



The quest for self in the novels of Shashi Deshpande: Symbol and imagery

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Abstract

The present paper deals with a study of symbol and image that Shashi Deshpande uses as a technical device to voice the age-old silence of her sex in a free and fair way. Before analyzing her fictional world an attempt is made to define a symbol and an image for the convenience. Before a symbol can be defined, it must be distinguished from a sign. Differentiating between the two, Thames and Hudson in *The Reader's Guide to Literary Terms*, write:

An object that signifies something else, such as a red light, which instructs the motorist to stop, is a sign. To be efficient, the sign must have only one meaning. A symbol, on the other hand, is more complex. In its simplest sense it is also something that stands for something else. The cross, for example, is a symbol of Christianity, the hammer and a sickle, of communism, John Bull of England, etc. Such symbols are more complicated than sign, however, for they sum up a large number of ideas and attitudes and can mean different things in different circumstances. The cross, standing for the whole complex of Christianity, is an object of reverence to some and of contempt to other. Nevertheless, such symbols are public and are generally understood.

Symbols are literary discourse. Symbols do not have a public accepted meaning but take their significance from the total context in which they appear. They may also be taken from a special area of knowledge, such as Freudian psychology, or from a private system of the authors; however, the most powerful symbols are usually formed or, if borrowed, modified by the works in which they are found. Thus, the white whale of Melville's *Moby Dick*, one of the most discussed literary symbols, is simply the animal which Captain Ahab pursues but at the same time much more. As the novel proceeds, Melville associates so much meaning with *Moby Dick* that the reader accepts him as an object of great significance. Many critics have discussed the meaning of *Moby Dick* without any final agreement, for such complex symbols, don't admit of easy definitions, and are perhaps expressible only in terms of themselves.

Keywords: quest, self, shashi deshpande, novels, symbol, imagery

Introduction

Thames and Hudson are apt in stating: "Sometimes not only an image but an entire work may be taken as a symbol. Thus, the journey of Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner* may symbolize the universal journey into the depth of despair and back to psychological and spiritual stability^[2]." Moreover, a symbol is something that represents something else by association, resemblance or convention, especially a material object used to represent something invisible or it is an object that an individual unconsciously uses to represent thoughts, feeling, or impulses. It is something that represents or stands for something else, usually an object used to represent something abstract. Symbol may be conventional, printed or written figure which is used to represent an operation, element, quantity, relation, unit of measurement, phenomenon, or descriptor. It can be also defined as an arbitrary sign (written or printed) that has acquired a conventional significance. It is something visible that by association or convention represents something else that is invisible; "the eagle is a symbol of the United States". *Encyclopaedia Britannica* Describes about the term and some early symbols as:

The term given to a visible object representing to the mind the semblance of something which is not shown but realized by association with it. One of the first symbols of the savior, the

fish, was derived from an acrostic of the Greek word Jesus Christ, son of God, Saviour. The ship, another early symbol, 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 (i. 29 and 36) and the lion from the Book of Revelation, where (v. 5) 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 stage for the soul thirsting for baptism. The sacred monogram *Cri Rho*, supposed to have been the celestial sign seen by the emperor Constantine on the eve of the defeat of Maxentius, represent the first two letters of the Greek word which Constantine figured on his labarum, or standard, and is found on early Christian coins bearing also the favourite decoration of the Byzantine sarcophagi^[3].

Symbol and Imagery

Symbol literally means to signify, to denote or to represent something else. Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines symbol as "a person, an object, an event, etc. that represents a more generally quality or situation^[4]." On the basis of the above definitions, we can classify the term into

these categories: (i) Public or Conventional Symbols which include religious, natural, cultural, philosophical, mathematical, scientific, literary, psychological symbols etc., (ii) General or Accidental Symbols, and (iii) Personal or Private Symbols. The universal or conventional symbols are those symbols, in which a natural object refers to a limited number of interpretations that transcend cultural barriers as sun representing energy, a source of life; at the same time, rising Sun denotes birth, and setting Sun represent death or decline etc. meaning thereby, the meaning of the symbols are used generation to generation on the same conventions.

