
Unraveling the Riddle of Murder in A Case of Exploding Mangoes

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Open-ended plots will always leave an impression on the reader's memory. The novel *A Case of Exploding Mangoes* urgently needs to be dissected to find out who killed General Zia in the open ending. Using a qualitative descriptive method, this article aims to discuss the mystery in the novel by Mohammed Hanif and to separate the extrinsic and intrinsic elements; the theory of New Criticism has been used to inform the research. There are three most likely suspects in this premeditated murder case: General Akhtar, Ali Shigri, and Zainab. Of the three suspects, it is found that there is ample evidence to suggest that Zainab, the blind woman, is the one who committed the murder of General Zia.

INTRODUCTION

Conspiracy theories are debatable because it triggers people to form their own camps based on their own personal beliefs. As with the plane crash that killed the former President of Pakistan, Muhammad Zia ul-Haq, the crash of the Hercules C-130 aircraft is still a big question mark in many people's minds. Through this tragedy, Mohammed Hanif managed to pour it into a debut novel in the historical fiction genre, *A Case of Exploding Mangoes*, which was awarded as the best debut novel. One of the things that attracts the attention of readers is the plot, which has many conspiracy theories about who killed General Zia and has an open-ending so that readers are left guessing who the assassin is.

This research uses the New Criticism approach, in which a work is only seen in terms of its beauty and intrinsic elements, and readers are required to separate extrinsic elements in analyzing it. In this study, the researcher will focus on the plot of the novel *A Case of Exploding Mangoes*, with two research questions as follows: How is the plot written to find the murderer of General Zia Ul-Haq?

As explained above, the author raises the issue of who is the most "likely" murderer of Zia ul-Haq because this is the plot that is the main attraction of this novel. In the analysis, the author will describe the three characters who are the main suspects in the murder by giving their respective reasons. Then, provide an analysis of who is the most plausible character to kill General Zia ul-Haq.

This study uses the title "Unraveling" to attract readers to understand more about the structure and meaning of the novel. It is important to study literature objectively by avoiding elements that cause bias in interpretation, such as the author's biography or history in the real world that can affect the reader's emotions. Furthermore, Brooks (1979) in his journal has criticized that readers should not be influenced by the author's background when interpreting a work. Instead, readers should focus on the text itself, as it is often inaccessible or irrelevant. In this way, the reader can understand the novel by not overlooking small details to build a complete meaning.

Previous research on the same novel, for example, Afzal et al., (2020) found that meaning changes according to the reader's understanding. This journal uses a deconstructive approach and Derrida's theory in analyzing the novel *A Case of Exploding Mangoes* which creates ambiguity for readers because of its diverse meanings so that it is not difficult to equate perceptions in solving a puzzle at the open ending of a novel. On the other hand, Lodhi et al., (2019) found consequences that Zia Ul-Haq received due to his

dictatorial leadership such as distrust, disunity, rebellion and so on. This research uses a comparative method by comparing other novels, as a result this research is too limited to political aspects so it does not present other aspects such as psychological and social aspects. Additionally, the research has the nature of continuity so that in the research of Arafat et al., (2019) found how oppressed the community was during the Zia Ul-Haq regime and this research is sparking the reader's political awareness to care about countering oppression from the government. Of the three studies above, none used a new critical theory by separating intrinsic and extrinsic elements. Therefore, this research is a renewal for the novel *A Case of Exploding Mangoes* by focusing on the structure and meaning of literary works.

LITERATURE REVIEW

New Criticism

A literary philosophy that originated in the 1940s, New Criticism, focuses on the strict investigation of literary texts and the creation of a standard measure of literary worth (Duvall, 2015). The movement's goal is to give a more systematic and scientific method to analyzing and understanding literary works. Bansal (2020) noted that the main concepts, influenced by T.S. Eliot, include the belief that features such as meter, diction, and alliteration are not simply formal qualities, but also vital to the message within a literary work. This also supported by a study from Hendra (2016) revealed that New Criticism refers to a method of literary interpretation that emphasizes the content of the text itself, suggesting a close reading technique that attempts to reveal meaning through the language and structure of the text, while limiting the impact of extraneous factors.

