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ISSN 2278-9529
Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal
www.galaxyimrj.com

From Sign to Symbol: A Brief Analogy

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Realization of reality, rather an ultimate reality, which is culturally perceived and determined in context of space and time, is the most vital and active phenomenon that goes into the proper definition of a symbol. Any visible thing when given the semblance of something which is not shown but realized by associating the visible object to the mind is the symbol of that particular object. The proper representation of this particular object becomes a necessity. The true understanding is ascertained only when the representation is made clear to the mind that perceives the visible object and gets connected with some known reality. Thus, Symbol becomes a sign-language or “an excellent dumb discourse”. It existed in one form or the other since the creation of the ‘Word’. With the continuous evolution and experimentation of the intellect and with every passing era, literature has grown in its vastness, became boundless and so strengthened the desire of man to communicate his ‘self’ with others. Thus, language becomes the individual as well as social possession of man; a never-ending system of equivalents, equivalents of sounds to objects. Language in general and Words in particular are symbolic. Words can inspire, strengthen, encourage and can cause revolutions.

“We live by Words: Love, truth, God.”

“We fight for Words: Freedom, Country and Fame.”

“We die for Words: Liberty, Glory and Honour.”

[J. Maurus]

In the words Freedom, Love, God, Truth, Liberty, Honour; an image of different abstract emotions and realities are formed which makes the reader realize the sincerity or importance of the articulated words, which have a definite value of their own.

Words, in reality are the representation of an image which can be either Physical or Abstract that can exalt the reader or can make him feel the grimness of any situation. In context of their use, the Words become a symbol of tremendous energy and force. They bear the power that exercises its control over the mind of man. Bestowing the priceless gift of articulacy – from ‘mama to infinity’; they remain indestructible. “*Shabd-Eva-Brahma*”, “*Na ksharati Iti-Aksharah*”. The sound is the *Brahma*; it is eternal and remains existent in the Universe going nowhere. The word *Akshara* itself shows its inherent characteristic of remaining indestructible.

As, Emerson declares in his Essay entitled ‘The Poet’ (1844) that “Words and deeds are quite indifferent modes of the Divine Energy”. Words are also actions and actions are a kind of Words. Baudelaire expresses this conception in a sonnet entitled “Correspondences,” where all nature is viewed as a temple whose living pillars are the trees. As the wind blows through these “forests of Symbols,” confused words are now and then breathed forth. The poet because of his special endowment is able to apprehend these words, for in all things there is a symbolic sense and connectivity to some spiritual reality. Words, in a sense are the real cause

of action, the movement, the force. They have the Power to make the World move. They symbolize and reveal the hidden emotion that stirs the soul. Words become symbols and symbols become words depending upon the need and articulation. Only a reality can be symbolized as symbols help in defining subtler, indefinable shades of reality. It is 'reality' that needs expression, better definition and understanding. An unreal object doesn't need further explanations as its ultimate remains a falsity.

Basically, a symbol is an image and the repeated use of this image becomes a symbol. The original image may have its source in a picture. Pound called the "image" "a radiant node or cluster" and "vortex" "a whirlwind of force and emotion." To consider the image of "Swan" which is common in other poetry and stands for strength, purity, fidelity, immortality with overtones of the soul. It symbolizes the loneliness and mystery that embodies a human soul. It symbolizes the loneliness and mystery that embodies a human soul. It will not be wrong to say that Memory plays a vital role in making an image grow into a symbol. It acts as a reservoir of the poet's own experiences in the past. These experiences live on, remaining intact on the mind and can be called down into the present by dream, vision or image which can be further cultivated as required in the literary creations. That Symbol creates a cover over the image is a total misconception. It is about revelation of a truth which was unperceived but existent. It is about creating newer and vaster horizons for accumulating boundless knowledge. As Goethe has note, "in true symbolism, the particular represents the universal, not as a dream or a shadow, but as a living revelation of the unfathomable." The revelation made through symbols is usually deep and complex and basically a spiritual phenomenon which has to take the help of various physical and mental images for opening-up. The discovery of its meaning presupposes a certain amount of active cooperation between the symbol-user and his audience. As a rule, it is based on the convention of a group that agrees upon its meaning. However, Symbols may also be individually and subjectively constructed. Symbols bear a close affinity with 'Objective Correlative'. For evoking an emotional response the objective correlative uses objects or characters while Symbolism enriches the meaning of a work of art through hints and suggestions without affecting the surface level of the story.

