

Lyrical Narratives: Symbolic Representation in ‘*The English Patient*’

Dr.Nishrin Pathan ,Associate Professor, ASMSOC,NMIMS, Deemed University in Mumbai.201, 2nd Floor, SBMP Phase II Building, Opp. Cooper Hospital, JVPD Scheme, Bhakti Vedant Marg, Vile Parle (W)Maharashtra, India

Article Received: 20/04/2024

Article Accepted: 25/05/2024

Published Online: 26/05/2024

DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2024.6.5.119

Abstract:

As Ralph Freedman says, any lyrical prose is ‘vertically related to the scenes and events, while horizontally, to the symbols and images.’ Symbols are emblems that do not work alone but connect with other text elements. Using symbols and imagery together brings lyricism to any literary work, whether poem, drama, or novel. Postmodernism advocates that no work of art is unique and does not emerge without any reference, hence focusing on the context of the text. This article studies the narrative styles of the novel, ‘*The English Patient*’ by Michael Ondaatje, using various symbols and images interwoven with the text to render a complete understanding of love, cultural identity, and post-war trauma. The twinning of historical, cultural, and war motifs extends lucid progression to the storyline. The reason for writing this paper is to study images and symbols that render a lyrical tone to the novel. The novel, so far, has been studied for various elements like post-colonial, war traumas, and human relationships. It still has a vast research scope for ‘rural lyricism,’ ‘Lyric tense,’ ‘subtle lyric of the desert,’ ‘use of lyric in prose,’ etc.

Keywords: Lyrical Narrative, Symbolic Representation, Postmodern Literature,

Introduction

Imagery & Symbols:

The protagonist of a lyrical novel experiences that particular objects are significantly acting toward him. Familiar and active objects like clocks, tables, the Bible, mirrors, bookshelves, pictures, etc., offer a break from the past of a protagonist. The role of these ‘objects in a character’s subconscious is perceived as an ‘act of symbolic self-concease.’ Symbolic figures and images appear and gather up time in imaginative insight. These ‘objects not only portray characters’ themes and

experiences but also symbolize the contradicting worlds.¹ E. g. quickly fading external music outlines with inner music. Sometimes, oppositions in symbols depict two different universes of goodness and evil lying within the protagonist. Clarity and cleanliness, washed hands, clean clothes, and good manners are juxtaposed with the worlds of servants, slaughterhouses, prisons, drunks, screaming women, ghost stories, or any event that has awe (Freedman, 1963). Symbols and images also represent occult communication between the protagonist and his mentor.

Some more examples of symbols are as follows: an emblem that a hero discovers is a symbolic answer to the conflicts between two worlds he is facing. A girl in a street is the emblem of salvation and pure love. Significant symbols of 20th-century urban life are 'Jazz music, asphalt streets, electric lights, bars, motion pictures, night clubs, warfare, and aviation.' (Hesse, 1981)². The depiction of water suggests vague boundaries between two opposite images as they combine and define each other (Freedman, 1963). A mirror has multiple interpretations as a symbol. Its primary function is producing a picture of a subject; in a symbolic way, it is a platonic correspondence between subject and image. An additional interpretation of a mirror is that it has the capacity of a glass to reflect multiple parts of a single object. It is the ability to split an entity into a variety of components. Lyrical novels rely on the lavish use of symbols as they offer myriads of interpretations of the hero's ideas.

Symbols always represent something that remains to be demonstrated unless it has already been accepted in the fai(Kumar et al. (2003). The symbol, as an image, expresses the meaning of the image it is meant to convey and not in a casual point. Transcendental symbols embody meaning which has no connection. Between symbol and meaning, there is no causal nexus; there are only mysterious parallels. The realistic symbol is directly related to the independent meaning. As Charles Feidelson (1953) writes in *Symbols and American Literature*, "Symbolism has been considered one of the most sophisticated movements in literary history." John Hodgson (1977) states, "Allegory and symbol are critical strategies in broaching the subject, to affirm the value of symbol over allegory.