Secondly, the general or accidental symbols are those which appeal to smaller audience, but contain more associative meanings, as in the Christian cross and the Nazi Swastika. These symbols rise out of the particular situation to represent those timely conditions or circumstances, but later on mingled into mainstream of the meaning. The third of symbol is created by writers, the poets themselves, according to the individual needs or represent or to associate something with individual experience and the social realities. "The private symbols are created in author's imagination and conveying any number of meaning in the guiding context as in Yeat's holy city of Byzantium ^[5]." But all these private invented symbols gain more significance and become universal and archetypes in due time when shared by the public.

Defining a literary symbol C. Hugh Holman writes: "A trope that combines a literal and sensuous quality with an abstract or suggestive aspect. The symbol shares with the image, a concrete referent in the objective world - a referent that it evokes on primary level. But the symbol also makes this reference suggest a meaning beyond itself. It does lose its literal meaning but uses that meaning to suggest another."⁶ Literary symbols have two types of meanings. One is the literal that gains universality; the other is suggestive one. But the real force lies in the context in which they are used. Further elaborating it C. Hugh Holman writes:

Literary symbols are of two types. The first embodies within itself universal suggestions of meaning a land and sea suggest timelessness and eternity or as a voyage suggests life. Walt Whitman was user of symbols with such universal meanings, as in his poem 'Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking', where the land and the sea imagery extends into universal symbols. The other types of symbol gains its suggestive value from the way it is used in a particular work. Thus in Whitman's Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed' the 'Western Fallen Star' represents Abraham Lincoln in the poem. Similarly, in Hemingway's novel 'A farewell to Arms', rain is a physical fact, a symbol of loss and death through the frequent repetition of its use in the novel ^[7]."

Literary symbols are functional, not product of the intellect or thought like scientific symbols, but arise out of artist's experience and able to evoke thoughts and feelings and they have multiple interpretations. On the other hand, religious symbols may equate the literary symbols because of their function to look things beyond and express what is abstract. But the literary symbols may be used to reveal mundane emotions and everyday experience. This is not the case with religious symbols. After used once, religious symbols become literary symbols.

Symbols are essentially words which are not merely connotative, but also evocative and emotive. In addition to their meaning, they also connect with them, and are also rich in emotional significance. For example, Lily is merely a flower, but it also evokes images of beauty and innocence. It also carries with it the emotional overtone of pity resulting from suffering or oppression. Symbols make the language rich and expressive. Thus a symbol can be used to convey 'pure sensations' or the poet's apprehension of transcendental mystery. Edmund Wilson defines symbolism as "an attempt by carefully studied means - a complicated association of ideas represented by a medley of metaphors to communicate unique personal feeling ^[8]"

An image is a concrete representation of an object or sensory experience. Typically, such a representation helps evoke the feelings associated with the object or experience itself. Images are either literal or figurative. Literal images are especially concrete and involve little or no extension of the obvious meanings of the words uses to express them. Figurative images do not follow the literal meaning of the words exactly. Images in literature are usually visual, but the term 'image' can also refer to the representation of any sensory experience.

An image is a reproduction of the form of a person or object, especially a sculptured likeness. It is an opinion or concept of something that is held by the public. An image is one that closely or exactly resembles another; a double: *He is the image of his uncle*. It is the character project to the public, as by a person or institution, especially as interpreted by the mass media. It is also a personification of something specified: *That child is the image of good health*. An image is a mental picture of something not real or present. It is a concrete representation, as in art, literature, or music that is expressive or evocative of something else: *night as an image of death*. It is a mental picture of someone or something produced by the imagination or memory. An image is multifunctional. To make or produce a likeness; to mirror or reflect; to symbolize or typify; to picture mentally; to describe, especially to evoke a mental picture are some of the functions of an image that a writer selects conveniently.

