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AMINA'S VOICE by Henna Khan

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Portrayal of Religious Harmony AMINA'S VOICE by Henna Khan

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Abstract

Religious identity as portrayed in the Western media and in the media of US is paradoxical and Muslims living there are much worried because of it. On the one end peaceful and progressive identity is presented in the media by showing them worshipping peacefully and participating in social activities on a large scale. On the other hand, bearded Muslims are being presented as barbaric, uncivilized and inhumane. The few involved in criminal activities are presented as representatives of all the Muslims. Media do not bifurcate between the criminal segments of the society and peaceful and true followers of the religion. There must be some clear-cut bifurcation, which is very unfortunately missing. This paradox of identity portrayal is worrying Muslims and non-Muslim across the globe(Saeed, 2002). Both Muslims and non-Muslims find it difficult to assert the exact identity and the type of religious people.

Amina's Voice is a novel written by Hena Khan. It takes place almost exclusively in the United States, and focuses primarily on people whose families have left their previous national cultures and moved permanently to the United States. The major theme of the novel is religious harmony and religious identity maintained in a very peaceful atmosphere. In this novel there is a message for human beings across the globe that one can and one should maintain his/ her identity and religious identity in particular but not at the cost of others. The novel dramatizes how this goal might be achieved through interfaith harmony and by respecting each other.

Keywords: Western, paradoxical, scale, criminal, Amina's Voice, Hena Khan

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Pentadic Analysis of the Novel

Another equally important theme, which is interconnected with the first one, is religious tolerance. Written in the backdrop of American society, the novel conveys the message of religious tolerance, which is a major route to universal peace. If we want peace in this world we have to respect and tolerate people belonging to other religions, sects, genders and colors and so on and so forth. Without mutual respect we cannot dream peace in this world. Different characters such as Amina, Soojin, and Emily convey this message through different acts, scenes and agencies. I will analyze the character of Amina only in relation to the five elements that constitute dramatism as offered by Wanda Gág and will show how they contribute towards achieving the purpose i.e. interfaith harmony and maintenance of religious harmony in a peaceful way.

Throughout the novel we find that scenic based actions play the major role in the plot and development of characters, especially the main character i.e. Amina. The writer seems to have a purpose of pushing and developing a positive character in Amina and to serve this purpose she is constantly depicting scenes that give characters many chances to utilize different agencies to perform actions which are very much appreciable. The small purposes of many actions during the course of the novel contribute to the overall and big purpose of the novel: to create a peaceful and harmonious world where people belonging to different cultures can peacefully coexist with each other and where no one faces destruction of or fundamental sacrifice of their identity. However, the analysis of the third and second persona will show that there nonetheless remain undesirable limitations in these representations.

Characterization of Amina

Amina is the main character of the novel and she is the one who carries the novel with her. The whole novel is in fact about Amina's voice just as the name of the novel indicates. In this novel we see how Amina goes through different stages and feelings as she grows. In the beginning we find her a very innocent and pure hearted girl who has a strong and unquestioned friendship with Soojin. She is a girl who is not a hypocrite and she is very sensitive to the smallest of things happening around her. Along with these characteristics, she is the one who is very conscious of her Muslim and Pakistani identity and wants to keep her identity intact all the time. She is so identity conscious that she cannot imagine her friend altering her cultural and original identity despite the fact that Soojin is soon going to become an American citizen. Amina tells her that she must remain Soojin no matter what happens because this will keep her original identity intact.

