

An Examination of Symbolism in J.P. Shongwe's Poetry

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ABSTRACT The objective of this paper is to highlight the significance of symbolism as a literary communicative device, recurrent image and conveyor of ultimate meaning in poetry. Symbolism and imagery help to create the main themes in a poem. The creative use of the abstract and concrete phenomena enhances the recurrent images of the poem. Symbolism is not only vital in poetry, but to all modes of discourse because of its allegorical, metaphorical and representative character. Its functionality is noted when it encapsulates, signifies and exemplifies in poetry. The analysis and appraisal approaches are used in this study. Symbolism is the representation of objects, actions, thought and concepts which can be conventional or public, traditional or private. Recurrent imagery further stands for the ideas, state of mind and extrasensory experience. The word choice or diction plays a major role to determine poetic meaning, sound and suggestive powers in the verse-line or poem.

INTRODUCTION

Symbolism is a word which comes from the Greek language, meaning to throw together. It is a concept or object that is living or non-living, abstract or concrete that figuratively encapsulates something else. The symbol has no specific and fixed meaning. The researcher is free to suggest a range of symbolic meaning, provided that he or she bears in mind that what is suggested can only be part of its meanings. In the following discussion, the poet has chosen various objects or concepts that are animate or inanimate to represent various ideas and ideals which appear in his poetry.

Murry (1995: 157) viewed symbolism as:

The art of expressing emotions not only by defining them through overt comparisons with concrete image, but suggesting what these ideas and emotions are by recreating them in the mind of the reader through the use of unexplained symbols.

Hornby (1995: 893) saw symbolism as:

The literal and artistic movement that use artistic invention to express sensually ideas, emotions and abstractions in the place of realism.

Mokgokong (1975: 14) said that symbols imply tokens that may be used to stand for something or refer to anything other than itself by bringing to mind the picture or idea of that thing. They may evoke feelings along with ideas. There are intended meanings which have primary conceptual referential function of calling to mind

and referring to something. Where words are used as symbols, there are four factors that are taken into account, namely, the speaker, the hearer, the symbol and the referent. A necessary condition in any mode of communication is agreement by both the sender and the receiver of the meanings of the symbols employed. Words are signs, token, emblems and symbols. As symbols, a word can by definition stand in the place of the referent, by stimulating in minds that part of reaction to which it will be a reference to the thought of the thing referred to.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The theoretical approaches that are examined are analysis and appraisal. They are selected to look at symbolism as applied to natural concrete and abstract phenomena in the poems. The analytic nature of symbolic words in poetry usually depicts creativeness, inventiveness and resourcefulness.

The recurrent images convey and illustrate ideas in a concise and appropriate manner. More information is conveyed using the implied meanings, a wide range of symbols, imagery and properly selected poetic diction. It is evident in the study that symbolism does not consist merely of mental pictures but of various figures of speech which enhance the fundamental attitude, meaning and ideas of poetry. The images on comparison and resemblance (simile, metaphor, personification, apostrophe, consonance and

assonance) display the artistic expression in a vivid way in the entire work of poetry. Public and private symbols or recurrent images are used for poetic truth.

Symbolism as Applied to the Natural Concrete Phenomena

In the poem, *Emfuleni waseNazaretha* the poet has used the imagery with special reference to wide range of symbolism that run through the poem which are water, landforms, natural vegetation, human beings and animals.

Water as Recurrent Image

Water is a substance which is in liquid form. It can be touched and felt. The river may be a reference to the Christian idea of God's immense and unending love that never hesitates in stooping and healing the repentant sinner. The poet implied that as there is no end to God's love in the following lines:

Umfula longashi, longomi.

Emangeleti ayageleta ...

(The river that does not dry up.

The waters are following ...)

(Shongwe 1982: 5)

Water flows to purify and to relieve the sinner from his sins. A river and God's love may be compared in that they are a natural gift to man from God. In some instances, the poet referred to Christ as the River of Nazareth. In this instance, the river is Christ. Christ's power to save is referred to as the power of the River of Nazareth in the entire poem.