It is easy to read *That Long Silence* as an expression of the suppression of the female psyche by a male-dominated society. But when we read the novel closely, it shows that the narrator has been delineated almost as a fragmented personality in whom there is a constant battle between tradition and individuality, other and self. All the troubles are centred round the confusion arising out of this fragmentation. Subhash chandra's view that "the novel begins with gender differentiations, valorizing the male categories"⁹. May apply such minor characters as Mohan's mother or Jaya's mentally disturbed relative, Kusum. Jaya always believes that she has been victimized by everyone around her. Kamat, the only character in the novel she seems to have some respect for.

The practice of giving a new name to a bride, a common Indian custom recurrent in Deshpand's works, is to "supersede or supplant the identity of the woman, which is in sharp contrast to the continuity, nay, reinforcing of the same familial identity of the male, an identity which is the product of patriarchal society ^[10]." The conflict between her maiden name Jaya and Suhasini symbolises the conflicting selves. The

difference between the two selves makes it is very difficult for her to identify with Mohan's problems. Jaya can distinguish her real self from Suhasini, a soft, peaceful, motherly woman. Like the self-centred, worldly wise sparrow she remains inside the security of the hearth though it suffocates her.

In the novel, the Big House, where Sumi goes to live with her parents after Gopal walks out on her, has a symbolic function. The Big House with "A festoon of cobwebs, hanging in a canopy over the huge door....." (3) suggests the crisscross of emotions and neglect of Kalyani by her husband, Shripati. The past of Kalyani and Shripati is suggested by the bougainvillea that "has become a monster parasite" (4) and threatens to kill the plant is grown on. Shripati, who has lived his life on Kalyani's wealth and property, bears comparison to the parasitic bougainvillea. The fragmented personalities of the characters associated with the Big House are suggested also by the plan of the house: "Inside, the house seems to echo the schizophrenic character of its exterior. A long passage running along the length of the house bisects it with an almost mathematical accuracy, marking out clearly the two parts of its divided personality" (5). The walls of the house which remain moist long after the monsoon become covered with mass of creeping insects which present an ugly and horrifying sight.

The house assumes the element of a living character ".....as if it were holding its breath, waiting for something" (5). The isolated room built on the first floor of the house again suggests the divided personality of the house. The novelist describes it as "..... an excrescence perched on the top of the house, detracting from its main quality of integrity" (5). During the day there is not sound in the garden but at night "..... There are ominous rustlings, sounds of unknown creatures of the night" (7). The entire description symbolically suggests whispering of the unconscious mind coming into conflict with the conscious thoughts and feelings of the characters and causing split in their inner personalities. The novel starts with the description of the house, called Vishwas. Unfortunately there is no Vishwas (Trust) between Shripati and Kalyani, the couple who live in that big house. The husband has not talked to the wife for nearly two decades due to the loss of their mentally retarded son. In a beautiful manner Deshpande brings to life structure of the house and the various trees and bushes that grow in its garden. The bougainvillea has become a monster parasite clinging passionately to its neighbour, the akash mallige, cutting deep groves in its trunk, as if intent on strangulating it. But high above, the two flourish together harmoniously. This image mirrors what happens in many marriages, the husband and wife depending on each other, merging their personalities into each other's not realizing that each is strangulating the other. Under those circumstances it takes a lot of courage to break out of this suppressed like grip called marriage.

When Gopal walks away, he does not want to conceal himself from the world, he lives few miles away from Sumi and his daughters in the house of an old student. He wants to be unaware of the outer world. Here Deshpande gives a beautiful image and compares Gopal with truck drivers: "..... Like the truck drivers, who after a night of frenetic driving, go to sleep in the womb-like interiors of their driving cabins, wholly

insulated from the outer world, Gopal is unaware of the jangle of noises in which he is living his life" (40). Why does Gopal walk out on his family? The reason he mentions that he was frightened of the emptiness within him. Gopal realizes the emptiness that behind human relationships. He understands that most of us go through our lives without opening our eyes to the emptiness which stares us at our face. For him, the life he was nothing but a bundle of lies.