Due to the novel is based on real story, the plot of this work will be examined using New Criticism theory. The author want to concentrate on examining components derived only from the text, with no influence from the true story of the C-130 plane accident.

Plot and Open-Ending Plot

Plot is the interconnected and thrilling sequence of events that make up the flow of a story. Sholihah (2021) also defines that plot is a sequence of interconnected moments, where each moment has an effect on the next. This means that plots are created not necessarily in sequence but are still related to each other. In addition, intrinsic elements and involving the reader in the story are factors that can influence plot development. The plot can draw readers further into the novel and its characters by influencing their tastes

and expectations (Kiosses, 2021). This engagement can lead to a deeper understanding of the story's themes and messages, which is an important part of overall relevance.

Freytag in his book “Die Technik des Dramas” which was published in 1863 proposed a model showing the plot development pattern where a story normally has five acts that when connected form a complete arch.

Exposition

The exposition, defined as the introductory portion of a narrative that provides essential background information, serves as the foundational opening (Jahn, 2021). This first plot setting gets to present the scene, characters and define the situation as well as create the background needed to anticipate the rest of the action. In this case it acts as the authors instrument to lay down the background and the setting of the story from the word go.

Raising Action

In the case of the narrative, the development of rising action that is a series of events that increase in tension is usually seen as the part of the plot towards the climax of the whole procedure. This stage is marked by emergence of conflicts, growth of the content and thematic characters' relations, and escalating progression of tensions or build up of the dramatic action, which involved the medium to high-stake conflicts and challenges to the character's goal (Cutting, 2016).

Complication

The story then develops further complications, defined as the obstacles and problems that arise to impede the protagonist's progress (Walsh, 2018). These complications, in essence, as layers of conflict that enrich the plot and put to the test the characters. They help to introduced the higher level of concern from the spectators and develop several line of the conflict that merge at the denouement. Which brings the story to the peak, the incandescent point of the narrative's structure, at the episode where the dominant struggle is at the critical, the intense and extreme confrontation and characters at their most crucial confrontation.

Climax

The climax can be defined as the outstanding point, after which the conflicts of a particular story have to be solved, certain changes abridge to occur and the major characters are bound to make primary decisions to envisage their destiny (Nikoleris et al., 2017).

Resolution

Last, the resolution stage also identified as denouement, brings an end to the story by portraying how characters react to the effects that they are left with from the climax stage (Delatorre et al., 2018). At this stage the reader is disentangled and the complications in the plot are explained as well as the conclusion of the story is shown. It provides closure needed to wind up loose plot strands, shows what becomes of the story's characters and provides a feeling of finality

The given connections reveal the concept of plot function not as the mere mechanical division but as the integral system that facilitates the natural evolution of the/storied events along with the coherent and engaging construction. Each of these elements flows from the previous ones to provide an organized flow that takes the readers through the logic and passion of a story while at the same time making the story meaningful at any one point.

On the other hand, an **open ending** is a literary technique in which some part of the story is left unsolved, leaving the reader to speculate about what might have happened (Preis, 1990). Open endings are sometimes ambiguous and they generate lively discussions among readers. Thus, this analysis is discussed because of the many interpretations of the novel's ending. . Some stories could use an open ending that tells the audience what happens, maybe using less definitive endings that force the reader to contemplate the narrative's meaning.

RESEARCH METHODS

Research Design

This type of research from scientific writing was descriptive qualitative research. This means that the research is not written using numerical data, but rather includes the reading experience of the researcher or research participant. Qualitative methods in this study were needed to analyze human behavior or habits. Singh (2006) emphasized that the descriptive method is a method used to explain a phenomenon, event, or human's attitude that actually happened or just was a fiction. From this description, the qualitative method is the right method to analyze the behavior and attitude represented through the narrative text by the characters.

