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SYMBOLISM IN NARRATION AND ITS RELEVANCE: A STUDY OF SELECT FICTION

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ABSTRACT

War literature is often laced with imagery and symbols. Narrating rampant Violence and destruction is often a difficult task. In such scenarios, writers use various techniques to depict war, particularly the emotional and psychological distress faced by multiple characters. This paper intends to study the use of symbolism in Bangladeshi writer Shaheen Akhtar's novel *The Search*. Symbols have always been an integral part of literature, and writers have employed them to address their concerns. Symbols are nothing new and have always been employed to communicate the meanings hidden behind the items or phrases that act as symbols. The use of symbols in literature is similar to the usage of symbols in the actual world in that they stand for something larger than themselves. The most challenging aspect of symbol studies is assigning meanings to symbols and rationally connecting one meaning to another. The issue may occur because the message is complicated. This paper will discuss various symbols, their significance in this novel, and how they shape the narration.

**Keywords:** Bangladesh, Symbols, Search, Violence, Novel

Introduction

Literature is among the most innovative and complete means of transmitting humankind's emotional, spiritual, or intellectual understanding. It may assist readers in growing their views and personality by reading and comprehending the literature. Literature also provides an objective foundation for the reader's knowledge and comprehension. The best method to understand and evaluate literature is to immerse ourselves in it and experience it on its terms. As we read, we should immerse ourselves in the tale, the language, and so on. The use of symbolism is one of the most straightforward writing techniques writers have employed since the beginning and development of writing.

The term symbol is derived from the Greek verb "symballein" and its noun "symbolon," both of which imply "to toss together" or "to link together." A symbol, also known as a sign, is an object that symbolises or stands for something else, known as the signified. The Egyptians initially used the term 'symbolon' to describe an identifying stamp made of various materials known as "tessera" in Latin. The tessera was thought originally to be a "symbolon," It is only later that the notion is applied to the sign and the explicit reference to the tessera.

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At the same time, the verb *symballein* is employed in the way of speaking that implies collecting, concealing, or veiling (Oxford Dictionary, 1971: 737). Similarly, According to "A Glossary of Literary Terms," a symbol represents something else; in this sense, all words become symbols. When addressing literature, 'symbol' exclusively describes an item or an event representing something or has a range of references (Abrams, 1971:195).

### **Symbolism: Theoretical Overview**

Symbolism is an essential component of human expression, particularly literary expression. Since time immemorial, humans have communicated among themselves using various symbols known and understood by the members of society. According to Arthur Symons, symbolism came into existence when man uttered the first words. When he named every living creature, or before them in Heaven when God titled the universe into being, and we see precisely what symbolism in literature is in these beginnings, a mode of representation at best but approximately, basically, but arbitrarily, until it has acquired the power of a convention for an unseen reality grasped by awareness. There can be no literature or language without symbolism. What exactly are the words? (Symons, Arthur. 1952: 6).

Many definitions of 'symbolism' have been put forward. For example, the *Concise Dictionary of Literary Terms* defines 'symbolism' as portraying objects/ideas by symbols or giving things an associated character and significance. (1972:266) A symbol is an image so laden with meaning that it is neither literal nor merely stands for something else; it is both itself and something else that it vividly indicates. It represents something too intricate or mysterious to be revealed otherwise. (Barnet, 1969:344)

Perrine (1974: 214-215) offers several interpretations of the symbols' meanings. First and foremost, while reading a tale and studying the symbols, there must be adequate proof for such a thing as a symbol. Second, the interpretation of the meaning of a symbol must consider the entire context of the tale. Third, following the broad definition of the symbol, anything that stands in for something else, the meaning must imply something other than the linguistic meaning. It is also worth noting that a symbol may have an unclear feature. It indicates that a sign can have several meanings. Stanton's notion of symbolism in literature has three common impacts, depending on how it is employed. First, a symbol that appears on a significant occasion in the story emphasises its significance. Second, a repeating symbol reminds us of a recurring aspect in the tale. Finally, a symbol in the account might assist us in identifying or explaining the story's goal (1965:31). To understand literary symbols and uncover their significance in the work context; the reader must be familiar with symbol interpretation procedures. Stanton says that the reader should pay attention to the symbolic subtleties and the connotation of the symbols and compare it to the context and its contexts. However, these strategies need careful attention and consideration of the work, such as our past acquaintance with the author's work, our understanding of the storyline and characters, or what we know about the story's features (1965:32 -33). Robert and Jacobs write in their book "Fiction on Introduction to Reading and Writing," private, authorial, or contextual symbols are not generally applicable descriptors. They are recognised as symbols, but only in the context of the specific works. These symbols are significant through context or the unique work (1987: 280).

### **Symbolism in literature**

In literature, symbols may be anything. Objects, details, persons, locations, activities, and concepts fall under this category. The author can employ any symbol as long as he can give them significance beyond themselves and their objective realities that symbolise the exact things the author has planned. Symbols can be found in everyday dialogue, religious rites, and advertising. The difficulty is recognising that some features are symbols, but determining what they imply is quite intriguing. By including it in the title or making it exceptional for no apparent reason, the author can offer a more detailed explanation of that symbol than its accurate significance warrants.

