

## A Narratological Study of Actions in *My Ancestor's House*

### Umar-ud-Din

Associate Professor of English,  
Government Graduate College Civil  
Lines, Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan.

Email: [umarluk@gmail.com](mailto:umarluk@gmail.com)

(Corresponding Author)

### Muhammad Saleem

Professor of English, Government  
Graduate College Township, Lahore,  
Punjab, Pakistan.

### Muhammad Umer Azim

Assistant Professor of English,  
Government Graduate College  
Township, Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan.

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**Abstract:** *This study investigates Bina Sharif's play My Ancestor's House in the light of the narratological notion of action as a character trait. Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan (2002) insinuates that fictional characters are propelled by two types of actions: one-time actions and habitual actions. Routinized activities of characters betray their constant qualities which are labeled as their static dimensions. These fossilized aspects, in degrees, begin to appear unexciting, ridiculous, and ironic. On the other hand, one-time actions of the literary characters showcase their dynamic self to usher in a turning moment in life. Bina Sharif's characters not only qualify these definitions but they are also configured in the narratological concept of the act of commission, the act of omission and the contemplated act. The type of action determines the type of patterns that operate as the testimonials of characters. Actions ultimately adopt the symbolic plus ideological colour.*

**Key Words:** Bina Sharif, *My Ancestor's House*, Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, Narratology

## Introduction

Structuralist aesthetics acquainted the world with its own actual mechanisms of social existence that had been lying untapped for centuries. The structuralist paradigm first divided the social formation into multiple parts and then connected all these pieces into a collective whole where the humans feel themselves related in each way. The parts of social life move in circles that intersect each other under the provisions of the rule-governed grammar. These assumptions and practices of structuralism necessitated the comprehension of various aspects of life. One

of these paradigms is termed narratology. This discipline introduced us to the modernized concepts of narrator, narrative, narratee and narration that form the basis of the storytelling. This science of narrative provided us with different types of narrators, who, based on their telling skills, put us in a tricky position to judge the reliability/unreliability of their tone in the narratives they advance. Then it brings us to the concept of filter and focalization; the purpose of this lens of investigation is to decide the writer's intended poetics of 'knowing' through 'showing'. Whose ideology

is in fact, the epicenter operating behind the lingual streams of the narrator is the other dimension that implies the complexities of the narrative entity. Besides it, there are so many other insights of this science of narrative that tend to enrich our world of speech and writing.

It is generally believed that actions generate the patterns which essentially account for the determining of the type of a social being. Majority of the social beings like and wish to be permanently cast as a repository of the positives. Narratology looks at this phenomenon from another point of view. It enumerates various types of actions that we normally are forced to initiate to execute the discourses of social exitance. Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, in her book *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (2002), elaborates the sociology and implies the psychology of oft-repeated activities. To her, the routinized actions push the human into a comfort zone that he usually takes pride in. These repetitive activities that define him pleurably, in fact, are readily available to merge him into the signifier that is synonymized with the fossilization of things easily. This easy-going life routine tricks him into sliding slowly but steadily towards the completion of the dysfunctionality of existence. The passive and tamed behaviors that he is fond of beginning to guarantee his initiation into inertia certainly is not a lexeme with non-negative connotative extensions. These solidified activities, after some time, commence appearing, making faces at him. He may look significant to himself but to a narratologist, he is funny or comic. The more proud he is of his static identity, the more he appears ironic and humorous to a perceptive eye. On the other hand, the one-time action of a human may be dangerous to him or the others but, of course, in the eye of a narratologist, it is the proof of his being dynamic. And it is the dynamic version of life that is more meaningful and quite fit for the

realization of playfulness in all its aspects. Being dynamic is a qualification for the rapturous and ecstatic life. It is the emblem of unsurmountable self-confidence in one's self-consciousness.

