



RESEARCH PAPER

Exploring Voices of Symbolism in Najwa Zebian's *The Nectar of Pain*

¹Shehriyar Younas * ²Afaq Ali and ³Huzaifa Noor

1. BS Student, Department of English, AWKUM, KP, Pakistan
2. BS Student, Department of English, AWKUM, KP, Pakistan
3. BS Student, Department of English, AWKUM, KP, Pakistan

*Corresponding Author | shehriyaryounas09@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the symbols used in Najwa Zebian's book of poetry called "The Nectar of Pain" to uncover themes of human's feelings and emotions. The poetess is a Lebanese who wrote her poetry after she was betrayed by her lover. She was in trauma due to her lover's disloyalty. She wrote her poetry to express her feelings of pain, hope, revenge and love. Therefore, her poetry expresses her post-traumatic condition through figures of speech and symbols. This study analyzed symbols through close reading technique. After the analysis, this study shows that the poetess has expressed many themes through the use of symbols. This analysis revealed dominant themes of her poetry are revenge, self-identity, betrayal, hope and hypocrisy and double standards of her lover. Key symbols used are "rose," "heart," "flower," "darkness," "sky," "pearls," "home" and "bird." To address the emotional turmoil reflected in her work, readers could explore therapeutic practices like journaling or poetry workshops that healing through creative expression.

KEYWORDS Literature, Poetry, Symbolism

Introduction

Najwa Zebian is a Lebanese poetess. She has written *The Nectar of Pain*, a book of poetry. There are many themes in this book, e.g. betrayal and hope, but this study analyze symbolism in this book. This study analyze various symbols used in the text of her book by using close reading technique as a research method. Symbolism has been used by many literary writers such as Shakespeare in his dramas and W.B. Yeats in his poetry. Symbolism refers to how a writer uses certain words to mean something else. Functions of various symbols help in expressing themes of a literary genre. We do not consider the literal meanings of the words used as symbols. We consider the implied or contextual meanings of those words. We consider the meaning of a word it stands for or it symbolizes.

Dhain (2015, p.486) defines symbolism as "the use of an object, person, situation or a word symbolically to represent something else in literature." We can rarely find examples of literature where symbolism would not have been used. The author has analyzed symbols in Joseph Conrad's "Heart of Darkness." The novel is full of basic symbols which are about life. Almost all great works are symbolic. The author says that even the word 'darkness' in the title of the novel is symbolic because it has been used for shades of reality, nature of the mankind and corruption of decency when people face hurdles and obstacles in life. Conrad has also used many other symbols, e.g. 'the Congo River,' 'the ivory' and 'the fog.'

Symbolism has been defined and interpreted in various ways by literary critics, scholars and philosophers. Some different definitions of symbolism according to different people.

Arthur Symons(1899): "Symbolism is a method of showing the infinite, the abstract, the spiritual, by means of the finite, the concrete, the material."(Source: Symons, A.(1899). *The Symbolist Movement in Literature.*)

T.S. Eliot (1920): "Symbolism is a way of conveying the emotional and intellectual content of a poem through objects, colors, and other tangible things." (Source: Eliot, T.S. (1920). *The Sacred Wood.*)

Northrop Frye (1957): "Symbolism is the process of transforming words into myths, and myths into words." (Source: Frye, N.(1957). *Anatomy of Criticism.*)

Plato(c. 380 BCE): "Symbols are sensible objects which convey spiritual truths." (Source: Plato. (c. 380 BCE). *Cratylus.*)

Aristotle (c. 335 BCE): "Symbols are signs that convey meaning beyond their literal sense."(Source: Aristotle. (c. 335 BCE). *De Intepretatiane.*)

Friedrich Nietzsche (1883):"Symbols are metaphors that reveal the deeper truth of human existence."(Source: Nietzsche, F. (1883). *Thus Spoke Zarathustra.*)

C.G. Jung (1964): "Symbols are archetypes that express the collective unconscious." (Source: Jung, C.G. (1964). *Man and His Symbols.*)

Claude Lévi-Strauss*(1963): "Symbols are part of a larger system of signs that structure human culture." (Source: Lévi-Strauss, C. (1963). *Structural Anthropology.*)

Umberto Eco (1976): "Symbols are signs that have multiple meanings and Connotations."(Source: Eco, U.(1976). *A Theory of Semiotics.*)

Symbolism is a technique of the writer which this study is going to analyze. It is the main topic or problem for this study. Symbolism is used for several purposes. And analyzing the purpose and manner of using such symbols in Najwa Zebian's poetry is the aim of this study. This study explain how the symbols have been used and how they help in building various themes in the text of her poetry. This study explores, what functions do different symbols perform in Najwa Zebian's *The Nectar of Pain*? Many researchers have analyzed different topics in literature like poetry. Research has its own scope and value. Some studies are more useful than others, but this study is significant in many ways. If we work on symbolism in Najwa zebian's poetry, students of literature can benefit from it. Knowledge about symbolism in poetry will be increased. Researchers will be able to analyze symbols in other literary genres. This study will be good for those people who want to use symbols in their daily-life communications. This study is also useful for writers. After reading this research article, they will be able to use symbols in their writings the way Najwa zebian has used them in her poetry. In short, this study means to produce some ideas about symbolism.