Furthermore, after analyzing the data on the novel more deeply using qualitative analysis, descriptive method was needed in this study to describe the finding through words. The

benefit of this type of descriptive research is to provide research results that are systematic, accurate, and understandable to readers. By using descriptive methods, researchers can also easily describe the context, so this method is appropriate for analyzing a novel where the context in a data is needed. Since this research is a literary study, the instrument used is the researcher herself. The researcher is involved in analyzing and interpreting a structure and meaning in the novel *A Case of Exploding Mangoes*.

Research Procedure

The first stage of this research is to determine a problem formulation by thinking about the urgency of why the problem needs to be analyzed further. The formulation of the problem determined by the researcher is how the plot is written to find the murderer of General Zia. After that, the researcher reviewed further literature related to relevant references. Finally, the researcher determined the object of research by selecting several characters that fit the problem formulation: Ali Shigri, General Akhtar, and Zainab.

Data Collection Technique

Of course, data must be collected before it can be analyzed further. The following are the steps of how the researcher collected the data: using document study, that is, reading the novel *A Case of Exploding Mangoes* repeatedly, marking important quotations that can solve the problem formulation, then taking notes and identifying the data. Finally, the researcher used close reading technique by ignoring extrinsic elements and focusing on the text of the novel itself.

Data Analysis

In this section, the data is analyzed by further selecting the most important data to support the research and deleting the less important data. The data are then described in narrative form and analyzed using qualitative descriptive methods. The researcher also ensures that the data and analysis are easily understood by the reader by organizing the data properly. Finally, conclusions are drawn from the data and interpretation in conjunction with the theory described in the literature review.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Exposition

The exposition is characterized by the setting of military government in Pakistan in 1988. It is also marked by the introduction of the main narrator, Ali Shigri, who is a junior air force officer and also the leader of a silent drill team in the military. As additional information, a silent drill squad is a squad that is led by non-verbal instructions and relies on precision timing.

“Despite the absence of verbal commands in silent training, the commander's inner voice should still be at strength 5. The voice should obviously not be overheard by the person standing next to him” (*A Case of Exploding Mangoes*, 2008, Appendix 1).

The squad holds their weapons with rifles or bayonets (a rifle tipped with a knife), thus if one of them moves a few seconds or even milliseconds late, there will be an accident to the team.

With his job as commander of a silent drill squad, the novel begins with Ali Shigri's arrest on charges of threatening national security with the disappearance of Ali's roommate, Obaid, who stole a military plane with him. Ali is then placed in a military cell and required to write a statement about what he did during his roommate's disappearance.

On the other hand, the novel also shows the point of view of Muhammad Zia Ul-Haq, a President and General of the highest rank with four stars on his arm. He develops as a character who becomes paranoid day by day due to internal threats: He speculates that all those closest to him want to bring him out of his position of power.

Eventually, the words escaped: “Can you upgrade my safety level?” The General nodded enthusiastically and squeezed his hand again with the grip of a boxer. General Zia frowned, his left eye shedding tears, and his right eye looked suspiciously at the imam. “Please raise it to the red level” (*A Case of Exploding Mangoes*, 2008, p. 20).

In the citation, General Zia requests his close friend and head of ISI (Inter-services Intelligence) to tighten his personal security by raising the level to emergency level or red level. He was then guarded daily by several soldiers and did not leave the army house even for state matters. General Zia Ul-Haq was also known as a dictatorial leader who served in Pakistan for eleven years. With his actions of abusing freedom of speech and being arbitrary with his people, there is no disputing that there were many people who planned to assassinate General Zia, mainly to stop his absolute power. Each party had their own personal reasons and revenge why Zia should be murdered, and they also had their own

well-formulated plans. These two things can be used as a reference to find out who actually killed Zia ul-Haq.

Apart from General Zia, General Akhtar is also introduced in the novel as the second most powerful man in Pakistan. He holds responsibility for Zia Ul-Haq's safety after the announcement of the code red. He is also portrayed as a figure who likes to sycophantize General Zia in order to get the power he desires.

