reminder of the conflict between individual desires and societal norms. The ID's pursuit of pleasure, when unchecked, can lead to adverse outcomes and personal embarrassment.

Repression and Expression: Khawaja's childhood inclination to dress up and dance like heroines, suppressed over the years, resurfaces during the wedding. This repressed desire finds expression in his impromptu performance. Freudian theory suggests that

repressed desires held by the ID can resurface when conditions allow, often leading to unexpected and uncontrolled actions.

Khawaja's character in the narrative showcases the prevalence of ID and its impact on his behaviour. His unrestrained desires, impulsivity, and the ensuing conflict with societal norms highlight the Freudian concept of the ID operating independently of moral considerations. The consequences he faces underscore the potential repercussions when the ID's pursuit of pleasure disregards the constraints imposed by the superego and societal expectations.

Semiotic Analysis

In this image, the represented participant RP Khawaja is dancing at a wedding in front of his friends. The vector is created by the gaze of the RP. The character does not look into the camera which makes him an Offer for the viewers to interpret his personality and presents him as an object of observation and sources of information. The image is framed as a long-shot narrative, emphasizing the distance between the RPs and IPs. They are positioned at a 'public distance,' signifying a lack of intimacy and suggesting a mere stranger-like social relationship. The background features the decoration and lights but still carries the theme of light vs. dark therefore, inviting viewers to imaginarily place themselves within the scene, momentarily pausing to assess the situation. The image is captured from a 'frontal angle' in a horizontal plane, depicting the protagonist Khawaja as an integral part of our world. In the vertical plane, the RPs are shot at a mid-angle, making them equal sharers of the control of the situation and holding power over the IPs.

Image C

Rahat khwaja and his daughter sitting on a bench in the hospital



the hospital. Khawaja's daughter, when enters home to take her dead mother to the hospital, sees his father sleeping while watching a movie in the other room. Filled with rage and pity, she blames her father for carelessness and does not talk to him even in the hospital, where both father and daughter are sitting on a bench and avoiding each other by looking in opposite directions. Throughout the movie, this detachment between father and daughter serves as a poignant commentary on the challenges faced by individuals and families in navigating the changing dynamics of a traditional society in the midst of evolving cultural and social norms. It highlights the generational clashes and emotional estrangement that can arise when individuals like Khawaja are unable to bridge the gap between their deeply ingrained beliefs and the changing world around them.

This image portrays the consequences that Khawaja had to face due to his ID-driven desire to dance like the heroin of early times on an item song that he could not control. And so, it was projected as a crime by his own daughter, son-in-law, relatives, friends and society. Which destroyed his image in society and he was punished by all through public and personal abandonment.

Semiotic Analysis

There are two RPs in the image, sitting at a distance on a bench and looking away from each other. The image, in its representational structure, is static. Both characters are not doing any action here. The vector is created by the gaze of the Rps, and Gaze of the both Rps is in the opposite direction. Which signifies detachment between the both. The scene featuring Rahat Khwaja and his daughter sitting on a bench in the hospital, both draped in dark-coloured shawls, can be subjected to a semiotic analysis to uncover the underlying meanings and symbolic elements in this cinematic moment.

Color Symbolism: The choice of dark-coloured shawls for both characters holds significant semiotic value. Dark colours, such

as black or deep shades of blue or grey, are often associated with somberness, grief, and solemnity. In this context, the dark shawls may symbolize the emotional weight and seriousness of the situation they find themselves in. It suggests that both Rahat Khwaja and his daughter are grappling with difficult emotions or circumstances.

Non-Verbal Communication: The fact that neither Rahat Khwaja nor his daughter are engaged in conversation is a vital aspect of this scene. In semiotics, the absence of communication can be as meaningful as verbal exchanges. It may indicate a communication breakdown or emotional distance between the two characters. Their silence speaks volumes about the strained nature of their relationship, emphasizing the emotional detachment discussed earlier.