Literary narratives use symbols interwoven with the text to facilitate the storyline's progress. For instance, Romantic symbolism refers to using an object like a rose or music to represent a romantic relationship between characters. Using an object to symbolize how an emotion develops in a text is an example of emotional symbolism. Again, using flowers as an example, the flowers may appear to fall as the energy in the room turns negative suddenly. At the same time, the couple argues in the room and employs well-known symbols to depict anything in a religious context, for instance. The Bible portrays snakes as deceitful because the devil deceives Adam and Eve by appearing as a serpent. Colors also symbolize—E.g., red for passion, white for peace, etc. The most commonly used symbols in the literary narratives are artifacts and objects. Each artifact around the character or story strongly represents

the motif. Birds and animals have traits that align with the characters, and weather represents the ambiance, past or present, that creates the plot's setting.

Symbolic Vision in 'The English Patient'

Symbolic visions in any novel are crucial in conveying subtle themes and messages. 'The English Patient' by Michael Ondaatje presents beautiful depictions of objects and symbols. The wide array of symbols used in the novel can further be divided into several categories. The novel presents natural symbols like landscapes, places, and seasons, symbolizing life's journey, emotional turmoil, and renewal of moods. Water and Plants symbolize stagnation and growth of life, whereas birds and animals represent specific traits, love, or loss. Everyday objects and artifacts symbolize cultural identity, self-reflection, and historical and ideological conflicts. Using characters and figures symbolizes human qualities and experiences and even mythological references. Religious and spiritual imagery and Biblical motifs symbolize universal truth, moral values, and human fate.

Natural Symbols:

The Garden is the most potent place that gives the feeling of longing for lost ones. It is where human beings naturally desire to be in connection with someone, but it is impossible in such a state of war here. Hana's garden in front of the Villa represents the Garden of Eden and puts humanity above all religions. Hana's constant attention to her garden to produce food for the residents of the Villa symbolizes men's refuge in the Garden of Eden, men who are displaced by war. She creates an asylum for those who have nowhere to go.

The Desert is a prominent symbol throughout the novel. The detailed description of **desert wind** is symbolic as it suggests that desert wind and storms can destroy people and things, like war, destroy people's identity and nationality. **The Desert** itself is boundaryless and nationless. As Katherine jots down in her diary, it suggests there should be a boundary-less map, and people should be free to live irrespective of their nationality. The **impermanence of the Desert** symbolizes the momentariness of human existence. **Crossing the Desert** symbolizes passing through the inner being of man. All the characters in the novel, in a way, have to cross their utterly disturbing inner realm to reach the utmost peace of mind.

Caves of Swimmers depicts prehistoric desert life and represents the secret desire of Almasy and Katherine to indulge in socially forbidden behaviour. Injured Katherine, waiting for Almasy to return and take her from the Caves, jots down her irresistible desire to live in a better world.

Water always flows in the Villa where Hana stays with the patient. It is a constant source of joy and peace in this sheer barren place. Water is always an elixir and a symbol of calmness. It relates to situations in life that are now giving relief. Water also represents energy, which is needed here in a war-shaken world. The water in the Fountain is continuously and endlessly running, which symbolizes eternity flowing into the pasture of time, which is also the phenomenon of Nature. Everything in nature passes with time, which is humanity's most significant lesson: to grow and walk ahead continuously. It also represents Nature's mystical dimension of an infinite source of energy. We cannot see the water source, which is true in real life. The source

of eternal peace is invisible to our senses, and we get astray when achieving superficial pleasure.

Symbols of Animals, Birds and Plants

Once, in the Villa where the English Patient is resting, **a stray dog** comes and frightens him. Later on, Caravaggio and Hana took care of it. It was an old mongrel. Ondaatje introduces him here as his representation, as he calls him mongrel, but in a pejorative sense. Michael Ondaatje is a Sri Lanka-born Canadian writer born during World War- II. He has experienced the prevalent tension among races, cultures, and nationalities. **The birds** pose excellent metaphorical significance to the lives of the characters. Ondaatje uses symbols to represent specific incidents. In the deserted Villa, where Hana chooses to stay back with the burned English Patient, there is not much luxury to enjoy except a sealed library and Fountain in the garden. After the Allies retreat, everything is damaged and in pieces here. **The hawks** are flying every morning over the Villa. An **ostrich in the Desert** could symbolize the predatory love that Almasy has for Katherine; later, the same ostrich points the way to him. Lying in a sickbed, Almasy remembers when he was being taken by nomads in a palanquin, wrapped in a felt; he could see up in the sky the veins of **flamingos**.