The overall security of General Zia was the charge of General Akhtar and his Inter-Services Intelligence, (*A Case of Exploding Mangoes*, 2008, p. 36). The only person who spoke up was General Akhtar. He was a former middleweight boxer, clean-shaven, and of tribal origin. He had so much military dignity that he could have been a general in any country on any continent. He had a knack for carrying himself with martial grace and a talent for sucking up to his superiors. In fact, there was a joke going around the trenches that he could wipe out an entire enemy unit just by kissing their asses (*A Case of Exploding Mangoes*, 2008, p. 18).

The above quote shows that General Akhtar is a two-faced person, leading to a joke in the military that he can put on a happy face in front of others but in the back he could have stabbed the person. General Akhtar was also a man who legalized all methods to achieve his own personal goals by misusing his power. The ISI or a kind of FBI that he heads in Pakistan, allows him to intercept any information from his disliked opponents.

Raising Action

Raising action occurs when the characters in this novel have their own revenge for the arbitrary treatment of Zia Ul-Haq. The raising action also introduces a character named Zainab. Zainab is a blind woman who won the sympathy of the international press and the people of Pakistan, especially women, because she demanded justice for several people who sexually harassed her. However, the law in Pakistan is unequal towards the blind, she is required to be able to identify the perpetrators of these crimes. As a result of this, Zainab was accused of lying and sent to jail on charges of adultery and threatened with stoning.

Why were the Western press so fixated on sex and women? This was the third international press story about Blind Zainab. A simple case of unlawful sexual activity had been blown out of proportion. General Zia was perplexed. Perhaps because the woman is blind, he thought, because she isn't much to look at. It's surprising that Americans are devoting front-page space to fornicating blind women. (*A Case of Exploding Mangoes*, 2008, p. 107).

As a result of the many protests against Zainab's case, General Zia decided to seek legal advice from a former judge in Mecca who was also a retired subordinate. His name was Qadi, he was ninety years old and gave Zia the following legal advice:

"The court does not distinguish between people who are able to see and those who are not. Now let's suppose for the sake of a legal argument that the rapist is blind in the case. Is he deserving of any special treatment? So the victim, blind or not, is entitled to the same level of scrutiny, the same rights" (*A Case of Exploding Mangoes*, 2008, p. 111).

Based on the quote above, Qadi encouraged Zia to give the same punishment instead of giving special treatment to the blind. General Zia trusted Qadi greatly, so the advice given by Qadi strengthened his stance to sentence Zainab to death by stoning. Thus, a sense of resentment grew in Zainab's mind for the punishment of a crime she had never committed. She also always did good to living beings by feeding the birds around the prison and massaging pregnant women in prison. This made the people in the prison including the jailer make her the favorite prisoner.

On the other hand, Ali had a different grudge. Ali Shigri wanted to kill Zia ul-Haq because he was aware of the fact that his father, an important Pakistani colonel, did not commit suicide but was killed on Zia ul-Haq's orders.

He had prepared a statement on my behalf and had me sign it in ten minutes. The statement said I had to sign because I was the only male member of the family. I did not want an autopsy, suspected no wrongdoing, and had found no suicide note (*A Case of Exploding Mangoes*, 2008, p. 44).

"Colonel Shigri did not commit suicide and I will not commit suicide," I uttered. Then I placed my mouth near his ear and yelled with a force of 5, "Is that clear?" (*A Case of Exploding Mangoes*, 2008, p. 133).

Based on the quote above, Ali realizes that his father's death was odd since he was forced to sign a statement saying that his father committed suicide, moreover, no death record or autopsy was provided for the Shigri family. However, he realized that he was just a junior officer who had no power to voice the injustice. Over this incident, Ali secretly developed a grudge and began plotting the assassination of Zia Ul-Haq.