Etymologically, 'symbol' is traceable to the Greek word symbolon, meaning contract, token, insignia and a means of identification. Down the ages Symbols have played a vital role in religious experience, artistic activity and political sphere. A Symbol when applied to an idea gives better dimensions to the idea, clarifies the idea, illuminates the idea and greatly enhances its interest. Parties to a contract, allies, guests and their host could identify each-other with the help of the parts of the symbolon in ancient Greece. Symbols establish a vibrant and congenial relationship between the spiritual and the material. Every culture and religion owns a host of conventional and recognizable symbols, such as the *Crescent and Cross, the Staff, the Serpent, the Buddhist Stupa, the Indian Swastik, Chakra (wheel)* and the Trishul. One of the first symbols was that of the Saviour and the symbol was the Fish which was derived from an acrostic of the Greek word, 'iũθvs', the component letters of which were the initials of the words Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour. Another early symbol 'The Ship' represented the Church in which the faithful are carried over the sea of life. Other symbols are those which were represented by animals real or fabulous and were derived from

scripture. Thus, the Lamb typified Christ from St. John's Gospel and the Lion from the Book of Revelation, where Christ is called the Lion of the tribe of Juda. The Peacock stood for immortality, the Phoenix for the Resurrection, the Dragon or the serpent for Satan, the Stag for the soul thirsting for Baptism. The Principal symbol of the Christian religion the Cross, recalls the Crucifixion of Jesus Christ and the redeeming benefits of His passion and death. The Cross is thus both a sign of Christ Himself and of the faith of Christians. In ceremonial usage, marking a sign of the Cross may be an act of the profession of faith, a prayer, a dedication or a benediction. In its original meaning, the symbol represented and communicated a coherent greater whole by means of a part. The part, as a sort of certificate, guaranteed the presence of the whole and, as a concise meaningful formula, indicated the larger context. The symbol, in this sense, was based on the principles of representation, complementarity and mutual recognition.

The ancient Indian scriptures exhibit Symbolism to the widest extent. They have a reality that needs elaboration and understanding by the readers. The characters depicted are more spiritual than physical, mental or emotional. In the Epic Ramayana, the three Queens of king Dasharatha do symbolically signify the three *gunas* - *Sattva*, *Rajas* and *Tamas*. Dasharatha's four sons signify the four human goals (Purushartha) - *Dharma* (Righteousness), *Artha* (Wealth), *Kama* (Desire) and *Moksha* (Salvation). If Rama is an incarnation of Divine Consciousness, Sita is Earth-Consciousness. She is the daughter of mother Earth. The marriage of Sita with Rama is the union of the Divine Within (Atma) with the Divine Without (parmatma). Lanka is described as the human body in which the human soul is imprisoned, separated from the Divine Soul. Dashratha signifies the five *Gyanendriyas* (the five senses) and the five *Karmendriyas*. Similarly, the symbol of *Swastik* signifies positive energy, dynamism, motion. Through extreme force, Dynamism, positive actions; fame, Glory and honour can be attained. The Future, Fate and Destiny of man as predicted by him in the astrological sciences are symbolized by various zodiacal symbols that signify the particular position of the planets supposedly governing his life.

Symbols originate in sense impressions or in objects of environment. Some of them are derived from the objects of nature and others are artificially constructed in a process of intuitive perception, emotional experience or rational reflection. For Carl Jung, symbols are 'natural'- prior to their cultural manifestation-because they reach down to and express the unconscious in primitive fashion at the same time as they correspond to the highest intuitions of consciousness. As for example, Cherry blossom first rose to symbolic prominence in Japanese consciousness during the ninth century as a result of their exchange with the Chinese, against whom the Japanese sought to establish a distinctive identity. They chose Cherry blossoms in opposition to the Chinese plum blossoms. Ever since, Cherry blossom had thus long been intensely involved in conceptions and representations of the Japanese self, at both the individual and collective levels. At the emotive level cherry blossom, whose most important characteristic for the Japanese is its gorgeous but brief life, has been closely linked to the sublimity of pathos- the pathos and beauty of ephemerality. During the Second World War, the aesthetics of cherry blossom was deployed in numerous ways, but especially as a symbol of soldiers' sacrifice for the emperor. The symbol of cherry blossom came to represent the "Japanese soul" an exclusive spiritual property of the Japanese that endowed

young men with a noble character, enabling them to face death without fear. 'Thou shalt die like beautiful falling cherry petals for the emperor'. Cherry trees representing the Japanese soul were planted all over Japan's colonies during its imperial expansion in order to transform the colonized space into a Japanese space. No doubt, the public memory played a vital role in the growth of the image of Cherry blossoms into a symbol. Associating Nature with national ideology and nationalism is easy and effective as common men directly associate themselves with Nature; it renders a sense of belongingness, oneness, commonness and collective responsibility. In political nationalisms, a unadulterated Volk or Urvolk is often symbolized by an "unadulterated nature." The combination of 'nature' and 'nationalism,' a seemingly innocent pairing, can turn lethal if it becomes a part of the machinery of political nationalism. Nations, Races and individual men are unified by an image, or a bundle of related images. And symbolism becomes a political activity.