## Review of Literature

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Bina Sharif, the writer of *My Ancestor's House*, herself wrote a brief but smart commentary on the play under analysis. She calls it a 'memory play' as it deals with her own past life, of her siblings and of her parents in Pakistan that she left behind decades ago before moving to America. Basically, it is written in the memory of her elder sister called, Deedi, who was cruelly boycotted by the family because she chose her husband without their consent. The husband also proved cruel as he did not support his family; he remained idle till her death. The thesis that Bina Sharif presents is very simple: if the life of a woman is hellish in Pakistan, life in America is no less cruel. She says, "as a woman in Pakistan, I felt confined"; "my writing expresses the horrifying alienation and loneliness which come with the pursuit of freedom in the West" (1996, pp. 376-78).

Nasrin Yavas' study *Problematizing home, belonging and identity in Bina Sharif's My Ancestor's House: A transnational approach* (2021) situates the present narrative in the domain of the transnational paradigm. Bindia leaves the male chauvinist country Pakistan for the sake of freedoms and liberties in America. But her problems do not subside there. She remains the metaphor of a weaver's shuttle between America and Pakistan. The liminality of life that is the result of the hybrid self keeps her entrenched in homelessness. The theories of William Saffron, Stuart Hall, and Homi K Baba are all relevant to the present dramatic writing of Sharif. Peter Civetta, in his essay *Expressing and Exploring Faith: Religious Drama in America* (2005), analyses Sharif's play *My Ancestor's House* briefly but very critically.

He presents the theme of greed and senseless selfishness found among the siblings. Comparatively, the wealthier are the greedier. The second theme that the present critic ushers in is the obnoxious role of religion in the life of all the members of the family. He says, "the weight of Islamic rules produces a stultifying effect on many in the family" (p.199). To Civetta, the play artistically suggests the reader close their traditional religious antidotes and go for the new and alternative options for the solutions of the present-day life. He holds that "the institution of religion has ceased having a positive impact on the lives of the characters" (p.199). All the above-mentioned analyses on *My Ancestor's House* are significant contributions to its different aspects, but no one of these criticisms have examined it from a narratological angle. Hence the present study.

### Research Methodology

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The present study is qualitative and exploratory in tenor. For its theoretical work, it is informed by Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan's *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (2002). This book offers character indicators in an unusual way. One of its provisions posits that indirect characterization in literature involves various techniques. One of these character traits is labelled as habitual action versus one-time action. The difference between the two produces important ideals of human existence. Rimmon-Kenan says that genuine grace goes with the one-time action as it expresses the dynamic vitals of a character. On the other hand, the repeated activities of life produce only the slavish behaviors of life. Like the simple creatures of the universe, the habitually triggered human being remains only in the patterned configurations of behavior. The tamed and crammed versions of life fail to exhibit the freshness of the original taste and bite. As the repeated actions are colourless and boring, that is why they cease to be graceful. After

some time, they become the technique to usher in ridicule and irony. It deprives the routinely related beings of the live spirit of life. The study is also carried out with the help of three types of acts given by Rimmon-Kenan. Act of commission accounts for the work that has been performed. The character is reaping the harvest of his effort. It is a positive feature. On the other hand, the act of omission is purely negative in character, "something which the character should, but does not do so" (2002, p.62). The third type is called the contemplated action. It is an idea born in the mind of a person to do something, but it never turns into reality. The present research is completed with the help of all these character indicators suggested by narratology.

### Research Questions

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The present research is carried out with the help of the following research questions.

1. What role the habitual actions play in the life of the characters of *My Ancestral House*?
2. What is the significance of one-time actions in the play *My Ancestral House*?

### Data Analysis

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J. L. Austin (1962), in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, gave a new meaning to the spoken language. He believes that speech and utterance perform actions just as our hands and the other body parts do execute human activities. But Bina Sharif, the author of *My Ancestor's House*, intentionally juxtaposes the speech acts of the characters against their physically performed actions. There are only a few examples of the one-time physically performed actions. Most of the time, the characters of this play are busy in speech acts that account for their imaginary escape from their real-life conditions. The futility and meaninglessness of routinized activities have made them socially and psychologically

emaciated and inertia stricken. Acts of omission and the contemplated acts rise so high in the graph that the acts of commission are just sidestepped. It makes them fall short of self-affirmation that renders them nonplussed. The withered abilities to go for those actions that change meaningfully change the course of human life pinch them to resort to the 'pretentious' acts like self-pity, fantasizing, blaming others, telling lies, and performing officiousness. These speech acts, most of the time, adopt ridiculous, ironic, and symbolic characters. Their dialogues and their arguments become self-referential to produce and aggravate their self-ridicule.