These birds symbolize things like maintaining balance and remaining steadfast in chaotic life. Just before meeting an accident, Almasy indulged in many extravagances and a passionate love affair with Katherine, Geoffrey's wife. He was entirely burnt by plane fire. Flamingos teach how to stand firm in the face of a storm. They also symbolize inner harmony and outer synergy with the people around them. Their habit of keeping one leg up is so meditative and mysterious. Flamingos have a bond between earth and air and know how to strike the balance. If we look at the color of flamingos, which is pink due to their diet, it also symbolizes being playful and charming. The pink hue resonates with harmony, friendship, honesty, and a small quantity of romance. If we compare these qualities with the novel's characters, they are all victims of war, and the world needs to harmonize with them. The people living in Villa are true friends, as the novel has a parallel theme of friendship and humanity. The novel's milieu is set up in the post-Second World War time, which has called for greater harmony and human care. Flamingos are passionate lovers, and so are Almasy and Katherine. However, in Almasy's burnt condition and other people's scattered fate, these birds symbolize serenity and contentment in life. Many cultures consider Flamingos an emblem of healing and love. In Egypt, people associate them with the sun God, while Peruvians consider them sacred heroes who are protectors of humankind.

Hana finds **Plum** in the garden of the Villa and puts it in the mouth of the patient. As Almasy eats the plum, he simultaneously feels sensual and spiritual feelings. The exchange of plums can be viewed as the bond of love between two people in wartime. Hana is not very exotic about food. She would need bread and meat. However, she loved watching the English Patient who could not eat. She remembers someone gifting her Jerusalem artichoke while caring for war patients **in Rome. Jerusalem artichoke** symbolizes hope, peace, and a tender heart, which Hana constantly desires. She had to be at the place where wounded patients were

accommodated. She would sleep in any corner of basilicas or monasteries and care for the wounded. When someone died, she would hoist a small cardboard flag or put a thick stone at the foot of the grave to respect the martyr.

Places, Objects and Artifacts:

The Villa in which the main characters gather is a real place in Tuscany, a region in west-central Italy. The idyllic beauty of this region of Tuscany is exactly juxtaposed with the death and devastation of war and the bombed Villa itself. The Villa has a great, glorious past, and these scholars have spent their valuable years here through paintings and graffiti on walls and domes. This Villa is called Villa Bruscoli Poliziano. The enemy attacked it, damaging some parts of its roof and walls. Even the people staying there are unaware of how much it has been damaged. It is broken, and its pieces fall uncertainly, creating debris and leaking water. It is in such a condition that people cannot live there. The Villa symbolizes the devastating consequences of war that leave the world 'in near ruin.' It also symbolizes the ruined emotional and mental states of people living therein. The villa is a place to heal people traumatized by the war. It represents the physical and psychological trauma of the people. The way several rooms, which are utterly damaged, cannot be entered, the characters' hearts also cannot be reached.

And the only running water in the Villa is the **Fountain**. Fountain, in the novel, stands as a symbol of eternity. After total devastation by war, it only stands intact and alive in the ruins. It is the symbolic representation of the characters' subconscious realm. With its tunnel, it is connected to the characters' internal beings and eternity in the external. The round-shaped bowl of the Fountain is a sacred space like the 'Holy Grail' representing the transcendence of thoughts, from physical to spiritual. Kip always washes himself near the Fountain. Hana secretly watches him often. It evokes typical feelings in them and renders aesthetic manifestations of their emotions. Sometimes, when the English patient eeps, Hana silently moves out into the garden, watches starsfountains, and enjoys the early summer weather.