Literature Review

Poetry is a genre of literature which is a medium of expression. It is considered as a rich source of human's feelings and emotions. This study analyzed symbols used in Najwa Zebian's book of poetry called "*The Nectar of Pain*". Symbolism means the use of

symbols in literature for various purposes. Literal meanings of symbols are not considered. Their contextual or symbolic meanings are considered. A symbol is a word used to refer to something else, e.g. 'rose' is sometimes used for beloved. The use of symbols is arbitrary. Symbols have been used in literature by many great writers. Their use in poetry is very common. They were also used by poets in society where poetry was considered immoral. Arthur Symons (1899) says that symbolism was used by W. B. Yeats in his poetry. He has used 'rose' and 'stone' as symbols in his poetry. He says that his poetry is full of various symbols. If we read Shakespeare and John Donne, we can understand how many symbols they have used.

Dutta (2014) says that William Blake has used many symbols in his poetry. He has used 'lamb' and 'tiger' as symbols. The word 'lamb' was used for innocence of the people, and 'tiger' was used as a symbol of power and experience. Tiger also refers to divine power. He says that it is the divine power which helps people re-gain their lost innocence. Rumi was a mystic poet who used a lot of symbols in his poetry. He used 'wine' and 'tavern' as symbols in his poetry, but these things were unlawful in Islam. 'Wine' was used for reincarnation of dead souls. He used these symbols for something very good.

Ilame (2020) says that symbolism plays an important in the holy scriptures. It links the text with the external nature in the era of modernization. In Housman's poem, various symbols have been used. These symbols also reflect his romantic attitude and his search for eternity. The author says that his poetry is on immortality. He values intellectual pleasure more than sensual pleasure. He says the only solution for the human beings is in religion. His use of many symbols reflect spiritual attachment and satisfaction. His poetry through symbols takes us to our past which is full of joys and sorrows, but it also tells us about the eternal activities. He has used typical and personal symbols. He is known as an obscure symbolist because common readers cannot understand his symbols. He has used those figures of speech which Shakespeare, Milton, Dante and Lord Buddha had also used. He also uses Greek mythology in his poetry. Knowledge about the causes of joys had motivated him to be a symbolist in poetry.

The use of symbols in poetry is not limited to western traditions. Sharopidinovna and Nasirovna (2021) have written about specific features of symbols used in literature. They say that symbols are like sign language which are related to nature and certain culture. According to them, symbols in the past were not used in domestic scientific research. They were replaced by other concepts, like 'image,' 'allegory,' 'sign' or 'metaphor.' A symbol is defined as "a concrete and visible embodiment of those or other ideas and ideals as the highest values and meanings by which we live" (p. 233). A symbol is used to link the material with the ideal. They write that symbols in literature can be objects, plants, animals, actions or natural phenomenon.

Theoretical perspectives on symbolism offer valuable insights into its functions and effects. Northrop Frye (1957) posits that symbols operate on multiple levels, including the literal, metaphorical, and archetypal. This layered approach enables symbols to tap into collective unconsciousness, resonating with readers on a deeper level.

Feminist critics, such as Elaine Showalter (1981), have examined the role of symbolism in women's writing, highlighting the ways in which female poets employ symbols to subvert patriarchal norms and express feminine experiences. This perspective is particularly relevant to Najwa Zebian's work, which explores themes of love, loss, and identity through Symbolic language. Postcolonial theory also informs the analysis of symbolism in poetry. Critics like Homi Bhabha(1994) argue that symbols can serve as

sites of resistance, enabling marginalized voices to challenge dominant narratives. In the context of Zebian's poetry, symbols may function as a means of reclaiming agency and articulating experiences that have been historically silenced.

Recent studies have explored the intersection of symbolism and cognitive theory. Research by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) demonstrates that symbolic language is rooted in embodied experience, highlighting the role of metaphors in shaping human understanding. This perspective underscores the importance of considering the cognitive and emotional resonance of symbols in poetry.

Joshi (2016) says that T. S. Eliot was a great symbolist. His poetry is full of many symbols. He talks about Eliot's theory of objective correlative and symbolism. Eliot was influenced by Laforgue and he mostly took ideas of symbolism from great symbolists. The symbols he used are "prosaic, poetic, grand, material, abstract, metaphysical, and spiritual" (p. 48). Symbolism has given spiritual touch and vastness to literature and art through their connotative meanings. It has brought the dark and mysterious side to light and it has brought delight to the readers. The style of using symbols in literature is getting famous. Eliot used the style of his followers. He expressed moods of his characters through 'objective correlative.' The term 'objective correlative' means how the poet uses external agents to show the hidden psyche and feelings of various characters.