Water signifies life, purity and relief. Both *umfula* (river) and *emangeleti* (water) are symbolic of these concepts. The flowing water signifies cheerfulness and liveliness of God's unceasing love. The poet elucidated the importance of water that grants good moral nature and good disposition. The water that is found at the river of Nazareth is noted for its effectiveness in quenching thirst, that is, it is always available to wash and strengthen Christian pilgrims. The symbolism of water appeals to the imagination and the instinctive feelings of the reader. Water as a natural gift that delights both spirit and mind reflect socio-cultural and religious contexts in the poem.

Landforms as Recurrent Images

In the first part, the poet discussed the unceasing power of the water to affect and change human weakness. In this second extract, he emphasized this power to 'change' by describing two types of landforms which are, the valley and the cliff.

...Ahlokome kudvume emawa netigodzi

(They bubble and rumble the cliff and shallow valleys)

(Shongwe 1982: 5)

The valley and the cliff are two biblical symbols. Isaiah speaks of Christ's coming and says that every valley shall be filled by the coming of the Saviour. The poet's valley has no sound of its own. His cliff also has no sound, but when the 'river' flows through them it fills their emptiness and quietness with its sound. The empty valley 'babbles and rumbles' with the sound of the water. The empty stony cliff also fills up with the sound of the running water. The poet's river fills the empty valley and the empty cliff with the 'voice' of the rumbling river of life. One is reminded of the valley of the dead bones upon which Ezekiel Prophesied and the power of God that gave the bones flesh and spirit (Ezekiel 37: 1-10).

On the other hand, the two symbols, valley and cliff could be seen as a representation of the contrariness of human nature. The valley is normally arable and fruitful. The cliff is symbolic of bareness and hardness. He allows the 'river' to affect and change both the willing and the unwilling, the meek and the proud, the humble and the hard-hearted, the valley and the cliff. He wrote as if he is aware of Isaiah's words:

So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth:

It shall not return unto me void;

But it shall accomplish that, which I please, And it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it.

(Isaiah 55: 11)

Natural Vegetation as Recurrent Images

The natural phenomenon refers to the object that is used without involving the innovations. Like the psalmist, he used the natural vegetation to represent godly prosperity. David in Psalms likens the man who listens and obeys God's demands to a fruit tree which is planted by the river-side:

... that bringeth forth his fruit in his season;
His leaf also shall not wither; and
Whatsoever he doeth shall prosper
(Psalms 1: 3)

Shongwe, as a poet expressed this thought in similar poetic words:

... **Tjani netihlahla** akomi...
(... The **grass** and the **trees** do not dry up...
(Shongwe 1982: 5)

Just as the water of the River of Nazareth affects valleys and cliffs, so it affects the low grass and the high trees. These contrasts show the concern that God has for all, the young and the old, the king and his subject, the humble shepherd and the wise Magi, the humble fisherman and the learned Paul all are called to God's prosperity. Shongwe seemed to be aware of Paul's assertion that God's love nourishes all sections of humanity. Paul said that with God:

There is neither Greek nor Jew,
Circumcision nor uncircumcision,
Barbaric, Scythian, bond nor free:
But Christ is all, and in all.
(Colossians 3: 11)

He added 'neither grass nor tree' will remain unaffected by this great changing power of God. The source of Christian life flows from the lived by Christ in Nazareth. It is this humble loving which turns the world to meekness, lowliness, humility, responsibility and lovingness. There is never a winter 'dry up' because Christ is there tending and caring, nurturing and showering the 'grass and trees' that grow by the River of His love. He showers and waters them against the evil-one! Christ becomes the source of Christian freshness, fertility, multiplicity and life itself in all its complexities.