Setting (Hospital): The hospital setting itself carries semiotic significance. Hospitals are often associated with illness, suffering, and vulnerability. By placing the characters in this environment, the filmmakers may be signifying a moment of vulnerability or crisis in their lives, possibly related to Rahat Khwaja's viral video and its consequences.

Bag on Bench as a Divider: The bench they sit on can also be analyzed. While it physically brings them together, it also acts as a divider. They are sitting side by side but not interacting, emphasizing the emotional gap between them. It's as if they are sharing physical space but not connecting on an emotional level.

Shawls as Protective Barriers: The shawls both characters wear could also be seen as symbolic shields or barriers. They may be using these dark shawls to shield themselves from each other's emotions or from the outside world. This further reinforces the idea of emotional distance and the challenges they face in opening up to each other.

Character Identities: Rahat Khwaja's identity as a man of faith and devotion contrasts with

his daughter's presumably more secular and modern outlook. The dark shawls could symbolize their shared heritage and beliefs, despite their differences. It's a visual reminder of their shared cultural background, even if they struggle to connect on a personal level.

This image of Rahat Khwaja and his daughter sitting silently on a bench in the hospital, both draped in dark shawls, reveals a complex web of symbolism related to their emotional detachment, the somberness of their situation, and the cultural and generational contrasts within their relationship. The use of colour, setting, and non-verbal communication all contribute to the rich semiotic layers of this cinematic moment.

Conclusion

In the semiotic and psychoanalytic analysis of the protagonist Rahat Khawaja within the context of the movie "Zindagi Tamasha (Circus of Life)," a multifaceted portrayal of his character emerges. This analysis delves into the intricate layers of symbolism, emotions, and conflicts that define Rahat Khawaja, shedding light on the internal struggles and external challenges he faces throughout the narrative.

Semiotically, the character of Rahat Khawaja is marked by profound symbolism and visual cues. His identity as a devout and respected man of faith, symbolized by his attire and religious rituals, contrasts sharply with the complexities of his personal life. The viral video of his impromptu dance performance disrupts the carefully constructed façade of his social identity, leading to societal ridicule and an erosion of his reputation. This stark clash between public perception and personal reality is emblematic of the broader tension between tradition and modernity in the film.

The semiotic analysis also highlights the significance of objects and settings within Rahat Khawaja's world. His interactions with religious artefacts, Intense old Lahore streets, the hospital environment, and the shawls he and his daughter wear carry layers of meaning, representing his inner turmoil,

vulnerability, and strained relationship with his daughter. The use of colour, particularly the dark shawls, underscores the emotional weight of their circumstances and the distance between them.

Psychoanalytically, Rahat Khawaja's character embodies a struggle between the ego, superego, and id. His ego, shaped by societal expectations and religious norms, strives to maintain a respectable image. However, the emergence of his id, represented by his fascination with film heroines and the impulsive dance performance, reveals suppressed desires and impulses. This inability to reconcile the ego and id leads to inner conflict and external consequences.

Furthermore, Rahat Khawaja's relationship with his daughter exemplifies the challenges of intergenerational and cultural differences. The emotional detachment between them, depicted in their silence and the

dark shawls they wear, signifies the broader themes of generational gaps and cultural clashes explored in the film.

In conclusion, the semiotic and psychoanalytic analysis of Rahat Khawaja's character in "Zindagi Tamasha (Circus of Life)" unveils a rich tapestry of symbols, emotions, and internal struggles. His journey is emblematic of the broader societal and cultural tensions depicted in the film, making him a compelling and multidimensional protagonist. This analysis underscores the film's exploration of tradition, modernity, identity, and the complex interplay between personal desires and societal expectations in the context of contemporary Pakistan. Rahat Khawaja's character serves as a lens through which these themes are examined, ultimately adding depth and complexity to the narrative of "Zindagi Tamasha (Circus of Life)."

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