Hana uses an abandoned **crucifix to make a scarecrow** for her garden, where she has sown some seeds. This again symbolizes how religious rituals and symbols become immaterial when serving humanity. Her leisure time activities include playing **hopscotch** at night to keep herself childlike.

Hana's library is another symbol that keeps the characters' faith alive. The library is damaged by a 'mortar-shell attack on the villa.' It is an 'oval-shaped' library that implies 'ovum' or 'egg', further representing rebirth, fertility, and immortality. People living in this Villa are all victims of the devastating consequences of war. Despite witnessing life's harsh reality, they keep reading books and hope for a new life to begin. The library symbolizes wisdom, intelligence, knowledge, and new doors to life, which are annihilated at this point. The library is damaged and has a 'portrait-level hole'; however, inhabitants have adapted themselves to this wound. However, this wound offers them the experience of different weathers, gazing at evening stars and listening to the sounds of birds. The stuffed head of the bear on the wall represents a severe threat to the human community, which they can withstand and make displays of the same. The library gets light intermittently, and the books have at least

consolation to serve their purpose. Books on some shelves are wet due to rain, which implies new knowledge but with some disappointments. Hana had stayed in an isolated part of Villa when others moved to the south. The staircase of this room has lost its two last steps in the fire. She has brought twenty books from the library and nailed them on the floor to rebuild the lower two steps. This ironically symbolizes books to be used for physical elevation in this challenging time.

Books always accompany Hana. **Books** symbolize the forward movement of progress and familiarity with the world you live in. She piles up some library books as a missing step in her staircase to climb up it and, ideally, to facilitate her upward movement. Metaphorically, books transform characters in the other world. Because of her reading, she can confront the pain and desolation of her surroundings, a war relief camp. Books allow her to elevate herself from her immediate surroundings to a safer and better life experience. Books give her great relief from her daily chores of harsh work. Books and stories render emotional and intellectual support to the English patient and Hana, healing them after war trauma. While e-reading '**The Last of the Mohicans**, ' Hana adds her feelings on the book's last page. This shows that her story and feelings are now part of that book and added to the history.

The mirror remains a constant symbol of looking for self-identity time and again. When she realizes that Caravaggio is constantly staring at her day and night, she is urged to look at herself in the round mirror. She has stopped looking in the mirror for almost a year now. In wartime, she found it utterly futile to look at and appreciate beauty or be self-centered. One day, she peeps into the mirror, looks at herself, and says, 'Hi Buddy' as if trying to recognize herself. The mirror symbol gives her a chance to revisit her identity after a long time and renew her aspirations towards life. This happens once Caravaggio returns to her life and reminds her of her past. She perfectly knows that he is constantly following her, and in a way, he becomes a mirror of his suppressed desires and dreams. He makes her revisit those happy days and gives them new hope to live life, enjoy what she has craved for a long time, and be happy with someone. She secretly acknowledges Caravaggio's affection towards her, and this becomes obvious when she writes about him in her diary, "...for some reason, I am cared for by this friend of my father." (Ondaatje, 1992, p. 65) Caravaggio would sit on a terrace near a broken **chimney**, foreshadowing worries and problems. He also prefers sitting near the headless **statue of a count** that matched his faceless identity. Almsy can hear the sound of **wind chimes**, a *feng shui* symbol of protection and mystic energy, which Almsy desperately needs.

Hana recalls working at Santa Chiara Hospital in Pisa, and a **statue of a white lion** at Pisa stood near the hospital as a guard day and night when she moved among patients. It stood there for centuries; to her, it appeared as a gift from the past, and like other things, she had to accept whatever she had inherited. It stood there even after the war, like a person shivering in **shell shock**. Nurses, too, were shell-shocked due to the many deaths around them. It was this time when Hana received news of her father's death; she had to accept it like a white lion. Hana is fond of some of her belongings, and they are giving her soothing feelings. She has taken a pair of tennis

shoes and a hammock.¹³ She has taken these two things from a soldier who was in her care, from wartime, and from others. She feels secure in this miniature world she has built. The hammock symbolizes a life of leisure, relaxation, and simplicity amidst war.

