

A Study of Symbolism in Western Aesthetics

***Laxman Singh Gorasya**

Distinct symbolic trends and patterns have emerged over the years. The symbolist technique of symbolism has become an effective literary device for the expression of a poetic thought and feeling. Symbol is not merely a sign but it evokes an attitude towards it and rows an emotion. It includes metaphor, myth and image. Symbol may be "private" which has a special significance for the poet and it may be archetypal which has a traditional significance in general. The work of a symbolist poet is to identify similarity between two things through the eye of the mind and suggest association, sometimes unknown and hidden. Frederick Clarke Prescott says that "Simile is more the language of prose while metaphor names an imaginative fusion which has already taken place in the poet's mind." But a symbol can be a figure of speech merely; it is something much more which is used by the poet not merely to illustrate an idea, but to charge it with emotional connotations. A pure poetic symbol is always implied, never explicitly stated.

Symbolic poetry always becomes obscure for the readers because of its mystic nature. W. B. Yeats says that "you cannot give a body to soemthing that moves beyond the senses unless your words are as subtle, as complex, as full of mysterious life as the body of a flower or of a woman. The form of sincere poetry, unlike the form of the 'popular poetry' may indeed be sometimes obscure--- but it must have the perfections that escape analysis, the subtleties that have a new meaning everyday."²

Symbols are of many kinds. Some of the types are explained here. Personal symbol is always created by a poet when he has lived a memorable past and which has left sense impression on him. Every poet has his own private experience of life to form special symbols. William Blake's poem titled as 'The Sick Rose' is

* Asstt. Prof. of English, Govt. Kalidas Girls' College, Ujjain (M.P.)

a good example for the illustration of personal symbol. Blake always forms personal symbol but sometimes he symbolises certain objects which have traditional values.

O Rose thou art sick !
The invisible worm,
That flies in the night,
In the howling storm,

Has found out thy bed
Of crimson joy;
And his dark secret love
Does thy life destroy.

[The Sick Rose]³

Here the Rose stands for a personal symbol. The words "bed" and "love" are specially used to have definite sexual connotations. The pleasant act of love is destroyed by the surreptitious and furtive entry of the worm in this Eden of the Natural world. The worm is like a serpent. Here the Rose itself stands for life is corrupted by a foreign element which takes advantage of its being frank. Thus the crimson Rose blighted by the secret worm symbolises the destruction of joyous relationship by cunning and guile.

Another type of symbol is traditional or archetypal symbol. Northrop Frye explains a traditional symbol as one "which connects one poem with another and thereby helps to unify and integrate our literary experience."⁴ Traditional symbolic poetry has a risk of repetition in the use of traditional symbols. But it can have a new-dimension if a poet imposes a wealth of meaningful images with a potential symbolic meaning. Arnold's poem - Dover Beach is a good example of traditional symbol.

The sea of faith
Was once, too at the full, and round earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar.

[Dover Beach]⁵

Here we can see that Arnold has extended the traditional symbol of the calm sea into his personal symbol. The different moods of the sea suggest different thoughts to the poet. The calm sea stands for serenity, balance and stability, which

the poet needed for himself. But when the calm surface of the sea is disturbed by the noisy waves, the poet is reminded of "the turbid ebb and flow of human misery". Thus the sea becomes a symbol of contemporary problems for Arnold. Therefore, he uses archetypal concept of sea and adds personal impressions which suggest his own response to it. There are some other types of symbols like-mystic symbols and spiritual symbols. Here we find necessary to give a short account of some symbolic poets of the western aesthetics.

W.B. Yeats, Pound, Eliot, Blake, Keats, Coleridge, Browning, Tennyson, Hopkins and others are the big names who claim to be symbolist poets. Yeat's 'Sailing to Byzantium', 'Leda and the Swan' and 'The Second Coming' are his major symbolic poetry. His mature poetry generates a great emotional intensity and discloses its depths of implication. He is a poet who emphasizes the exuberance of the soul. The world of the senses has been brilliantly juxtaposed with the world of the intellect with help of two different sets of symbols of music - the sensual music and the soul's music.

Another notable symbolic poet is Keats. His 'Ode to Nightingale' is milestone of religious symbolic poetry where death is not tenifying and violent for Keats. After hearing the song of the Nightingale, Keats is lifted to a plane of consciousness where he has no decay. He feels rich to die. Here we find religious symbol in his poetry. The song of the Nightingale is the symbol of a deathless music. Music and the bird are fused here to form a symbol.

