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## EXPLORING AMBIGUITY IN TAUFIQ RAFAT'S "WEDDING IN THE FLOOD": A NEW CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

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## ABSTRACT

*This study employs New Criticism to analyze Taufiq Rafat's *Wedding in the Flood*, focusing on ambiguity as a key literary device that enhances the poem's interpretive depth. New Criticism centers on close reading, isolating the text from external contexts such as the author's intent or historical background. In *Wedding in the Flood*, ambiguity is woven into the symbolic dimensions of the poem, particularly through the contrasting imagery of the flood and the wedding. While the flood symbolizes destruction and unpredictability, the wedding traditionally represents hope and new beginnings. This duality creates layers of meaning that reflect human anxieties, societal expectations, and the fragility of personal choice. The study explores how Rafat's use of language intensifies these themes, highlighting the tension between tradition, superstition, and individual agency. Ambiguity enriches the poem's emotional and thematic complexity, inviting readers to question the stability of relationships amidst societal obligations and life's uncertainties. By presenting *Wedding in the Flood* as an ideal subject for New Criticism, the research underscores the enduring relevance of Rafat's poetic mastery.*

**Keywords:** *New Criticism, Ambiguity, Imagery, Tension, Juxtaposition, Material Possession, Exploration*

### **Introduction**

"Poetry, I think, helps us to name and namelessness, to formulate the unsayable" (Plath, 1982, p. 572). This perspective highlights poetry's unique ability to express the ineffable. As a genre, poetry allows readers to engage with diverse emotions, thoughts, and experiences, often conveying what cannot be articulated through ordinary language.

In Pakistan, numerous prominent writers have embraced poetry to express profound ideas, employing figurative language, imagery, symbolism, and literary devices such as ambiguity. Writers like Zulfiqar Ghose (1935-2022), Alamgir Hashmi (1951-present), Imtiaz Dharker (1954-present), Aysha Baqir (1985-present), and Taufiq Rafat (1927-1998) stand out as key figures in Pakistani English poetry. Among them, Taufiq Rafat is recognized as a pioneer, celebrated for capturing the cultural richness and complexities of Pakistani society (Mehmood, Saleem, & Azeem, 2024).

Rafat's poem *Wedding in the Flood* reflects different phases of life, presented in free verse across five stanzas, each with shifting narrators. Through vivid imagery, conversational language, and juxtaposition, Rafat explores societal injustice, using symbols such as rain, a cot, a palankeen, a looking glass, a river, and oxen. While existing research on the poem has addressed themes like the portrayal of the bride, structural elements, and socio-psychological factors, this study shifts the focus toward the poem's hidden meanings through the lens of New Criticism.

### **Research Question**

How does ambiguity in *Wedding in the Flood* shape its thematic and emotional complexity within the framework of New Criticism?

### **Research Objective**

To explore how ambiguity in *Wedding in the Flood* shapes its thematic and emotional complexity within the framework of New Criticism through close reading and textual analysis.

### **Literature Review**

This literature review examines various critical analyses of Taufiq Rafat's poem *Wedding in the Flood*. Scholars have approached the poem from multiple angles. Rasheed, Javed, Aqeel, Javed, and Munir (2022) explore the demystification of cultural psychology through a structuralist critique. Similarly, Amjad, Tahir, and Ahmad (2021) analyze the socio-psychological factors embedded in the poem. Mehmood, Saleem, and Azeem (2024) offer a feminist perspective, focusing on the portrayal of the bride. Additionally, other studies have investigated the structural and linguistic elements of the poem.

While these analyses provide valuable insights, they primarily engage with surface-level themes. A significant gap remains in exploring the deeper, more intricate complexities of the poem—particularly its use of ambiguity. This study seeks to address this gap by applying New Criticism, a theoretical approach that emphasizes close reading and textual analysis, to uncover the hidden meanings and nuanced interpretations within the poem. New Criticism emerged as one of the dominant American literary theories in the first half of the 20th century, challenging the previously prevailing biographical-historical methods that dominated literary studies in the 19th and early 20th centuries (Tyson, 1999). Key figures of this movement include William K. Wimsatt, I.A. Richards, Allan Tate, Robert Penn Warren, F.R. Leavis, and Monroe Beardsley.

Lois Tyson, in *Critical Theory Today* (1999), explains that New Criticism dismisses the need to consult the author's intent or historical background, as the meaning of a text is embedded within the text itself. Tyson emphasizes that readers cannot rely on an author's interpretation but must engage in "close reading," examining the text's language, symbols, metaphors, rhyme, point of view, and other formal elements—such as ambiguity, tension, paradox, and irony. These components collectively shape the literary work and provide the foundation for textual analysis.