While deliberating over the innards of the characters imbued with habitual actions, Shlomith [Rimmon-Kenan \(2002\)](#) states that "all these kinds of actions can be ... be embowed with a symbolic dimension" (p.62). The figurative scheme within a text very smartly forecasts both the tenor and the tone of the thematic mine lying down the visible surface of the linguistic formation. One of these implicational tropes is the repetitively popped-up reference to the garden. This lexical item is a widespread craving across the siblings. Bindia dots upon 'The jasmines, the daffodils, the beautiful birch trees' and 'the best rosebuds' in the garden of Nazo. She cannot help crying, 'oh! the lovely roses'; 'you could never have a garden in New York'. 'Nazo, fond of the garden, asks Roona to 'let her (Bindia) stay in the garden. It is so lovely out there. In comparison with Roona's 'smaller garden,' the garden of Sahid is just 'huge'. 'And like others, he is also very fond and proud of his garden. It is the symbol of joys, luxuries and happiness that a character in *My Ancestor's House* provides to his/ her own family.

Bindia has no children as she has no familial life. She does not own her garden rather. There is a lot of concrete and cement around her house in America. That is the reason she is more fond of a garden than

other characters. She is passing a lonely life in America. Nazo's big garden signifies the worldly success and luxuries that she, along with her life partner, brings to the children. Deedi has no garden at all. Roona's smaller garden stands for the little material advancement she made for her family. To yearn passionately for the garden is reinforced by the unaffordable miseries of practical life that the unchanging, cruel, and constantly repeated actions occasion them. Nazo's hollowing unrest due to materialist hunger, Roona's apprehensions and worries to arrange money for her daughters, Sahid's unjust moral compass that is the result of modern vicious circles of life and Bindia's rootlessness in the American ambience all sharpen their desire for the carefree childhood implicated in the lexical item 'garden.' Bindia committed a one-time important act of leaving Pakistan for America. It brought a big turn plus a boost in her life but then she lost her energies to further struggle for adjustment to the new environment. Deedi proved her dynamism by choosing a husband of her own choice, but she also failed to replenish her forces and courage to overcome her miserable marriage at the hands of her worthless life partner. Sahid, Nazo and Roona, who could not make any one-time extraordinary action, are fully exhausted in terms of peace, contentment, and self-actualization. The inability of all the siblings to come out of their orbit to go for the fresh action has made them complaining souls, liars, myopic, and short stature. Roona comments: 'It is the same thing over and over again. We never solve anything.

Mother is the symbol of the sap of life for all the characters in this play. Bindia says, 'mother is dying'; her 'vacant stare...is almost frightening'; she 'tries to lift up her hand...but she cannot...tries to speak ...but cannot'. The routine-based habitual life has squeezed their prospects to nourish and flourish vigorously. Mother is the key metaphor to aestheticize the central theme of the play i.e.,

lifelessness. This theme of dead unresponsiveness is configured in the formulations of the whole-part relationship commonly known as the metonymic. The attitudinal and existential trajectory of all the siblings snakes into the undynamic mother image: the grammar of the characters in the play under analysis. For example, the rhetoric wishful thinkings and desires of all the characters signify the paralyzed hands and vacant stare of their mother. Bindia says that she wanted to help Deedi even at the cost of her own self. She wanted to tell her, 'Deedi, you are not alone'. The other example of the act of omission is Bindia's regrets. She is sorry for not having reached out earlier when the mother was able to speak and recognize her family members. She says, 'I just wish I came back a little bit earlier'.