S.T. Coleridge's 'Kubla Khan' is a highly symbolic poetry. It has been composed on the occult plane. It is a vision in a dream. What is important for us is to consider the fact that his experience is an illusion of the senses. Inspiration comes from the sub-conscious state of our mind. Here it is notable that Coleridge is interested in the creative process. This poem reveals about symbolic vision: that it has to do with both the real and the ideal, the phenomenal and the non-phenomenal world.

Some other notable symbolist writers need separate illustration which will be given simultaneously during the description of the history of the symbolist movement and its impact on English poets. Here, we will have a brief review of the origin and the development of the symbolist movement.

Arthur Symons says, "Symbolism is seen under one disguise or another in every great imaginative writer."⁶ The symbolist movement became an international movement. It pervaded literary art of nineteenth century France, Germany and England. The sparks of symbolic tendencies were also visible in the English Romantic

poets- Coleridge, Keats, Blake and Shelley. Carlyle says about this literary generation that "It is in and through symbols that man, consciously or unconsciously, lives, works, and has his being: those ages, moreover, are accounted the noblest which can best recognize symbolical worth, and prize it highest."⁷

The symbolist mode of expression travelled a long distance before it achieved its final culmination into movement in Nineteenth Century in France where Baudelaire, Mallarme, Rimbaud and Valerie were the literary giants who gave definite and final expression to the symbolist movement. On the other hand, it developed as a powerful literary genre in England in the poetry of Pound, Yeats and Eliot and in Germany in the poems of Rilke.

Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867) became a great symbolic force in the Nineteenth Century in French literature. He avoided sentimentality and laid much stress on poetry being apprehended by intuition and feeling. His 'Fleurs de Mal' (1857) became a pioneer of symbolic technique for its suggestiveness.

Valerie's symbol established a kin relationship between man and the universe. He believed that symbolist poetry has been continuously trying to recapture from music what belongs to it. Mallarme's poetry is also a fusion of complex suggestion of imagery and verbal music. On the other hand Rimbaud said that the role of a poet is to apprehend the metaphors that exist in the world and to provide meaning to it. Though it causes obscurity but it is an essential element in poetry. Here it is important to note the opinion of Mallarme who said, "To name an object is to do away with three-quarters of the enjoyment of the poem which is derived from the satisfaction of guessing little by little : to suggest it, to evoke it-that is what charms the imagination." Thus the purpose of symbolic poetry is to provide suggestion to the mind of the reader through symbols, ideas, emotions or an image of something which is non-phenomenal or abstraction. Here we find two types of symbols - "Human symbolism" and "Transcendental symbolism". Symbolism that represents emotions which falls within the reach of human experience is called "Human symbol". On the other hand, "Transcendental symbolism" is created when concrete images are used as symbols of transcendental things which exist beyond the phenomenal reality. Transcendental symbols can not be created by an ordinary poet. "Human symbolism" can be seen in the well-known poem of Baudelaire titled as - 'Harmonie du Soir'. On the other side, transcendental symbolism can be found in Sri Aurobindo's poetry like 'Savitri', 'Urvasie', 'Songs to Martylla' and 'Love and Death'.

Mallarme is also a transcendental symbolic poet. He wrote in a letter to his friend in 1867 about his transcendental experience that, "I am now depersonalised;

I am no longer Stephen Mallarme, but simply a means whereby the spiritual universe can become visible and can develop through what was once me."⁸ His famous sonnet 'Allegorique de Lui-meme' is a good example of transcendental symbolism in which he traverses from the visible world to invisible world.