Symbolism improves the quality of a literary work and is the essence of any academic effort. It allows a writer to communicate their vision more clearly and enables the reader to imagine what the writer explains, exposing the hidden truth that cannot be expressed in any other way. Shaheen Akhtar uses symbolic imagery to portray the fact concealed within and around her protagonists and other characters since the standard narrative

form does not serve her creative aim. She is undoubtedly one of the most potent novelists in the Bangladeshi literary canon, relying on imagery and symbolism as two wheels to propel her storytelling. The symbols are a vital part of her academic fabric, allowing her to establish the scene, develop the atmosphere, and evoke the proper mood of her works' complicated issues by giving the reader a key to understanding them. Symbolism allows writers to present diverse interpretations of the same item in their work.

Furthermore, symbolism has provided universality to characters and topics in literature. It piques the reader's curiosity to learn more about the author's expressions. In other words, how an author perceives the world and his attitudes toward other items.

### Symbolism in Akhtar's work

Shaheen Akhtar is one of a brilliant writers from Bangladesh. Her works smoothly carry the message of loss and life. Her novel *The Search* was published initially in the Bengla Language under the title *Talaash* in 2004. It was later translated into English by Ella Dutta in 2011. English translation of this book made it available to global readers, and it was very well received, fetching her acclamations and rewards. *Talaash* and *The Search* will be used interchangeably wherever necessary in this paper. Her works capture the colourful panorama of her characters' brains and emotional distress with hypnotic imagery and careful observation of emotions and sentiments, bringing depth to her topics. Her works indicate societal realities, which she describes from an informative perspective rather than from a social reformer. Her works centre on war, distress, Violence, women's search for themselves, and the suppression they encounter within their family, society, and nation.

She employs symbolism with the skill of a painter to convey the depth of sentiments and highlight the gravity of the situation. Even the slightest noises and images describe her character's attitude. Shaheen's work is distinguished by the fact that an idea, metaphor, or even a simple allusion to anything may be comprehended exclusively by its purpose within the narrative. Her examination of the psyche, very personal style, nuanced and beautiful writing, great attention to detail, and crucial fiction methods contributed new dimensions from previous narrative techniques used by her predecessors. Words appear to have a sensual attraction for her, and she revels in them. In an interview for *The Daily Star*, Shaheen Akhtar, while talking about symbolism in her Novel *The Search*, said,

Indeed, *Talaash* has a lot of metaphors! They reflect the horrifying memories of the war without directly showing details of Violence. They also assist in highlighting certain scenes with the contrast of light and darkness, at times making it extra meaningful in a way that even surpasses reality. The last Chapter of *Talaash* is metaphoric from beginning to end. (The Daily Star, November 12 2020)

She focuses more on images and symbolism since her goal is to seek the truth rather than represent surface reality. To her, only one-tenth of an iceberg is visible above the ocean's surface, with the rest nine-tenths lying beneath the surface. Thus, the novelist's primary strategy for presenting her topics and enabling readers to comprehend them quickly is using images and symbols. Her imagery and thinking are so complementary that they allow her to set the backdrop, enhance the mood and provide visual effect to her narrative, explain the feelings of her protagonists, and create an atmosphere for her characters to flourish.

### Symbolism in *The Search*

There are many symbols which are described in the novel. These symbols carry a profound message. Most of the symbols portray the ugly face of the Liberation war of Bangladesh and the torment that this war brought on women. Symbols used in this work are not limited to particular things; many characters become symbolic representations of places. In this novel, even in challenging situations or places, many characters become symbolic for one reason. Some of the symbols are discussed here.

**Title:** The novel's title, *Talaash/The Search*, is the novel's initial symbolic expression. The novel is about a search during the liberation war and the post-war period. The search for the truth, the past and the future. It is the search for identity and loss. Finally, there is the pursuit of justice. For many years following India's partition in 1947, people in East Pakistan sought their identity, eventually leading to the 1971 war and the establishment of

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Bangladesh as a sovereign nation. The novel follows Mariam's life from before the outbreak of war through nearly 30 years after the conflict. Mariam's mind is still preoccupied with it after more than two decades. Memories hung in her mind like "clumps of water hyacinth" swirled and trapped in the gory "eddies of murky waters". (The Search, p3)

**Mukti:** The novel's narrator, a young teenage girl named Mukti, enters Mariam's life to learn about her past and country. Mukti is a fresh graduate. She symbolises a new Bangladeshi society generation that did not participate in the conflict but had heard and read about it through elders and literature. Mukti was born in the same year as the conflict. She was born amid a turbulent night. "Mukti's birthday ended up being on March 26 instead of March 25" (The Search, p33), the same night the Pakistan Army started 'Operation Searchlight' against Bangladeshis. This night brought thunderous noises of bomb explosions and murders. Mukti was born in a hospital room between terrible noises and carnage. Her generation was engrossed with the past and eager to learn about it. She represents the renewed passion of Bangladeshi scholars to bring forward and expose the truth concealed after the conflict. Mukti is also a symbolic depiction of author Shaheen Akhtar. Shaheen has previously tried to gather information about women who had suffered from war.