Turning to General Akhtar, the reason behind him wants to kill General Zia was his own ambition. Someone who always felt he was second to General Zia strengthened his desire to dethrone the power that had been led for eleven years by his own best friend.

But when he stood in front of the mirror in his office day after day, counting the three stars on his right arm, he was unable to deny that he had turned into a shadow of General Zia. Like a devoted puppy, his career had followed General Zia's ambitions (*A Case of Exploding Mangoes*, 2008, p. 146).

Referring to the quote mentioned above, General Akhtar began to feel disillusioned with what he was going through at that time. He had to always obey General Zia, making the dreams of his superiors come true so he began to want his own dreams realized. From here

he thirsted for power and plotted the eventual assassination of Zia, the very person he was supposed to protect due to a code red from Zia's paranoia that grew over time.

Complication

In this section, it is explained how each character launches his mission to kill General Zia. Starting with Ali who buys nectar in the form of snake venom which is applied to the tip of his sword, he plans to launch his action during a tank demonstration in Bahawalpur. He gets the poison from a man who is a laundryman in the military, Uncle Starchy.

"How much for one cup?" I questioned as I thrust my hands into my empty pockets, knowing full very well that Uncle Starchy never asked for money for his wares.

"Whom do you think I am, sir? A drug pusher?" He returned to his usual muttering. The gleam in his eyes had gone out.

"I need to handle a family matter," I said with apology.

"He's tired now." He patted his burlap sack. "It will take another week to produce what you need." (*A Case of Exploding Mangoes*, 2008, p. 84)

The most highly guarded man in the nation was in a swirling circle of bayonets and only inches away from the tip of my hungry, poisonous sword (*A Case of Exploding Mangoes*, 2008, p. 224).

The above quote implies that Ali is looking for an opportunity to take his revenge when he meets Uncle Starchy who can create poison from snake venom. The "family business" in question was the death of his father, and it can be seen that he managed to obtain the poison and use it at the Bahawalpur tank demo in the second quote. In addition, he also created the scenario that there was an accident due to the delay in the movement of the silent drill team, so Ali pretended to try to save Zia by scraping a small wound to prevent sharp weapons from hurting Zia, when in reality Ali was injecting poison into his body.

In contrast to Ali, General Akhtar ordered his subordinates to use VX poison gas embedded in an air freshener. This air freshener was then used in the air conditioning on Pak One's plane on Zia's way to Bahawalpur.

General Akhtar was saluting with the greatest of care, keeping his hands straight, his own eyes level, his spine erect, every single muscle in his body pulsing with respect. The Shigri kid loses his mind in the end, but the aircraft General Zia is about to fly on has enough VX gas to destroy a village. (*A Case of Exploding Mangoes*, 2008, p. 227)

The quote shows that General Akhtar already knew that Ali also had the same desire to assassinate General Zia. Therefore, he made his assassination plan a backup plan if Ali failed to carry out his plan. After he missed that Ali had actually injected poison into Zia's

body, he then launched his action by waiting for General Zia to get into the Pak One plane and inhale the VX poison gas.

On the other hand, Zainab accepted the fact that her death sentence was final, inviolable as it was an order from Zia Ul-Haq. She pronounced a curse on Zia in front of the crows she was feeding. According to the beliefs in the novel, curses mean nothing except in front of a crow that is fed until its stomach is full.

"Hope your lifeblood turns to venom. I hope the earthworms eat your inward parts." The blind Zainab pressing her temples with both of her hands (*A Case of Exploding Mangoes*, 2008, p. 205).

It is also a well-known fact that most curses don't work. The only way they can work is if a crow hears a curse from someone who has fed him to a full stomach and then carries it to the person who has been cursed (*A Case of Exploding Mangoes*, 2008, p. 206)

Zainab, at first believed that the sentence would be revoked as the entire cell spoke of how it was impossible for a poor blind woman to be sentenced to death, but after she found out that her death sentence was irreversible, she began to curse Zia Ul-Haq and wished that he died a horrible death, just like she did. The curse is then carried by crows who are obsessed with sweets including mangoes. They flew here and there around the barracks where there was a mango orchard.