Variety is the name of human exposure to the panoramic colors of life, the signifiers of varied emotions, feelings, sensations, and passions. All these colours are linked with our dynamism or inertia. For instance, when humans move like prisoners in the bound of their habitual actions, their cyclic motion loses its natural hue. The background culture of the play under analysis is Pakistan where the stopped up, closed society has lost all the colours of playful, healthy, and productive life. The characters are the direct extension of the jammed routine-oriented existence. Life looks beautiful in the lap of change. Only that is absent here. Consequently, *the funeral has overtaken the general atmosphere here. At the start of the play, all the characters individually and then in unison offer prayers to the departed soul. 'Prayers sound like a tragic Greek chant. 'The grave is full of fresh flowers. The bedridden mother is also lying on the bed near the grave. In parallel to the grave, there is a beautiful garden.* The costumes of all the actors are either of light or white colour. Only Deedi, who off and on appears as an apparition, is in bright colours. Even the heads of the participants in the funeral process are in white caps. [Bina Sharif \(1996\)](#)

justifies it thus: "The climate of Pakistan is extremely hot in July. The element of heat is a very important aspect of the play" (p.380). We know very well that the white colour is the sign of an absence of colours. The white colour or the absence of colour has run deep in all the interiorities and exteriorities of their life. Whether breathing or nonbreathing, they are nonliving individuals. Bindia says, 'I...felt exactly like Deedi: helpless, bewildered, alone'. Why the play offers such a bleak picture? Answer is very simple. The social beings or the individuals in the play never come out of their repeated activities. They are never ready to go for more and more extraordinary works in life. All the acts of commission are of the same nature. This uniformity of their actions has sapped their mobile energies. Bindia says, 'I feel as if I have not slept in years'; it means their regeneration is beyond the possible. If someone like Deedi tries to experience colours/freedoms in life, that is thrown away by society.

[Bina Sharif \(2009\)](#), in one of her interviews, says, "there is humor in everything" (p.166). In her play, *My Ancestor's House* humour stems mainly from ironic behaviours. Owing to their permanent presence in the same frame of action, the character, with the passage of time, become mentally incoherent and disjointed to some extent. Their dogged tenacity to the same action turns them into some self-ridiculing stuff. And Sharif achieves all this through the ironic modes. Ali Buksh, the servant at the house of Nazo, is illiterate. He tells Bindia that his wife suffers from fever, sons are coughing and vomiting. In the next breath, he says that 'we are Muslim people,' 'little things like cough and fever do not matter-everything is fine,' and 'we have to thank our God.' This discourse of the servant is sufficient to prove his foolishly automatized personality but he considers it his duty to continue to advise Bindia not to smoke and not to go back to 'wild country, kafir country':

America. What is humorous in Ali Buksh? Contradictions of his discourse should be comprehended by him; instead of advising others, he should be advised. This ironic situation creates humour for the reader. Roona rightly tells Bindia: 'Here even the servants tell you what to do and what not to do.' Nazo tells Bindia, 'You have started smoking a lot' and 'smoking is not good for you. She further advises Bindia to leave America and settle permanently in Pakistan. The more she advises Bindia, the more she is ludicrously exposed. This ridicule of Nazo comes through her ironic dialogues. She is quite serious in herself but easily funny to the reader. In fact, like Ali Buksh, her sensibility has gone monotonous and disgusting owing to her lifelong meaningless cyclic motion in the boring frame of the same action.

Capitalism creates the unflinching hunger for materialism in humans to such an extent that the basic purpose of humans, that is, sympathy and sacrifice, is lost. A capitalistic system also plays a huge role in keeping its followers strictly in the same orbit of action. It never allows us to spare some time for the expression of kindness and cooperation towards others. Joy and not happiness is the only target of our cut-throat competition. As the competition is beastly, therefore, we adopt various types of negative characteristics to overtake others in the mundane rattle race. Fraud, lies, hypocrisy, allegations against others, and collusion of the supporting hegemonies are the common measures that we adopt to pursue our nefarious games of worldliness. The uniformity of their actions has rendered them ridiculous and worthless. Nazo, her husband, and Sahid have already pooled their selfish and cruel plan to expel Deedi along with her children and the worthless husband from her mother's house. Being elders among the siblings, they are bent on occupying the house cleverly. First, they try to pave the ground against Deedi, in front of Roona and Bindia, by finding faults with the former.

They condemn the husband of Deedi. They also show their apprehensions about that worthless man who, they think, might occupy, along with his wife, the mother's house. Then they further exercise their pressure against the subaltern Deedi: Sahid says that her sinister husband wants that the former should bring up his children. Sahid very clearly announces that he will not do this job. Bindia and Roona have discerned the plan of Sahid and Nazo very well.

