

Theories on Symbolism

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In general parameters, Symbolism is rather difficult to define and equally difficult to set within specific limits. Yet one can agree with Arthur Symons that without symbolism “Words can be nothing more than arbitrary symbols that human kind has created for the convenience of communicating with one another” (01). Similarly, Henri Peyre goes to the extent of remarking: “Literary and artistic criticism would have long since being reduced to silence if the terms that designate periods, movements, tendencies or various styles were all so precise that their meaning could be agreed upon once and for all time (01). But that unfortunately is not the case. Charles Chadwick in his important monograph on symbolism remarks, “Spelt with the small initial letter the word ‘symbolism’, like the words ‘romanticism’ and ‘classicism’, can have an extremely wide meaning. It can be used to describe any mode of expression which, instead of referring to anything directly, refers to it indirectly through the medium of something else. Clearly, therefore, the meaning of ‘symbolism’ must be narrowed down if it is to have any significance as a critical term” (01). The problem is further magnified by the fact that ‘symbolism’ has been used in mythology and religion as well. Religious art is mainly symbolic. The term has also been used by anthropologists for their use.

So to understand the scope and functions of symbolism, it becomes necessary to limit the meaning of the term. The term “Symbolism” is a practice of representing things by means of symbols or by investing things with a symbolic meaning or character. Further Arthur Symons states, “words are also symbols” (01). We are surrounded by symbols that represent diverse meanings and notions in it. However in literature, a symbol is an object that has meaning beyond itself. The object is concrete and the meaning is abstract. If we talk about the universal symbols, Fire for example, may symbolize general destruction, passion may symbolize the flames of desire, and the fiery furnace may symbolize hell. While as, the dove and yellow ribbon are just two of many symbols for peace throughout the world. It becomes necessary to distinguish symbolism from that of a metaphor. Symbols are not metaphors, nor analogies either. A metaphor is an implied analogy where one thing is compared with another dissimilar thing. Symbol on the other hand stands for something else, usually with something that is concrete. Symbols organize record and communicate huge amount of information in a quicker way.

Symbol as a word has the Greek origin. The term has been brought into English language by way of Middle English. The actual Greek term was ‘Symbolon’, where ‘Sym’ stands for together and ‘bole’ stands for ‘a throw’. This means “to throw together”. A formal definition of Symbolism according to Webster Dictionary is, “Symbolism is an art or practice of using symbols especially by investing things with a symbolic meaning or by expressing invisible or intangible by means of visible or sensuous representations” (35). Similarly, Oxford English Dictionary (OED) defines the term as: “a thing conventionally regarded as representing, typifying, or recalling something else by possessing analogous qualities or by association in fact or thought” (1318). According to A. N. Whitehead, symbolism therefore is:

The human mind is functioning symbolically when some components of its experience elicit consciousness, beliefs, emotions and usages, respecting other components of its experience. The former set of components are the symbols and the latter set constitute the meaning of the symbols. The organic functioning whereby there is transition from the symbol to the meaning will be called ‘symbolic reference’ (Whitehead 07-8).

Thus we can say that a true symbol can never be a straight and direct translation, the kind of relationship between the image and the reality it expresses, cannot be established. In literature, Symbols can be given as many multiple interpretations to define a subject; however the subjective expression may lead the possible understanding to anywhere. Symbols produce a sense of communication between the writer and the reader. In the field of poetry, symbolic representation depicts the concealed objects that have been beyond ordinary human revelation. As Graham Dixon states:

Pick the rose. It is used to symbolize the Virgin Mary and, before her, Venus, the pricking of its barbs being likened to the wounds of love. The association still survives in the common meaning of a bunch of roses (I love you). Flowers might be delicate and short lived but they have acquired a vast range of unpredictably durable meanings, a whole bouquet of significances: affection, virtue, wantonness, religious steadfastness, transience. The modern multiplication of floral emblems and trademarks has, however, taken its toll. When the red rose can stand for Labour Party, a box of chocolates and Blackburn Rovers FC, it seems fair to say that its symbolic potency has been somewhat dilute by over-use (n. pag.)