Climax

The climax begins with the departure of Pak One's plane carrying General Zia to the army house after his tank demonstration in Bahawalpur. He carries a huge crate of mangoes in the plane to invite all his subordinates to a mango party. The most important thing in this section is when General Zia invites all the people he suspects will kill him, including General Akhtar and Ali Shigri to board the plane with him. This calmed him down as all the "suspects" were with him. However, Ali Shigri was expelled by the officer for violating the plane's rules so he was not on Pak One with General Zia. On the other hand, General Akhtar's plan failed miserably so he had to turn off the air conditioning and pretended that it was turned off because General Zia was not feeling well at the time.

Then in the middle of his praying, he changed his thoughts and lunged towards the VIP capsule door. "Major Kiyani, inform the crew to turn off the air conditioning; the president is feeling unwell" (*A Case of Exploding Mangoes*, 2008, p. 236)

After that, the plane hit a crow that had eaten too much. The crow was then sucked into the plane's engine, creating engine damage. The pilot driving the plane then panicked and accidentally turned on the air conditioner with toxic gas in it.

He knows he didn't dodge the bird strike when the pressure gauge on his port engine suddenly drops and the air conditioning kicks in. He feels a cool breeze on his sweat-soaked skin and smells lavender, which makes him forget his orders to turn off the air conditioning. (A Case of Exploding Mangoes, 2008, p. 242).

"Pak One. Come in, Pak One. Pak One." The air-traffic controller's voice is trembling. Bannon's voice comes over the headphones. "Oh my God. These people are sleeping. No, they're dead. The pilots are dead. We're all dead." He chokes on his last sentence, and the only sound that comes over the headphones is electrical static (A Case of Exploding Mangoes, 2008, p. 243).

Based on the quote above, it was the crow that was the beginning of why Pak One's plane crashed. With the pilot dying first due to poisonous gas, the plane then crashed and created a huge explosion. The giant plane that could carry tons of weight killed all the passengers and the driver. There were no survivors.

Resolution

After the Pak One plane crash, there was chaos. Many were relieved or even celebrated the death of Pakistan's dictatorial leader. Conspiracy theories began after the ending hinged on Pak One's crash and did not explain who the real killer was. With General Akhtar, Ali Shigri and Zainab as the most likely culprits, the author believes that Zainab's curse was the reason why Pak One's plane crashed and Zia Ul-Haq was killed. Here are some reasons for it:

1. The novel also includes some mystical elements with all the superstitions and beliefs of people in Pakistan at that time. So it is very possible that if a dead person casts a curse, it can reach the person being cursed.
2. The crow that Zainab was feeding was the main cause of the accident.
3. Ali could not have been the culprit, as his lover and roommate Obaid was also on the plane and refused to move in with Ali.

I don't want to be one of those people who only turn to God when they're in a tight spot. I don't make any promises. It's not the time to make any commitments, but if You can save one person on that plane, let it be Obaid. Please, God, let it be Obaid. If there is a parachute on that plane, give it to him. If there are any miracles left in Your power, let them happen now. And then we'll talk. I'll always talk to You. I'll always listen to You (A Case of Exploding Mangoes, 2008, p. 244).

From the quote mentioned above, Ali prayed desperately for God to save Obaid. He continues to ask Him even though he knows he is not a religious person.

4. General Akhtar could also not have been the main assassin as he failed to turn on the poisonous gas in the air conditioner as he himself was on the same plane.

CONCLUSION

In the plot, many parties rebelled secretly and planned to overthrow General Zia's regime. The three most prominent of these are Ali Shigri, General Akhtar and Zainab. Ali wants to kill General Zia in revenge for his father's death, General Akhtar because of his ambition, and Zainab because of the curse of the unjust laws imposed by General Zia. It can be inferred that Zainab is the real assassin because it was her crow's curse that was the cause of Pak One's engine failure.

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