People as Recurrent Images

The names of the people are boldly symbolic. In addition the names that are used for accentuation, rhyme effects and associative value. His tact aimed at crisp conciseness:

Akukunambitseka kwawo!
Alungele **Dziniwe naKhatsele**,
Hluphekile naJabulile,
Emant' aseNazaretha.
(What a taste there is!
It is suitable for **Dziniwe** and **Khatsele**,
Hluphekile and **Jabulile**,
Water of the Nazareth)
(Shongwe 1982: 5)

The names of the people imply the basic idea that underlies the whole poem. The names he chooses either Biblical references or connotations are representative of verses in the Biblical texts. The translatability of the names of the people to the real life situation makes the abstraction tangible by perceiving it concretely. There is a constant reminder to consider the Almighty as the poet personifies weariness, tiredness, suffering and happiness by using the personal names. The actual meanings of words are *Dziniwe* (Weariness), *Khatsele* (Tiredness), *Hluphekile* (Suffering) and *Jabulile* (Happiness). The poem embodies the natural phenomenon water, throughout, which is both overtly and covertly used. Biblical influence leads him to regard the Saviour as the water of life. Both water and the Lord attract all people, irrespective of their state of health, mind and philosophy.

Animals as Recurrent Images

The poet used animals as symbolic elements to generate the meaning of a poem. A range of meanings and significances arose from their context:

Ingwenya nemsundvu akusondzeli
(The **crocodile** and the **earthworm** do not
come nearer)
(Shongwe 1982: 4)

The crocodile and the earthworm are placed in juxtaposed for effective comparison. Both animals symbolize destruction and corruption. Crocodiles suggest enormity, menacing and slowness. The crocodile is dangerous and harmful to human beings. Whereas an earthworm destroys plants, eats mud and rotten leaves. The crocodile is a bold and blatant destroyer. An earthworm is a subtle demolisher. The poet implied that within the congregation there are people who have the attributes of the crocodile and others who have the earthworm attributes.

Technological Elements as Recurrent Images

The poem, *Lamuhla Siyandiza* (We are flying today), was based on the aeroplane, the aerial transport which came to being due to technological advancements. The transports that were traditionally used were wagons and carts drawn by the horses, donkeys or cattle. In the deserts they were using camels as a major transportation means. The contemporary faster transport

is an aeroplane, which the poet apostrophically called it *mphephuki* (one who gets blown), *mcambalali* (one who lie down to rest), *mntjwezi* (one who flies swiftly), *maphendvuphendvuka* (one who turns around), *mafikamuva* (late comer). All the names that the poet has used, describe the action of the aeroplane while on air route. The poet is free to use any diction either as an image, symbol or both.

The human characteristics are bestowed to the aeroplane throughout the poem. He feels pity for our forefathers who permanently left, before perceiving the technological and industrial advancements. The poet stressed with joy and astonishment the following idea:

*Lamuhla siyandiza
Sesiwela netilwandlekati,
Satsintsa emafu saphephuka nawo.
(We are flying today
We flew across the ocean
We touched the clouds and flew with them).*
(Shongwe 1985: 33)

The significance of aerial transport is evident and remarkable because of fastness, safeness and pleasantness. It is easy to connect two countries that are far apart within few hours without any strain. The poetic distinctions that are used in the poem endorsed imagery and symbolism.

Symbolism as Applied to the Natural Abstract Phenomena

The imagery in a poem is conveyed by well-chosen words or diction. They are often called dream-symbols. The following poems, *Emaphupho* (Dreams), *Vuka Ngwane!* (Ngwane, wake up) and *Ensimini i-Avalon* (Avalon, burial field) are examined as abstract phenomena.

Dream as Recurrent Image

In the poem, *Emaphupho*, the poet highlighted the endless wonder of life upon the earth. The word 'dream' represents something natural and abstract. Dreaming is a natural thing which is exposed to human beings. *Kuphupha* or *kubhudza* (to dream) does not express a dream in the true sense, but it reveals amazing occurrences which cause the poet to doubt reality. The poet successfully used the word, *phupha* (to dream), to admire the advancement of technology and his aspirations:

*Sebayaphapha bendlul' inkhonzane ...
Maye ngiyaphupha!
(They can fly higher than the swallow ...
Oh, I am dreaming!)*
(Shongwe 1982: 34)