Characters and Figures as Symbols:

The novel shows explicit historical references and its impact on human lives today. The English Patient refers back to the history of **Herodotus** and **Queen of Sheba**. The original stories of Herodotus bear perfect similarities with the stories of the characters of the English Patient. In this way, by using the book of Herodotus, he searches for places in the Desert and explores every part of her body. Initially, when she asked for this book to be read, he called it his prideful possession and denied sharing it with anyone. Now, he gifts this book to her, symbolically implying his gesture of love and sacrifice to Katherine. The story of the Queen, the King, and Gis is similar to that of Almsy, Katherine, and Geoffrey.

After his plane crash in the Desert, when Almsy was being treated by nomads, at **twilight**, he saw a man moving towards him. The man carried hundreds of small bottles tied with different strings in his cloak. These bottles contained a panacea for his burnout. This man resembles 'archangels he tried to copy as a schoolboy' (Ondaatje, 1992). The description of a man resembles **archangels** who come to soothe humans who are in distress. This man also carries several bottles of ointment that heals skin. The Archangels are protectors, and so is this man. Angels inspire faith, provide comfort, and uphold high spirits of wisdom and understanding irrespective of man's sins. This healer symbolizes faith, hope, trust, devotion, and love. Almsy has great faith in this healer who 'moved with long, slow gait' smoothly without letting tilt in the bottles. His cloak gives him the feeling of wings, and he wonders how 'one body could have space for the muscles of wings.' Amidst the destruction of war and the predicament of humans, this healer symbolizes man's faith in the almighty.

Religious and spiritual Imagery:

Ondaatje employs symbols as metaphors and are used to project the mindset or behavior of characters. Kip is sharing condensed milk with Almsy, suggesting a congenial bond between him and the English patient, a universal brotherhood. The **turban** Kip wears symbolizes him being 'other' in the era of British colonialism. He represents cultural differences, non-European identity, and insistence on assuring self-identity. Religious symbols are also found throughout the novel. Burnt-lying Almsy looks **Christ-like** to Hana, whereas the Sikh identity of Kip and his indicative turban represents racial discrimination. Christmas parties where Almsy and Katherine make love suggest the futility of war and that love is beyond any religion or nationality.

Symbols of Dreams and Visions:

Dream allegory, also known as Dream Vision, is an allegorical representation of a story in the narrative framework of a dream. It has been a popular technique since Medieval Literature. The writers of postmodern literature use this device to reveal the characters' incredible imaginative fantasy or bizarre state of mind. Dreams also help readers interpret symbolic objects and their implications. Dreams bring the suppressed desires of characters to the surface. They also render progression to the narrative of the text. The novel's main characters are confronted with the dark brutality of the war and its aftermath. The only solace to their tormenting souls is to dream. They dream about the experienced past and its extensions or about the unseen beautiful world and desire to be there for eternal comfort and peace. Lying in a sickbed, an English Patient dreams about Flamingos, the birds of spirit, symbolizing his high fortitude and guts to overcome physical barriers. His senses of hearing and smelling are also powerful, as he can smell the bridle of a horse he saw in the Desert and hear the rustle of palms. He can smell and identify from those tiny hundreds of bottles with tempting fragrances. He feels the twilight and its liquid in the air and can hear the noise of darkness. He visualizes an oasis in the Desert that symbolizes respite and fertility in the middle of the Desert. An oasis is hope and optimism if a desert lacks opportunities and futility.

The novel beautifully describes how characters feel the world around them through their senses and psychology. Whenever reading a book to the English Patient, Hana feels like a scurry in her mind like a mouse...' Either it is a moth dashing on the night window or something moving on the roof.