Gopal's sense of loneliness and the fear associated with it lie at the root of his neurosis. His mental state shows that he is a victim of psychoneurosis as his thoughts and actions are interpretable in terms of conflict between ego and id. His ego is intact and he is aware of his distressing thoughts and emotions. The beginning of his distress dates back to his adolescent years. Sudha's school certificate reveals to him that she is his stepsister. Gopal feels shocked at the concealment of this fact. It is an act of "betrayal that cut away at the foundations of my life" (52). He feels alienated from Sudha and as his parents have already died he feels utterly lonely. His consciousness of his own mortality fills him with fear and a sense of utter loneliness. His detachment from others suddenly comes to an end the day he is charmed by Sumi's looks and her innocent laughter. However, as he recalls his love for Sumi and his married life he thinks like a man disillusioned of the snares of the world. After the death of Sudha's husband, he is painfully aware of the human predicament of intense loneliness. His sister Sudha cultivated family ties and relationships with love and care but there could not alleviate her fear and loneliness in moments of her need: "..... it's just deceiving ourselves when we say we are not alone. It is the desperation of a drowning person that makes us cling to other humans. All human ties are only a masquerade. Someday, some time, the pretence fails us and we have to face the truth. Like Sudha did. And I." (52)

In her works Deshpande has used many similes taken from various scriptures and the day-to-day life of women. In *A Matter of Time* she uses "as painful as the process of childbirth" (144) to compare Kalyani's pain in talking about her hours of desertion on the railway platform amongst strangers. Another fine example of simile is Jaya's comparison of her and Mohan's disgrace to that of squatting village women. The eagerness of these women to just cover their faces if seen by someone and ignore the fact that their bottoms were exposed reminds her of their condition as they went into temporary hiding ignoring the fact that the truth will come out one day. In her novels the return of the protagonists to their natal home symbolises the beginning of their quest for identity. The ancestral house is central in most of her novels because it is this that the women return. Saru in *Dark Holds No Terrors*, Jaya in *That Long Silence* and Sumi *A Matter of Time* come back to the natal home, and it is always here that past of present meet and some kind of evaluation takes place. Besides, the house links the characters with the past and rekindles old memories. The demolitions of the house further symbolises the break from such traditions. In *A Matter of Time* the Big House represents the life of its inhabitants. The life of a lonely recluse lived by Shripati is represented by his secluded room upstairs. In a way the house in this novel is also personified as a member of the family Shripati's death,

"..... there is strange sound, as if the house has exhaled its breath and shaken itself before settling down into a different rhythm of breathing" (236). Manorama, Kalyani's mother, always wanted a son to be born that is symbol for salvation. According to *Brahad-aranyaka Upanishad*,

Whatever wrong has been done by me,
His son frees him from it all;
Therefore he is called son. By his
Son a father stands firm in this world.
(*Brahad-aranyaka Upanishad*, 1.5.17) (91)

Conclusion

About Deshpande 'The Hindu' says: "The woman writer has to decide for herself how far she wants to de-romanticize the image created by men and also how to use her anger and resentment towards positive ends. Part of the struggle is also in the need to outgrow the socially propagated and individually internalized patriarchal values."

Through the devise of symbol and images, Deshpande has portrayed the existence of the Indian middle-class women in India. She not only presents a feminist insight into patriarchal values, but also prescribes a balance between tradition and modernity as a working philosophy for the contemporary woman. By tradition she means those values of security and harmony that symbolize the Indian way of life, while modernity refers to the assertion of the independent, individual self. Deshpande advocates that to realize herself, the woman must be true to her own self. The sacrifice and nobility that is expected from the woman is a stereotype that only suppresses the woman in a mire of rejection and suppression. The woman needs to come out of the familial framework, to discover her potential as an individual and give expression to her inner space. At the same time, she need not cast off her marriage or family. She needs to live in her family with the different attitude, different thinking and different manner.

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