A dream is an aspect of the ideal world that encompasses wishes, past and future plans, synesthetic effects and specific goals. It reveals itself in the world for the benefit of the real world. It is an abstraction and concretion. The idea of a dream has the immediate and powerful effect that bears abstraction. The poem outlined a sequence of events that flabbergasts the poet. He appears to be overwhelmed with amazements. He admires the ability of a man to reach the moon, the chemical and mechanical advancements that control the universe. He discloses the powers that God endows and enables man to display his dexterity, hardworking, potentialities and the zeal to utilize the natural resources in a meaningful way. The poet commented on modern creations that compete with the swallows in the air. His mind seems to unfold to the ideal world or the world of dreams. The modern creations symbolize modern life. They are man-made objects that show the relationship of man with himself and the world of objects in his environment.

Truth as Recurrent Image

Truth symbolizes grace, reliability and God's image at the centre of respect, responsibility, accuracy and meticulous attitude. Searching for the truth is the human being's attempt to strive for perfection, loyalty and calmness:

*Lamaphupho alisango
Lekungena kutfungatfwe emaciniso.
(These dreams are the entrance gates
Through which to search for the truths)*
(Shongwe 1982: 35)

The extract illustrated that success comes like a dream after hard work. Truth serves as a point of departure for all the activities that a person decides to partake in. Truth is an abstract phenomenon that presupposes concreteness. Truth is the forerunner of all the activities that occur in the real world.

Sleepiness and Death as Recurrent Images

He vividly conveys a situation of deep sleep using two consecutive abstract words *butfongo* and *bekufa*. The latter has a possessive formative *be-* that qualifies sleepiness.

... *Kuphele butfongo bekufa?*
 (... *To stop the sleepiness of death?*)
 (Shongwe 1982: 1)

The use of these words displays a poetic quality which addresses itself to imagery experiences, situation and attitudes. In the context of the poems, the poet uses these images to remark on the challenges that the nation has. He encourages the people to involve themselves in many projects that will lead towards the development of the whole nation. He is conscious of the development and prosperity that counteract static conditions, inactivity and he personifies the field when he said:

Avalon baphe kuthula nokuphumula ...
 (*Avalon give them rest and peace ...*)

He likens the cemetery to a cultivated field. He endows Avalon with animate qualities. He implies that a buried person is like a seed which is expected to grow into a new plant. He suggests that life is a circle, that death symbolizes the end of physical life and the continuation of the spiritual life. The poet is amazed at the breadth and width of this field. He remarks that every week many people are buried. The people who accompany their relatives to the field are depressed. There is a rain of tears and much crying. The extract illustrates surrender and the acceptance of physical death. On the other hand, the poet doubts his physical and human attempts to cut the cords of death that entangle people; the cords of the grave that coil and confront them; and the torrents of destruction that overwhelm them. Therefore, he feels that he will take refuge in God's fortress. The lyrical elegy, *Ensimini i-Avalon* (In the burial field of Avalon) is the poem on death. It is one of the major graveyards in Greater Johannesburg. The poet stated that the burial takes place during winter and summer seasons:

Kulinywa busika nelihlobo
 (*They bury during winter and summer*).
 (Shongwe 1985: 26)

It does not mean that the burial is evident in winter and summer only, but the poet has decided to choose two major seasons to depict that the burial takes place throughout the year. The use of *busika* (winter), which is connected with the autumn, reveals the period of wither and death, while *lihlobo* (summer) reveals growth and life. This burial field is remarkable because of its greatness and the well-known leaders from all spheres of life that are laid to rest in it. It is

further noted that Avalon is endowed with human attributes when the poet said:

... *Avalon mamintela*
Ngitjele Avalon, uyobakhafula na,
Sibabone labatsandvwa ngitsi ...
 (... *Avalon, the glutton*
Tell me Avalon, are you going to spit them out,
And see our loved once...)
 (Shongwe 1985: 27)