The French symbolist movement influenced English literature and its writers - Pound, Yeats and Eliot. This movement became a powerful literary force in English literature. Tracing the development of symbolism over the years Lothar Honnighausen has said, "Since unfulfilled love in this life constitutes one of the basic and painful experiences of the pre-Raphaelites, it comes as no surprise that the originally positive emblems (rose=love; lily=purity) turn into symbols of frustration for Yeats. As negative symbols they contrast with the image of the white bird which expresses the lovers' longing to escape into an erotic world of dreams."⁹

Yeats and Symons both believed that the true experience of the symbol is possible in passive contemplation or in the state of infinite insignificance of action. A symbolist transcends the phenomenal world and enters in the realm of non-phenomenal world. Yeats says that symbolic metaphor is a kind of expression which is closest to perfection because it carries subtle meaning in itself. He was in close touch with the symbolist writers of France and the Irish countryside was the main source for myths and legends for his poetry. In order to evoke beauty and truth he discovered the Irish mythological symbols. He wanted to live a peaceful life in an island called 'Innis Free' which became a symbol of his beautiful and peaceful life in the natural world in opposition to our industrial and commercial ugliness of the city. He wanted to escape from this ugly world either by inaction or by death. Therefore he comes out as a passive hero who does not want to act for various reasons. Yeats's symbols are unattainable for those who are not familiar with his life and circumstances. According to Brenda S. Webster, "The pattern of fear, defiance and deflation with its corresponding imagery, recurs in the drafts of one of Yeats's most famous poems - 'Sailing to Byzantium'. When we have understood the pattern and the defensive function of symbols like the sword, we are in a better position to understand more complex symbols like Byzantium's golden bird."¹⁰

T.S. Eliot was another notable poet who was influenced by the French symbolist movement of the late Nineteenth and early Twentieth century. Eliot's most of symbolic poetry have personal connotations for him. He has his private

mythology which often creates problem for the average readers. He often juxtaposed unrelated things for maximum poetic effect. Here is an example from his poetry titled as - 'Prufrock':

“When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherised upon a table.”

His symbols function at more than one level and traverse from the particular to the general. The 'Waste Land' is his highly symbolic poetry in which London has been described as a sexually frustrated city where marriage has reached to a complete failure of relationship and sex has become a mechanical process, which has caused boredom. Here, the poet is not only symbolising London as The Waste Land but also symbolising the whole western civilization which has lost its spiritual way of life. Western civilization is burning in the fire of materialism. He also suggests a remedy to get out of the danger of materialism. He suggested spirituality, which provides love, peace, wisdom and pure knowledge.

Tracing the advancement of symbolist movement we come to another symbolic writer - Dylan Thomas who was the dominant poet of 1940s. Readers and critics both remark of his Penchant for “attempting to press too much into too little space, “¹¹ as David Daiches has rightly observed. His love for the obscure symbol and his use of extravagant phrase are remarkable in his collection - 'Eighteen Poems'. His poetry reveals the concept of human life and natural life as being part of the same process. G.M. Hopkins also talks about the same process in his notable poem. 'Spring and Fall : to a Young Child'. Myths and symbols have a special place in Thomas's poetry which has been criticised for its unintelligent use in his poem 'Altarwise by Owl-Light':

Altarwise by Owl-Light in the half way house
The gentleman Lay grave ward with furies;
Abaddon in the hang nail cracked from Adam,
And, from his fork, a dog among the fairies,
The atlas-eater with a jaw for news,
Bit out the mandrake with tomorrow's scream.

Dylan Thomas's popularity was brought down due to the failure on the part of the reader to comprehend - such esoteric symbol. The symbolist movement

poets of the 50s were most vociferous in their condemnation of such symbolist poetry which wedged a gap between the poet and his readers.

References

1. Frederick Clark Prescott, *The Poetic Mind*, (London: Cornell University Press, 1959), p. 227.
2. W.B. Yeats, "The Symbolism of Poetry" in Gary Geddes (ed.) *Twentieth Century Poetry and Poetics*, (Toronto : Oxford University Press, 1969), pp. 567-68.
3. William Blake, *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, (London : University Tutorials Press, 1965), p. 30.
4. Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1973), p. 99.
5. Miriam Allotte, (ed.) *The Poems of Mathew Arnold*, (London; New York: Longman Group Ltd. 1979), p. 256.
6. Arthur Symons, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, (New York: Haskell House Publications Ltd., 1971), p.3.
7. Ibid. p. 1.
8. Charles Chadwick, *Symbolism*, (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1971), p. 35.
9. Lothar Honnighausen, *The Symbolist Tradition in English Literature: A Study of Pre-Raphaelitism and fin de siecle*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 23.
10. Brenda S. Webster, *Yeats : A Psychoanalytic Study*, (London: The Macmillan Press, 1974), p. 16.
11. George Fraser, *Essays on Twentieth Century Poets*, (Suffolk, U.K.: Leicester University Press, 1977), p. 18.

*