The novel begins with a scene of a class in which we see Soojin, the Korean girl, encouraging Amina to participate as a soloist in an upcoming musical production. Soojin whispers in the ear of Amina and tells her that she can do it. Amina is afraid and having stage fright but Soojin tells her to reveal her talent to the class and to all the people. Here the scene is a music class but the purpose of this act is to bring the real identity of a character to fore. The announcement of the audition for the solo, however, takes Amina back to an old memory of a time when she got stuck and frozen and could not act her assigned role as John Hancock. Amina is afraid of this happening again. In this scene of the novel we find Amina being hesitant and she lacks courage to sing in front of people. Amina has got a beautiful voice but she lacks the courage to perform in front of people and her friend Soojin encourages her to sign up for a solo performance. The agency of encouragement used by Soojin here has a purpose to motivate Amina to act in a solo but the main agent, Amina, still feels shy and lacks courage to do so because the thought of the past failure is there in the back of her mind. This state of mind is related to her inability to detach from the past and failure of the past. Once in the past she failed to perform on the stage and now she is carrying that fear of failure along with her even though many years have elapsed. This tells us two things about Amina; that she is a team girl who cannot do things by her own despite having the full potential to do so. She needs someone to motivate and encourage her and be part of a team for her. Only then can she translate her potential into performance. A second dimension of her character is that she is always lost in past memories and cannot easily come out of her reverie. This action tendency is repeated in the scene where Emily extends friendship to Soojin and Amina. The agency and purpose of the agency throw light on the character of the main agent, i.e. Amina.

During the same conversation Soojin asks Amina what name Soojin looks like. She asks her if she looks like different characters and Amina tells her that she only looks like Soojin and none else. Again this may seem a trivial and girlish action taking place between two best friends but it has its future implication when put in the different scene. There is purpose behind this simple and trivial action, which is a proposed identity change by Soojin. But till this point readers are only told this much and the proposed identity change is not revealed yet. Soon after, on page 7 we see how Emily enters the scene and joins the two girls. This entry is dramatic in itself as Emily on that very day did not go to her friend Julie with whom she was always spending time. Amina wanted Emily to just go to her friend Julie and allow the two girls, Soojin and Amina, to continue with their gossip. But in this scene we find her indecisive nature exposed by the

writer. She could not translate her thinking into action in order to ask Emily to leave them. This (in) action shows the introverted nature of Amina.

The entry of Emily creates an important new dimension to the scene. The dramatic purpose behind the action Soojin wants to perform (changing her name) is presented in a scene where the number of the friends increases from two to three. This new friend is welcomed by Soojin and unwelcomed by Amina. Soojin tells both of them that she is going to become an American citizen soon. Soojin is revealing her identity to Emily but Amina is more concerned about her change of identity. Amina knew that she was Korean and now going to become an American but she is surprised as to why she was going to change her name also. So, this scene when studied in relation to action taking place and purpose behind it depicts the relationship among the three girls, and the different dimensions of their identities, all in America, but with different national backgrounds. On the one hand Amina had strong relations with Soojin and she objects to her name change, which represents her original cultural identity. On the other hand the same action is seen as worthwhile by the new friend, Emily, whose identity has always only been American. In this scene we see Amina emerging as a character who cares for original cultural identity much more than the other two girls do. Similarly, on page 9 we see another scene in which we find Amina trying to convince Soojin to remain Soojin because Amina loved the "Soojin" in her friend. She dramatizes the bond to their identities by referring to the scene of the elementary school where theirs were the names that would cause difficulty in pronunciation. Using her persuasive language as her tool, she tells Soojin that it has been one of their "things". Their friendship is therefore built in part on their sharing of a cultural identity that pre-dates the American scene. Amina is emphasizing to Soojin not to lose their own things. From the first description based on act, purpose, scene and agency Amina appears as a character who is more conservative and more worried about identity assertion.

Kind heartedness and politeness are other qualities of Amina and she cannot offend any person. She tries her level best to keep everyone happy and mostly she has to suffer emotionally for doing so. This is evident in the scene on page 12 when we read that Amina finally asks Soojin if Amina alone can still call her Soojin because what Amina knows is only "Soojin". But Soojin refuses and asks Amina not to call her Soojin once she changes her name. In order not to offend Soojin, Amina agrees even to this which gives her emotional pain. The act of agreeing with Soojin definitely gave Amina emotional pain but her purpose is to see her friend happy. The purpose in this scene is the driving force for the action of agreeing with the disagreeable for Amina to take place. But we must

remember that thus far Soojin has not changed her name and that it is only her plans for the future when she takes the citizenship oath.