Avalon is ironically taken as a human being who has all human characteristics. It is looked as if it has a mouth to eat and talk. It has the ears to listen and the eyes to see. The poet appeals to certain senses. Irony is the opposite meaning of the literal meaning of a word. In most cases the meaning may be contrary to the exact meaning of the word. Thwala (2000: 163) defined irony as a figure of speech that is based on contrast or difference. The poet said that he is far away from home where he sees people crying tears of pain because they have lost their loved ones. In the cemetery, people are ploughing throughout the season. When ploughing, they use pick and shovel. In his poems he said:

Kulinywa ngelipiki nelifosholo
 (*They plough by pick and shovel*)
 (Shongwe 1985: 26)

Both young and old people are crying because they have lost their loved ones. Widowers and widows are also crying. The poet expressed the lamentation as follows:

Hhayi Mangwane lemvula yetinyembeti.
 (*Alas, Mangwane the rain of tears*)
 (Shongwe 1985: 27)

He said that he heard about people who were going very slowly and the black vehicle that carries the coffin. The bereaved families are crawling, hence he said that:

Sebayobuk' emadvolo, abasakhasi
 (*They have scars on their knees they no longer crawl*).
 (Shongwe 1985: 27)

When death comes, only those who have been chosen by you Avalon could hear. He supported his statement by saying:

Kumemeta kwakho Avalon
Kunkeneneta kudvume, kwece
Imisindvo yemshini yeJozi
Eve lowo losuke umkhetsile
 (*Your calling Avalon*
It is humming and overtakes
All sounds of machinery in Johannesburg
Only the chosen one can hear.)
 (Shongwe 1985: 27)

The poet said that when death has come, it goes straight to that particular person and calls him or her:

*Livi lakho Avalon liyanyenya
Likhas' imini nebusuku litotoba,
Liyofika kulabasemacansini nasemibhedeni
(Shongwe 1985: 28)
(Your voice Avalon is crawling
Crawling day and night
Reaching those who are sleeping in the mats
and beds).*

Cultural Elements as Recurrent Images

Culture consists of values, norms and traditions. Customs are nothing but set of rules and procedures which are expected to be observed by people. He is appealing to people to stick to their culture in the poem, *Bambani Mswati* (Emaswati hold on), as depicted by the following lines:

*Bambani ninokoshele kuw' emasiko;
Nidl' emicwembeni yabokhokho.
(Hold and stick to your customs
Eat from the dishes of your forefathers).
(Shongwe 1982: 14)*

Culture also includes the goods they have created which are meaningful to them, namely, bows, arrows and ploughs. Culture exists in every society. The poet insisted that culture is the totality of their norms, values and traditions, therefore, they must adhere to it irrespective of any conditions and situations.

Beliefs and Religion as Recurrent Image

He stated that the poem does not finally achieve a proper synthesis of the religions and cultures are achieved in the poem due to the Christians imagery that is dominating its conclusion. The poem, *Khaya, Khaya Lami* (Home, my home) presented us with the triumph of honest and reputable Christian ideal as follows:

*Kuw' akunamawa;
Kuw' akunatikhilikitsi;
Kuw' akunatisele, imigodzi netintsaba;
Kuwe khaya lami.
(To you there are no dungeons
To you there are no sharp curves;
To you there are no furrows, holes and mountains;
To you may home).
(Shongwe 1985: 14)*

The words, *emawa* (dungeons), *tikhilikitsi* (curves), *imigodzi* (holes), *tisele* (furrows) and *tintsaba* (mountains) are symbolic in the poem. Each word has various meanings.

In his poem entitled *Emtfonjeni Wemfula* (From the river source), he is begging people to come and drink in religion. He said that this water is life and happiness, therefore, he urges people to avail themselves to be well fed physically and spiritually:

*Uyimphilo mtfombo!
Mtfombo uyinjabulo
Lonatsa kuwe uyondleka
Ondleke umtimba nemphefumulo
(You are life fountain;
Fountain you are happiness,
Those who drink from you are well cared
for
Cared physically and emotionally)
(Shongwe 1982: 49)*

The words, *umtfombo* (fountain) and *umfula* (river) serve as sources of life, health and ecstasy in the poem. The theme of religion is portrayed through these symbolic words.