Hana reads books to the English patient. She secretly enters a sealed room and brings books to read to him. She immerses herself in the story, feeling the lives of others. She feels she has known people in the plot for twenty years. Her body and mind are entire of sentences and moments described therein the book, and she feels as if awakening from sleep with heaviness caused by unremembered dream' (Ondaatje, 1992, p. 13)

Katherine dreams of a man who holds her neck with his hands, and she wakes up screaming. Her husband, Geoffrey, is beside her and offers her a glass of water. This was the first time she dreamt about that man who would be her lover. She felt his hands on her neck with anger, and that was the same anger towards her she sensed when he met Almsy initially. She could feel him towards her and his disinterest and irritation towards her for being a married woman among them. This was her first recognition of her suppressed desire. The psychoanalysis of this dream suggests that she was feeling suffocated in her married life with Geoffrey and was looking for someone who loved her passionately beyond social norms. Almsy is going to be that man very soon. She deliberately avoided giving significance to this dream, but the next day, she remembered it for some time and then forcefully refused to snuggle on it. However, she thought over this dream for a year, and it appeared in front of her as a more realistic and peaceful dream after one year.

The English patient lying in his bed in the Villa is always in delirium. His vision swings between his devastated present life due to the consequences of war and his pleasant memories of his past spent with Katherine in the Desert. Sometimes, he

cannot determine whether the events he sees around him are actual or appear in his dreams. Towards the end, he hallucinates Kip roaming in the Villa and asks Hana about it.

Conclusion:

Symbols consist of objects, actions, and ideas involving all senses: sight, sound, taste, touch, and smell, which relate to some or the other phenomena of the character. Images are objects, scenes, and characters, imagery figures in the hero's lyrical point of view. The lyrical novel absorbs action altogether and refashions it as a pattern of imagery. Symbols and images render symbolic encounters, replaced by enactment of his inner condition. The English Patient uses prominent symbols like books, water, Nature, Mirrors, wind chimes, fountains, specific birds like Flamingos and ostriches, and ancient structures and statues. The dexterous twining of these symbols renders lyrical narration to the novel that makes unforgettable memories for the readers.

References

- Abbar, Emad Mohammad. 'A Critical Analysis of Symbolism in Modernist Literature concerning T.S. Eliot and Roland Barthes.' *South Asian Research Journal of Arts, Language and Literature*, vol. 5, no. 04, SASPR Edu International Pvt. Ltd, Aug. 2023, pp. 138–142.
- Beaman, Lori G. "Battles over Symbols: The 'Religion' of the Minority versus the 'Culture' Of the Majority." *Journal of Law and Religion*, vol. 28, no. 1, 2012, pp. 67–104.
- Bertens, Hans. *Literary Theory: The Basics*. Taylor & Francis, 2020.
- Embler, Weller. "Symbols in Literature and Art." *College Art Journal*, vol. 16, no. 1, 1956, pp. 47–58.
- Fornäs, Johan. "Identifying Symbols." *Signifying Europe*, Intellect, 2012, pp. 43–60.
- Freedman, Ralph. *The Lyrical Novel: Studies in Herman Hesse, Andre Gide, and Virginia Woolf*. Princeton University Press, 1963. Print.
- Frye, Northrop. "Three Meanings of Symbolism." *Yale French Studies*, no. 9, 1952, pp. 11–19.
- Hesse, Hermann - Introduction." *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, edited by Sharon R. Gunton, Vol. 17. Gale Cengage, 1981.
- Juss, Satvinder Singh. "Kirpans, Law, and Religious Symbols in Schools." *Journal of Church and State*, vol. 55, no. 4, 2013, pp. 758–95.
- Kohler, Sheila. "Symbols." *The American Scholar*, vol. 77, no. 3, 2008, pp. 124–29.
- Lecky, Eleazer. "Symbols and Symbolism." *ETC: A Review of General Semantics*, vol. 14, no. 2, 1956, pp. 140–42.
- Ondaatje, Michael. *The English Patient*. Toronto, ON: Vintage Books Canada. 1992. Print.
- Robb, John E. "The Archaeology of Symbols." *Annual Review of*

Anthropology, vol. 27, 1998, pp. 329–46.

Shoemaker, Francis. “Communication through Symbols in Literature.” *The English Journal*, vol. 37, no. 5, 1948, pp. 235–240.

Wellek, René. “The Term and Concept of Symbolism in Literary History.” *New Literary History*, vol. 1, no. 2, 1970, pp. 249–70.

Wylie, Elinor. “Symbols in Literature.” *The English Journal*, vol. 17, no. 6, 1928, pp. 442–445