Encouraged by Nazo, Sahid, advises Roona and Bindia to construct a commercial market in the location of the ancestral house. It would every month fetch a lot of rent from the banks to be built there. He also announces, along with Nazo, that the latter's husband has voluntarily agreed to supervise the construction work. For this purpose, Sahid requests a power of attorney from his siblings. As these women do not trust their elder brother and elder sister, therefore, they decline the request. When the dissenting group advises selling the house, Sahid disagrees with it. Then all of a sudden, he changes his strategy. He begins to say that all of them are 'empty souls'; all the children of the family are 'emotionally crippled monsters incapable of having a healthy conversation'. To dispel the effect of his younger sister's doubts about him, he spreads a new trap before them. He says, 'I am trying to save our children. He elevates himself to their father's position and says, 'I promised myself to prevent further decay of my family.' He announces to 'get Deedi out of this mess.' He even offers his own house for Deedi. When the group of his younger sisters does not show agreement, he begins the self-pitying process. He curses his career in the army. He also belittles his value before others saying that he is not happy with his institution as it usually destabilizes the governments.

[Azim \(2021\)](#) concludes that there is a causal relationship between madness and meaningless activities. The same formulation is spotted in *My Ancestor House*. The

characters are mercilessly and cruelly involved in 'an unending quarrel.' Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan's conclusion that the behaviours in the oft-repeated actions adopt figurative dimensions is relevant to these characters. Their imprisonment in the tower of ever static actions and their uncritical disposition has led to the outgrowth of volatility, characterlessness, self-pity, strong belief in fatalism, rattling race for material gains, false generosity, and allegations against each other. These obnoxious practices blurred their linear axis of existence. Bindia says: 'I run around in circles. Everyone claims that his/her love for the mother is greater than those of others. Bindia states she served the mother during her stay in Pakistan better than others. Nazo also takes pride in caring for her mother more than others. Roona also claims to have visits to look after the mother. Sahid says that he will protect Deedi and his mother. All these characters have empty claims of love and care for the mother. There is another form of madness found in these characters. Every character tries to have a father figure for others. Nazo positions herself as the mother and Sahid calls himself the father. The reality is that no one cares about others. Everyone is selfish in each way.

The contemplated acts and the acts of omission abound in the play under analysis. It is also a sort of their madness. Bindia wants her share of the house immediately to settle somewhere comfortably. Roona wants her share because she wants to arrange for the dowry of her daughters. Nazo wants to construct a commercial building there as it would bring a healthy income for her household. Sahid also wants a power of attorney from her siblings as he is desirous of fleecing all of them. The excess of all these works shows that they are without any pleasant colour in their acts of commission.

## Conclusion

The investigation of *My Ancestor's House* produced very significant results. It can be announced humbly that the habitual actions left dangerous impacts on the life of all the characters. Of course, some characters like Deedi and Bindia showed courage to bring a big change in their lives via one-time actions. But after some time, the fevers and frets of this action also subsided miserably. At that time, their life needed some other bigger initiative, but they failed to attend to the call positively. Consequently, their existence was as faded as that of the other ones with routine action. Unable to come outside of the unhealthy orbit, they fall flat on sinister practices like bragging, double-crossing, dishonesty, an exhibition of false emotions, levelling allegations against others, and self-projection. These immobile individuals behave like a robot in terms of their lust, instinct, and material thirst. They are all ready to cheat each other to bring more and more luxuries and pleasures to their own families. Their acts of commission are directly related to their routinized activities. Their acts of omission are so many. For instance, Bindia has a wish to comfort Deedi, to bring toys for her nephews and nieces, to come earlier to see her ailing mother and to shift Deedi and other family members to America. But these are just desires and whimsical materials. Their non-plastic and non-mobile characters essentially invite censure from the perceptive reader. Most of the time, their actions, behaviours, and discourses are ridiculous and ironic. They often signify the meaninglessness of life. Colours of the dynamic life, which are essential for the processes of self-actualization, are absent in their lives. They are serious in their thrust but easily funny to the reader.

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