RESULTS

An examination of symbolism in this paper depicts a meticulous choice of symbolism and images that are associated with beliefs, mythology and cultural traits of the nation. The crocodile is used with great success in modern poetry to symbolize strength, vigour and ferociousness. The words, *emangeleti* (water) and *ensimini* (in the field) are euphemically used in the poems to stand for something else. Water is a symbol of health and life, while the field contextually stands for the grave. His choice of recurrent images appear to be an unconscious way of resorting knowledge of socio-political and cultural ways in which he finds himself. It is further noted as a means of solving intricacies and complexities of life. It may on the other hand symbolise his desire to take a deep look into the history, culture and traditions of the nation.

The word, symbol means something that stands for or represents something else. A distinction is evident in these three types of symbols:

- Conventional or public symbols, for example, the cross, dove and a flag which will be more or less universal in character.
- Traditional symbols which will only have symbolic meaning in a society where they

acquired that specific reference. The examples are shields, spears and traditional dresses.

- Private or personal symbols, for example, a peacock for pride, an eagle for heroic endeavour, the rising sun for birth. They are developed by individual poets and have much more limited field of reference.

Symbolism is prevalent in all types of poems and it remains a source of metaphoric language. Despite the fact that symbolism is subjective, it reflects and interprets the experiences, ideas and feelings of the sender. It depicts a picture of the nation. Symbolism and imagery overlaps, intermingle and share most characteristics in poetry. Imagery includes various senses, namely, visual, olfactory, tactile, auditory and gustatory. What is noted about recurrent images or symbolism are that they are spontaneous words that are used to display and illustrate analogy and figurative meanings.

DISCUSSION

Recurrent images can forcefully convey feelings and create atmosphere at the same time that vividly describes settings, events and characters. Perhaps the most useful approach to the analysis of imagery is through noting the poet's repetition of specific images or patterns of images. Once such a repetition is discovered, the function of colour imagery on animal imagery ordinarily becomes clear. A poet may repeatedly use dark colours to convey a feeling of doom or danger, or he may repeatedly employ references to birds of prey in descriptions of an unscrupulous character, thus leading us, respectively, to a clearer sense of the atmosphere of a story and of the nature of a character. When we encounter such striking repetitions of image, we become aware of another function of imagery which is the extra-literal or symbolic function.

The most common kind of symbol in poetry is an image that serves not only as an important part of a description but also as a sign of something else. The visual image of a red rose may serve at the same time as part of a description of a garden and as a sign of beauty and passion. Darkness may be used by a poet both as literal fact in a narration and simultaneously as suggestive of evil and ignorance. Such suggestions or symbolic meanings are made evident by most poets through repetition of images that are associated with specific ideas: red with passion, rapid and irregular notion with violence, sweet-

ness with happiness, water and warmth with fertility, dryness and cold with death. Recurring image can symbolize more than one thing, as "cold"; for instance, can contextually symbolize vitality and freshness as well as death. Poets can also create their own unique symbols that are repeated and closely associated with a specific idea.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is evident that symbolism calls for an imaginative interpretation of the readers' emotions and reactions. The words that are selected in poetry reflect that they are either traditional or conventional symbols. Diction can be a major determinant of the poet style due to its descriptions which can be plain or ornate, formal or informal, abstract or concrete. It is noted that symbolism is found in most types of poems, namely; narrative, dramatic and lyrics.

Symbolic meanings are significant in poetry because they enhance figurative language which is basic in poetry. Poetic language is emphasized and echoed by the symbolic words or recurrent images. Symbolism is denotatively and connotatively looked at in poetry to bring about the intended poetic meaning. The symbolic words that are properly used in a poetry discourse are expected to be representative, illustrative and descriptive.

It is proper to state that Shongwe's poems cover various themes. His thematic approach appears to be the main message behind his writings. His style of writing evokes and redirects feelings and views towards harmony and reconciliation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that various rhetoric devices such as simile, metaphor, personification and sarcasm need to be broadly studied to enhance symbolism. More emphasis on poetic diction and connotative language determine poetic meaning, tone and message. The symbolic words need classification, categorization and analysis in poetry.

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