The scene on page 12 and 13 draws our attention as to why Amina is against the change of name by Soojin. She says that the purpose of this opposition is that Amina doesn't want to be the next one who will have to change her name and her identity. In order to protect her own identity she is actually protecting the identity of Soojin and feels that her original cultural identity will be shielded if her friend is protected. If her friend loses her cultural identity chances are there that it will impact her own identity as well. Issues of identity and their ties to cultures of origin are also illustrated on page 25 and 26 which depict a scene in which Amina's parents are instructing the children to pretend to be perfect while their uncle is there with them from Pakistan for the period of three months. The instruction and the different responses from the two children is suggestive of the different personality the brother and sister have. The purpose of this action on the part of Baba (their father) is to hide their real cultural and religious identities as Pakistani American Muslims whereas the response of Amina towards this action, which comes in the agency of instruction, makes the standing and position of Amina very clear. She is worried about hiding her real cultural and religious identities and behaving perfect. She thinks it will be extremely difficult to pretend to be perfect because she knows that she is not perfect from her uncle's religio-cultural perspective. This scene also reveals one more characteristic of Amina. We find that she is not a pretentious kind of a character. She is a true character who has no hidden purposes or personality.

Amina's lack of pretentiousness is related to her introversion. There is a scene on page 41 that portrays Amina as a very shy girl. In this scene we find Rabiya, Amina's cousin, trying to motivate her and play the role of agency to make Amina sing in front of a camera. Here we find the agent, Amina, being reluctant to perform even when no one except Rabiya is around. She is already very close to her and Rabiya knows her talent for singing. But the way the writer had dramatized this scene tells the reader that Amina has got great potential but she is not acting according to her potentials. This is an indication that Amina has a big role to play in the course of the novel of which she is very much capable, but at the very same time she is a reluctant a girl. She needs some agency to make her play the role she will be required during the course of the novel.

Amina's lack of pretentiousness and shyness seem to be related to her desire to keep everyone happy; she does not wish to offend anybody. This characteristic of her personality is portrayed on page 73 in a scene where Soojin asks her view if she adopts the name of Susan. Amina did not like it in fact she

did not like anything other than Soojin, but in order not to offend her she agreed. This act on part of the character suggests the purpose of keeping her friend happy at all costs. The scene clearly indicates that the agents did the act of agreeing not because she actually agreed but because she did not want to hurt her.

It is possible to see Amina's lack of pretentiousness and desire to keep people happy as stemming from weakness. There is another act in this scene when the agent feels jealous of the friendship growing among the two friends. She cannot think of Soojin going away from her and becoming a friend with Emily. This act on the part of the agent in the scene where no harm was done to her gives an impression of weakness and lack of will power. The agent, Amina, is afraid of the third girl who is going to be part of the friendship. This weakness symbolizes not only Amina's personality, but the overarching question the novel is asking: how do people born in other nations adapt to the scene of America? Amina's uncertainty about how to incorporate the "American" girl into her relationship with another non-American friend represents the struggle involved in such scenic conditions.

The character of Amina who is the main agent of the dramatic structure of the novel has been portrayed as worrying about identity. She is worried not only about her own identity but also about the identity of others, as she is worried for Soojin. This is represented specifically in regard to Amina's home culture in a scene on page 84, which reinforces the purpose of the agent i.e. Amina. In this scene we see the feelings of her cousin, Maryam, being communicated through the agency of a piece of writing brought to her by Thaya Jan. When Amina reads the letter she is reminded of her Pakistani identity and she misses her own people intensively. She wants to be with her larger family and in her original country and culture. Similarly, Maryam, her cousin tells her that her family misses her and it has been long since they saw her. Here there is a very important point made by the writer when Maryam asks Amina to pay them a visit. Maryam's purpose is to meet with Amina but the act she wants to take place is that they come back to Pakistan; she does not show any interest in going to the USA. This is very important as far as the dramatic construction of the novel is concerned. One is reminded of his/ her identity and the place of belonging and that one should come back to the place he/ she belongs to. Therefore, Amina wants to once again be part of her people and her culture and she misses being away from it.