Dixon makes an appealing use of symbol and expresses it more vividly, in defining the term. His reflection of the objects through symbolistic approach is coherent with that of Kamala Das. Kamala Das has given the portrait of the human behaviour and the status of relationship between man and woman in her poetry. In her poetic expressions, the relationship among humans (man and woman) is presenting a sense of deterioration in the existing domestic arena. The illusion that her poetry reflects has discreetly projected a kind of awareness among the audience. Her natural and spontaneous overflow of emotions, thoughts, and ideas etch have brought a rapid alteration in the world. William York Tindall goes to the extent of asserting that:

. . . symbol-making is our natural activity and our condition. Catching up with artists or trying to account for them, resent philosophers provide an assurance that the value we place on symbols is not misplaced. Whitehead regards symbolism, as a mode of perception and a cause of error, but although he talks about literature at times, he is too general and indifferent to help us with the literary symbol. Cassirer, who seems more to the point, says man is a symbolic animal whose languages, myths, religions, sciences, and arts are symbolic forms by which he projects his reality and comes to know it: ‘ what reality is apart from these forms is irrelevant’ (425).

In symbolism, the use of concrete imagery is necessary to express abstract ideas and emotions. The artistic feature observed in the poetry of Kamala Das is the use of symbols and images in her dialogues, rhymes, lyrics, poems, and expressions etc. The service of diverse symbols that is under analysis carries a lot of description in her poetry. Such representation has taken certain changes in the mood and behaviour throughout the globe. Emancipation and liberty

in the form of symbols has been the main focus that her writing has been alluding to. In this way, a symbolist presents an institution of reality and of forces. In this context Maurice Beebe suggests:

It is no accident that the method of art involves symbolism. For the artist must work with single instances; he can tell only one story at a time, paint only one picture or sing one song. The story, the picture or the song, would mean nothing artistically unless it is dragged in its wake a wide penumbra of meaning. Behind every concrete object of art is reflected the shadow of countless absent particulars which it affectively symbolizes. The hold upon us of a character in fiction, for instance, is its ability to remind us of all those actual people who are therein described. It is not the particularity of such a figure but rather its valuational generality which carries the appeal. We have never met Polonius nor shall we ever meet him: there is no such person. Yet we meet him every day and he lives for us because we have met so many dull, busy-body, meddling bores in high places (Beebe 09).

The fact that symbolism is a part of poetry, rather an integral part has been realized quite early. The symbolism as a movement spread to whole of Europe is evident from the fact that Mallarmé, who lectured extensively on the philosophy of the movement “manifesto of Symbolisme in Le Figaro” published in (1856-1910) by Jean Moreas, is considered its leading theoretician. His circle of friends extended beyond the strict boundaries of France. He projected literary tours of Holland and Denmark. A number of Portuguese poets moved in the circle of French symbolists. George Moore came to feel that symbolist meaning added to the charm of fiction. Joseph Conrad (1857-1924) was only in sympathy with the doctrines of French symbolists. Regarding Symbolism, he remarked:

A work of art is very seldom limited to one exclusive meaning and not necessarily tending to a definite conclusion. And this for the reason that the nearer it approaches art the more it acquires a symbolic character.

All the great creations of literature have been symbolic and in that way have gained in complexity, in power, in depth and in beauty (Aubrey 205).

Poets use personal as well as private symbols to make comprehensive understanding among readers. They employ techniques of exploiting pre-existing and widely shared associations with an object or action. For example, peacock with pride, eagle with heroic endeavour, rising sun with birth, setting sun with death etc.

Symbol therefore in a broadest sense of the term is anything that signifies something else; there are a variety of symbols, conventional symbols like “Rose”, “Dove” etc. There are set of symbols used in Christianity too.

We can safely say that a true symbol can never be a straight and direct translation. The symbol is a living part of that which it symbolizes and there is, to some extent, an interpretation of identities, and thus a continuity of meaning.

When a variety of ideas are brought together the visible idea being more conspicuous than the rest, it performs the function of a symbol and suggests the other ideas and connects them together.

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