Symbols establish a vibrant and congenial relationship between the spiritual and the material. In spiritual domain, an image helps the human mind to associate one's own imaginations with the Divine Power; to concentrate on a particular image with the qualities of being all-powerful. It restricts the wandering mind to an extent so that the heart can experience the Supreme. The image of God, any God is the creation of the Human imagination to its fullest extent, which gives a form to the Reality that is omniscient but invisible, which is eternal beyond time and space; besides controlling the course of nature and human life. The concept of 'Image-Worship' by the Hindus gains ground as behind it is the philosophy of defining or giving a form to the Supreme Power with all the characteristics and features of Divinity, Power, Strength and Benevolence. The image of God instills the emotions of awe, reverence, composure, fear etc. The representation of God is the work of the nature of collective conscience. Thus, the images help in strengthening the belief and faith in the Supreme Power. It deepens our concern with fact and seeks to create an aura of utter actuality. The aura regulates the actions of the believers and hence the system of symbols which create this aura is a very essential component of religion. This aura of actuality is very strong in so far as uniting people coming from the different classes are concerned. Though an image may have a limited meaning or a single interpretation, but when it becomes a symbol it has wider implications having different meanings for different readers, yet an image has associational value that cannot be ignored. In his 'Autobiographies' Yeats stated-

'When a man writes any work of genius, or invents some creative action, is it because some knowledge or power has come into his mind? It is called up by an image, as I think...but our images must be given to us, we cannot choose them deliberately.'

In his 'The Symbolism of Poetry' Yeats quotes "Blake"

'The gay fishes on the wave when the moon sucks up the dew'.

Yeats approves of this image as it reminds him of a childhood experience in Sligo Bay. As he writes in 'A Vision'

"When a child I went out with the herring fishers one dark night, and the dropping of them up has remained with me as a dominant image". Yeats may have also seen the hauling of the seine-nets for salmon in the Sligo River, close to his grandparents' house; an image even more appropriate than the herring drift-nets for the closing of fate. That can become

Out-worn heart, in a time out-worn,

Come clear of the nets of wrong and right...

Both in theory and in practice these past experiences play a large part in his poetic theory. To the artist/writer the image (a particular one) may struck as lightening amidst the cloud of thought-processes and can remain as spark reflected at times in his creations.

A Symbol gets proper recognition only when an image surfaces repeatedly. It depends on the writer on how much he relies on a few dominant images that may be closely linked to his own life. At times, a symbol may seem to be unpredictable to the reader because of its strong linkage with an image which is the self-possession of a poet or writer. The poem "Byzantium" by Yeats depicts the images of day-time such as the drunken soldiers of the king, reminiscent of the savage British soldiers terrorizing the Irish peasantry, stained with the blood and fury of the busy, day-light world have gone out of sight. The noises and the images peculiar to the night in a great city such as the song of the nightwalkers and brawl of the revelers have also melted in the calm atmosphere. As the poet contemplates the dome of 'Divine Wisdom' with a secret desire to explore its mysteries, he describes an image floating before him. It is faint and vague, a shadow in comparison with a concrete human body, but an image when compared to a shade.

The image fades when mind grows strong; the power of intellect associates the image with certain symbol that becomes more thought-provoking, clear and far-sighted. What is personal and transitory might be welded with the impersonal and permanent through a group of images. It is possible that the artist/writer through the images can strongly express himself and through which as Yeats said, 'the dream and the reality might face one-another in-visible array'. The images are not always illusory but represent the secret essences of things.

An image may be called as the first-step in the thought-process of the writer. It is through an image that he dwells with his own self. It provides him a frame-work for an idea to work upon. It appears that 'Milton' was right when he stated in the "Paradise Lost" that When the Supreme Power set himself for the task of Creation; He had only one Divine image before Him- "His Own Self" and thus, He created Man- 'His supreme creation' in 'His own image'

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