A major twist in the dramatic structure comes when we find that Thaya Jan is speaking ill of Amina and her interest in music. In the scene the two brothers are shown talking about the place of music in Islam. The agent, i.e.

Thaya Jan, asks Baba to worry about Amina and the purpose is to stop her from singing and using musical instruments, because he believes this is not true to her religious identity. We see respect being used as an agency that keeps Baba quiet despite the fact that he did not agree with his elder brother. This agency of silence and pretention to agree with him had a negative effect on the relevant agent, i.e. on Amina, as she overhears the discussion. She is shown in deep grief and discomfort. She wonders whether she was disobeying Allah and was committing sin by indulging in a type of action she was not supposed to be. The result is the scene in which we find her mentally upset and she does not feel like doing anything.

Another pivotal act by Amina moves the story forward and throws further light on the personality of Amina, the main character of the novel. In this scene she unintentionally leaks out Emily's liking for Justin. She commits a mistake by disclosing the secret. Her purpose is to protect Emily from Bradley but then we see Luke and Bradley do acts of humiliation towards Emily. There is a whole drama created by the act initiated by Amina. Although the purpose was noble, the resultant scene was a terrible one and she had to face the music when Soojin got angry and yelled at her for the first time in her life. So, here once again the pentadic elements combine together to unfold a very important characteristic of Amina's personality. We see her vulnerable and susceptible character who doesn't have mastery of controlling things with cunningness. She is very innocent and doesn't have bad intention and purposes towards others. However, her act of trying to protecting Emily ends up hurting Emily. The episode mirrors the larger dynamic of the novel's plot. Efforts to protect people and their relationships may do unintentional harm to people and relationships.

Chapter 18 heightens the self-doubt created by the previous scene into the next phase through the agency of the Sura which Amina is preparing with her Thaya Jan for the Quran competition. She is preparing Surah Al Humazah. Just to make the act of memorizing the Surah easy for her, Thaya Jan uses the agency of translation of the Surah into English. Because the Surah emphasizes the evil of backbiting, it intensifies Amina's angst about what she did to Emily, because she thinks it qualifies as backbiting. As a researcher I find that the scene is leading the action ahead and the development of the dramatic structure is scene bound. The purpose of the translation was to make things easy for Amina. Instead, it created a scene that further increased her uneasiness. Even as these actions intensify Amina's uncertainty and self-doubt, the next scene emphasizes the positive aspects of her character. Her mother soothes her and explains the difference between backbiting and Amina's unintentional harm to Emily to bring her out of

her mental chaos. This scene and the action of soothing by the mother reinforce the tenderness, politeness and innocence of the agent. This small scene will have huge impact on the overall identity of the Muslim character being presented here. It gives the message that there are good religious people who care for other human beings and take great care of the errors committed by them and want to compensate for them.

Chapter 20 presents the most important act of the novel when some unknown person attacks the Islamic center and put it on fire after filling the walls with hate filled words. The act and the scene of destruction all around terribly disturb the whole Muslim community. Most importantly Amina blames herself for the whole destructive action taking place and the horrible scene created as a result of that. She thinks that it was a result of her bad prayers she did only in order to skip Sunday school and the Quran competition. She thinks she should have not wished bad only because she was having stage fright and wanted to avoid it. This scene once again reinforces her innocent nature. How can one blame oneself for a destructive act done by some other person?