Monroe Beardsley reinforces this view, asserting that "art should be evaluated on its own terms," highlighting the importance of the aesthetic experience, which arises from the formal elements of the work—its symbolism, structure, and language (Beardsley, 1958). On the other hand, Charles E. Bressler mentioned in his book, *An Introduction to Theory and Practice*, "There is no need to study the author's life and time, no literary research, and no other textual information is important except, perhaps, a dictionary because the

poem itself contains all the necessary information to discover its meaning.” Meanwhile, he argued that “it is the job of the critic to unravel the various apparent conflicts and tensions...” Though it can only be analyzed by exploring the text’s use of irony, paradox, ambiguity, denotations, connotations, figures of speech, literal and figurative language, theme, and meter, critics can discover all these elements only by using the text itself because “the poem itself will reveal its own meaning” (1994) as Bressler focused on only figurative elements in interpreting the poem by stating that “while investigating the poem’s diction, new critics will seek out the figurative element evidenced in the text, such as metaphors, similes, personifications, and a host of other terms describing the use of figurative language in poetic diction.” After revealing those elements, he turned his attention towards the poem’s imagery, paradox, or irony by saying, “That seems to unite the entire poem, thereby giving it its organic unity and meaning,” so it’s necessary to closely read the figurative elements, tension, ambiguity, and paradox rather than the author’s life and textual information.

Consequently, this research builds upon the thoughts of the literary critics by integrating the lens of New Criticism, specifically Bressler’s concept of figurative elements, to examine the poem’s ambiguity.

As a result of consideration of the new critical gap in previous research, this study will provide a new dimension to the interpretation of the poem *Wedding in the Flood* by exploring the depth of words with a New Criticism perspective. Since New Criticism enriches the reader’s understanding of Rafat’s poem, it encourages readers to engage more deeply and critically.

### **Research Methodology**

The methodological approach used for data collection in this study is qualitative in nature. This qualitative study employs textual analysis to explore ambiguity and tension in *Wedding in the Flood* through the lens of New Criticism.

With the principles of New Criticism, textual analysis aligns well, emphasizing the text itself rather than the external factors. It facilitates an objective analysis of Rafat’s writing style, enhancing a deeper understanding of the poem.

### **Analysis & Discussion**

The poem *Wedding in the Flood* offers multiple interpretations that vary according to individual perspectives, as everyone has their own knowledge and experience, so they can have different perceptions regarding the poem. Many scholars have done great work on this poem by analyzing it from a unique perspective, such as feminist, demystification of culture psychology, socio-psychological factors, and so forth; therefore, this implies that the poem’s exact meaning can be elusive. However, the researcher employs New Criticism to explore its prominent meaning.

In this section, the author has presented the result of the analysis of the elements of how ambiguity and tension are used in Taufiq

Rafat's poem *Wedding in the Flood*, which shows a rich array of ambiguity and tension, and the following section delineated their findings:

### **Ambiguity**

The term ambiguity is derived from "ambiguous, which means uncertainty or unclear meaning and a sign bearing multiple meanings. In *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930), William Empson views texts containing moments in which meaning is not clear; the book is organized around seven types of ambiguity that William Empson finds and criticizes the poetry (Empson, 1949). Taufiq's poems are known for their determination; most of his masterpieces have several interpretations. Like in *Wedding in the Flood*, the poet uses ambiguity to enrich the poem; he reflects some complex emotions and ideas surrounding the wedding that seem to be ambivalent and inconclusive.

### **Ambiguity and Tension in the Title**

Taufiq Rafat's poem "Wedding in the Flood" is loaded with the ambiguity as the title itself is ambiguous, readers cannot immediately determine what the author intends to depict because "Wedding" and "Flood" are two juxtaposition words, that indicate the light and dark like one is the symbol of joy and unity while the other is the symbol of destruction then how these two words can be united, though this juxtaposition creates tension and raise the question whether they celebrate the wedding or it is a tragic incident and that creates ambiguity, however, with close reading of the poem, it can be analyzed and interpreted with several meaning according to the perceptions of critic.

### **Ambiguity in the Poem**

*"I like the look of her hennaed hands  
Gloats the bridegroom, as he glimpses  
Her slim fingers gripping the palankeen's side  
If only her face matches her hands,  
And she gives no mother-in-law problems,  
I'll forgive her the coat and the trunk  
And looking glass. Will the rain never stop?"*

*It was my luck to get a pot-licking wench." (2<sup>nd</sup> stanza, lines 18-25)*

These lines from the second stanza depict the bridegroom's mixed feelings and thoughts; it shows the ambiguity in the groom's emotions, such as, on one hand, he gives a compliment to the bride's hand as "*I like the look of her hennaed hand,*" and at another point, he is comparing her hands to her natural and physical attire as his admiration is superficial and limited. The line "*if only her face matches her hand*" adds further ambiguity, as a groom is uncertain if her appearance will satisfy him and indicates a lack of interest.