**Abortion:** Mariam got pregnant due to a love relationship with a student leader named Abed Jahangir. However, Abed appeared to be disinterested in her or the baby over time. This eventually causes pain and emotional trauma in her. This passionate affair occurred before March 25, 1971, representing a watershed event. This relationship between Mariam and Jahangir might be viewed as an untrustworthy link between West and East Pakistan. Being thousands of kilometres apart but linked by a common thread of faith made it tough to withstand the passage of time. Mariam's pregnancy was as devastating as the Pakistani Army's military incursion in Bangladesh. She began her "periods so soon" as a surprise for her "mother's eyes" (The Search, p31). They had no idea it was the dead, half-mature infant announcing its presence at her door. The blood streaming from her body is akin to the blood running through the streets of Dhaka and other Bangladeshi cities.

**Female body:** The female body is an important symbol in this novel and Bangladesh's liberation war. Male combatants used the female body as a battleground. The female figure also depicts Bangladesh's terrain, devastated and bombarded with fighter aircraft, tanks, and bombs. Similarly, female bodies were pillaged through Rape, kidnapping, molestation, torture, and murder. Bangladeshi women were forced into various kinds of Violence, yet only Rape was given importance after the war. Mariam tells Mukti that people are only interested to know "how many times we were raped day and night. They do not consider the other tortures as tortures" (The Search, p85).

**Anuradha's Dairy:** Anuradha, a first-year college student, was abducted by the Pakistani Army from her college. She mimics writing in a diary. She tells Mariam, "if she had a pen and paper, she would keep a prison diary like Anne Frank" (The Search, p114), drawing similarities with Holocaust victims in Nazi Concentration Camps. Anuradha gestures many times as if she is writing. This symbolises her will to survive and record the Violence done to them.

**Shoba Rani and Pumpkin:** Shobha Rani is a Hindu woman who lived blissfully in her home with her husband, Bimal Das. Hindus were victims because they were soft targets for the Pakistani Army and its followers. She had planted a pumpkin on her front lawn. They were fully developed and vibrant. They represent the joyful lives of Bengali Hindus before the outbreak of the conflict. When the Pakistani Army attacked, she was raped near the same pumpkin plants, and her husband was also executed there before they took Shobha with them. Pumpkin plants were also uprooted. After the Rape, soldiers presented her with a pumpkin "as payment for rape" (The Search, p115). The destruction of pumpkin plants represents the annihilation of Hindu families and the destruction of homes and domestic setups.

**Pregnancy of Shobha Rani:** Shobha Rani became pregnant after being raped and tortured. And her child was developing in her womb. According to the novel, "the foetus in her womb swelled like swelling pumpkins," It was not ready to give up. "Hatred, humiliation, and hunger" grew even after. In an independent country, she will become a mother. "A house would rise again on the desolated property. Once again, a conch shell would be blown; deities worshipped once again with incense and joss sticks, flowers and leaves. Once again, on the cow

dung-smearred courtyard, the future Hindu descendants of this family would crawl". (The Search, p136) It was a resistance against the savagery of the enemy army, who wished to wipe them off. The child in her womb represented hope and renewal. In most cases, pregnancies caused by Rape were a source of shame in Bangladesh's orthodox society, as well as a hardship and continual reminder of pain. On the other hand, Shobha's pregnancy represents new life and optimism.

**Last Chapter:** Previous Chapter of the novel is titled 'The Search'. It is a highly symbolic Chapter. Shaheen Akhtar, when asked in an interview to comment on her use of symbolism, particularly at the end of The Search, replied, "Actually, I have no explanation. This part of the novel came from my dreams" (Antonym magazine 2021). This Chapter traces the final journey of Mariam and Tuki while they cross the river. From here, their real search begins in Bangladesh's free and independent nation. Almost Every Line of this Chapter is full of vivid imagery and symbols that fill up the protagonist's emotional sphere and the people in general who have just survived the war. This Chapter symbolises the freedom struggle which the Bangladeshi people fought. Now they have a new world ahead. "In Tuki's eyes is reflected the land left behind that floats like hair against the red horizon. Anuradha looks toward it and exults, how beautiful is our country!" Tuki removes the sari end from her face, "the country for which we shed our blood." They have just passed a new phase, and so has their nation.

### Conclusion

To conclude, we can assert that symbolism is an integral part of this novel. It forms the core structure of narration in the novel. Metaphors and symbols fill every page from the beginning to the end of the novel. Symbolism helps enhance the narration and creates a visualising effect for readers. Symbols in the form of characters denote what is lost and what has been kept hidden from the public glare. It establishes a kaleidoscopic view of the war, making it easier for readers to comprehend the situation of that time.

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