To this point in the story, the catalogue of Amina's actions have been indecisive, passive, and misdirected. She has opposed Soojin's name change, but acquiesced to calling her Susan. She has fretted about a loss of her old friendship, but seen Emily enter her relationship with Soojin. She has tried to protect Emily in one relationship only to hurt her in another. The bombing of the Islamic Center, however, creates the opportunity for her to take an action on behalf of her community. In the scene that begins on page 169 we see Muslim families sitting together at the home of Amina with everyone looking tired, worried and mesmerized by the act of terrorism. Life seems to have departed and deserted them all. In this scene baba asks Amina to play something for them and that act of music helps change their moods to more pleasant ones. Initially Amina was hesitant to take this action, but she was encouraged by the Muslim families and we had learned earlier that she was less afraid of playing the piano than of singing. This act of playing music served the purpose to bring them all out of the melancholic scene and brought smiles back on the faces of all; the baby Sumaiya and the elderly and strict religious Thaya Jan. Here the agent, Amina, altered the melancholic scene to a more beautiful one through the agency of a musical instrument and her special talent. The act in this scene served two purposes simultaneously; on one hand she brought smiles on the gloomy faces and on the other hand she softens and modernized the behavior of the strict Thaya Jan. At the very same time this act served the agent also by lowering down her stage fright by gaining approval for music from the Muslim community, and as we will

see she will thereafter be able to overcome her stage fright in her future performances.

Chapter 23, page 178 & 179 expands the feelings of Muslim community beyond its limits and depicts action that creates a very welcome scene and it serves the great purpose of friendship and humanity. In it the agent, Mark Heller, the father of Emily, visits the Muslim community and offers his help to contribute in the rebuilding of the Islamic center. All of the Muslims are very happy at his extremely generous offer to help them rebuild but the most important thing in this whole dramatic structure is the agency. The purpose, the scene and the act are taking place because of the friendship between Emily and Amina that serves as the agency for this mutual community support. Previously, Amina did not consider Emily as her friend and as someone who was sincere, but Emily shows herself to be true in her friendship. She brings her father to participate and help in the rebuilding of the Islamic Center. This act by Emily and her father arising from the scene of their friendship, leads Amina to truly reconsider her thinking about Emily and she instantly went to Soojin who was present in the scene to offer her sincere apologies for the error Amina has committed regarding Emily. Soojin also responded very positively and told her it was not time to discuss these things any more. The three friends are a source of support for each other. This symbolizes that to be Pakistani American is not to lose one's Pakistani and religious identity, but to gain the support of additional identities while maintaining one's real social and religious identity.

This theme is further strengthened in chapter 24, which reveals the great action on the part of the Park family and the Milwaukee Central Presbyterian Church when they offered the Muslim community the opportunity to hold the Quran competition in their church. This act actually serves the purpose of peace and humanity and mutual respect and the beautiful scene is once again possible only because of the strong agency in the form of the friendship between Amina and Soojin. Had there been no friendship between the youngsters of the two communities things might have not gone the way they went and might have worsened. But thanks to the agency of friendship, the other dramatic elements combined to create a beautiful plot for the novel which communicates the possibility of peaceful coexistence – even mutual support among the people of different cultures and societies.

In the last scene of the novel we see Amina participating in singing a solo with the hall full of people but with the confidence she gained from participating in the Quran competition and from seeing her music help her community in a time of trial. Those experiences provided her with the agency to overcome her

stage fright and act towards achieving her dream and her purpose of revealing the beauty of her voice to the world.

In the novel, we see Amina as an agent who is constantly developing more and more and acting towards achieving her purposes with the help of agencies and scenes created by the author. In the process, we see her fuse an identity for herself that makes compatible her Pakistani and Muslim culture in the American scene.

Conclusion:

Amina is not only worried about her own identity but she takes great care of the identity of her friend Soojin also. She doesn't allow Soojin to change her name and tries to convince her to maintain her original cultural identity. In the character of Amina the readers, particularly the immigrant youth have a lesson that they can positively guard their religious identity while adopting the new culture they are now part of. One should not be oblivious of one's religious identity at any cost and it one should advocate peace and harmony at all cost.

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