### **Frustration or Dissatisfaction**

"*Will the rain never stop?*" gives the two interpretations that whether the groom is frustrated with the weather or if we see the above emotions of the groom, then it gives the sense of discontent

with the marriage, or it possibly indicates an inner conflict and dissatisfaction, so it creates tension among readers about what kind of emotion the author wants to represent here.

### **Male Dominance or Material Possession**

"I'll forgive her the cot, the trunk, and the looking glass" through this line, readers cannot estimate that poet want to show male dominancy or the material possession as the bridegroom says he will forgive her but under what circumstances he forgives, has she committed a crime or anything wrong, however, this line is ambiguous as it doesn't interpret the sense clearly whether the bridegroom is disappointed with the perceived lack of wealth of bride or he wants to be dominant by taking control over her.

### **Scared or Worried**

*"Not a familiar face around me*

*As I peep through the curtains. I'm cold and scared.*

*The rain will ruin the cot, trunk, and looking glass." (stanza 3 line 28-30)*

As the poet Taufiq Rafat narrates the thoughts of the bride, he shows uncertainty in the bride's thoughts, specifically through these lines, "I'm cold and scared," that show confusion. It's unclear it's unclear and depicts tension about whether she is scared for her new journey or worried about her dowry, as these lines, "*Not a familiar face around me, the rain will ruin the cot, trunk, and looking glass,*" show the uncertainty about whether she is scared of unfamiliar faces or anxious about her things.

### **Uncertainty Clouds the Groom's Father's Expression**

In the 4th stanza, "*Dear God, how down, down.*" is coming down." The line is ambiguous in the way that it conveys multiple expressions, whether it is an expression of fear, resignation, or frustration. Groom father's frustration can be interpreted as whether the groom father truly accepts the girl or if he just gets his son married for the sake of her dowry, and he is disappointed after seeing her dowry. The author doesn't provide a clear expression of the father of the groom.

### **Superstition or Accusation**

The poet has been repeating this phrase three times by stating it in different ways: "*The girl has been licking too many pots,*" said by the bride's mother; "*It was my luck to get a pot-licking wench,*" expressed by the bridegroom; "*The silly girl's been licking too many pots,*" declared by the groom's father. This line is basically ambiguous in such a way that "licking too many pots" could imply several interpretations, such as either the author wanting to depict that they are accusing the girl of bringing the bad luck and raising the question. Whether the author wants to convey that it is a blame or superstition. In some cases, it can also be a superstition that the author wants to highlight, or it may reflect the old belief that she is responsible for the rainstorm and misfortune.

### **Conshire: One of Death or Desire**

*"Oh, what a consummation is here". (stanza 5th)*

Here the “consummation” creates several interpretations that raise the question of what kind of completion has the author has depicted; in one sense, it could give refer to the consummation of the marriage or the consummation between bride and groom. However, it also gives the sense of a tragic ending that suggests dissolution rather than happiness.

### **Unwanted Wedding or Tragic Union**

*“The coy bride, truly wedded at last”*

This last line has reflected the numerous interpretations; in one sense, it could imply that the bride is finally united with the groom, or perhaps it can be said that through death, as she is wedded in the flood, truly wedded gives the sense of an ironic tone that suggests an unwanted or tragic union. It’s ambiguous that what kind of situation the writer wants to depict here: whether he wants to write on the tragic union of bride and groom or he wants to highlight the concept of exploitative marriage.

### **Conclusion**

In the poem *Wedding in the Flood*, ambiguity pervades the symbolic dimensions, enhancing the depth of words in Rafat’s poem. Rafat’s depiction of flood and marriage is the evidence of ambiguity, which embodies the contrasting and multiple interpretations, as flood is often seen as a destruction and natural disaster while wedding traditionally symbolizes hope and new beginnings, though the circumstances surrounding this union cast doubt on their future. In the poem, the author shows the consistency of the community’s insistence on proceeding with the wedding ceremony, highlighting the tension between the personal choice and societal obligation. Rafat’s language in the poem enriches the reader’s understanding by the different perceptual thoughts through the flood’s ominous presence.

Moreover, these ambiguities create a more complex and tragic version of the poem by deepening the word’s exploration and human anxieties and nature’s unpredictability. These tensions and ambiguities make the poem a rich exploration of inner emotions and social duty.

Ultimately, the poem’s conclusion offers resolution, leaving room for readers to question the endurance of human relationships and mind stability and how they face the traditions and life’s unpredictability. It invites the critical examination of how the social expectations and obligations can cause inconvenience to one’s life. It also invites readers to explore it through the lens of tradition, superstition, family dynamics, and fear.

Rafat’s masterful use of ambiguity not only enhances the understanding of the poem’s depth and complexities, but it also enhances the reader's understanding of the uncertainty inherent in human existence. This open-endedness invites further exploration of Rafat’s work through formalist perspectives, making this work more analytical and an ideal subject for New Criticism.

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