Dash (2022) considers W. B. Yeats as one of the most significant speakers of symbolism in the twentieth century English literature. Yeats used many different symbols in his poetry. Sometimes he uses one symbol for different things in different contexts for different purposes. Most of them have been obscurely used. He has derived symbols from his previous studies and associations. He has used symbols like 'rose,' 'cross,' 'lily,' 'bird,' 'tree' and 'sun' which he found in theosophical and other works. He used natural and cultural symbols. Natural symbols are those which are derived from the unconscious part of the mind whereas cultural symbols are used for eternal truths. They are significant for preserving a community's culture. Cultural symbols can affect individuals and can arouse their sentiments. Symbols in poetry are used for deeper meanings. He used symbols to share his sensations. He used major symbols in poetry like 'rose,' 'the tower,' 'the gyre,' 'the wheel,' 'the sword,' 'the moon,' 'the gold' and 'the fire.'

Material and Methods

First, this study collected lines or verses from *The Nectar of Pain* which contains different symbols. Lines and verses were selected purposively after reading different poems in the book. Then, this study analyzed symbols in those lines or verses (i.e. data) through the application of close reading technique as a research method. This research method was first introduced by the New Critics which tells us how to analyze a topic in a literary text. There are various contexts/levels of close reading technique. David Greenham (2019) has written on this type of technique. First of all, the researcher analyzed the semantic and pragmatic meanings of words. Then, she analyzed the sentence structure and meaning of each sentence. After this, she analyzed themes in the text. She also analyzed which words, phrases, sentences or ideas are repeated and why. She analyzed which genre is analyzed. Moreover, she analyzed the social or political context of the text for making meaning. In this study, researchers analyzed symbols in the selected lines or verses. For example, this study went to the symbolic meaning of 'heart' used in Najwa Zebian's poetry and this study also analyzed the overall line or sentence in which this symbol has been used.

Results and Discussion

This study analyzes the use of various symbols in the selected lines and verses. Najwa Zebian had been deserted by her lover and the use of symbols in her poetry is about her past, her lover and her present. She has given different messages to the readers about themes of her poetry. In her poem "After the End," she uses symbols. She has used "the scent of a breeze" for the recollection or thoughts of the pains. "Scent" is a symbol of the arrival of the thoughts of previous pains and "breeze" is a symbol of coming of such thoughts. She has also used "breathes" as a symbol of people's pains in life.

In another poem "You were my home," she has used different symbols. She has used "home" as a symbol of her lover's heart where she lived. She has used "windows or walls" for two things. "Windows" was used for the love that comes in and "walls" was used for security and protection of the poetess. These symbols show that her lover left her alone. She has used "heaven" for the place of extreme love and "taste" was used to stand for the pleasure of that love. These symbols are about the pleasure of love in a place of romance.

In a third poem "my heart left my heart," she has used "heart" as a symbol of love and lover. The line also means that her lover ("my heart") left her love or the place of love ("my heart"). The thematic meaning of the line is that her lover betrayed her. "Stars of the sky" stand for the shining light she put in her lover's eyes. "Pearls of her eyes" have been used as symbols of transparent tears or brilliance of eyes that she gave her lover's eyes. The use of "pearls of oceans" also stands for the wealth or the wealth of love or the brilliance of eyes she gave her. "I loved the darkness out of you" means thematically that the poetess lover grief of her lover. "Darkness" symbolizes grief or sufferings.

Additional symbols in her poetry warrant exploration. In "Knots," poetess uses "threads" (Zebian, n.d.) to show the tangled emotions and memories binding her to past experiences. The action of untying these knots symbolizes the poet's struggle to release herself from the burdens of her past. Similarly, "roots" (Zebian, n.d.) in "Unravel" serve as a symbol for the deep-seated connections between Zebian and her lover, highlighting the painful process of severing these emotional ties.

The symbol of "water" (Zebian, n.d.) in "Drowning" is also noteworthy, representing the overwhelming emotions that threaten to engulf the poet. This symbol may also allude to the cleansing and healing properties of water, suggesting Zebian's desire to purify herself from the hurt inflicted by her lover. Conversely, "fire" (Zebian, n.d.) in "Burn" symbolizes the passion and intensity of their relationship, as well as the destructive potential of unchecked emotions.

Zebian's use of natural imagery, such as "leaves" (Zebian, n.d.) and "flowers" (Zebian, n.d.), also merits discussion. These symbols represent growth, renewal, and the cyclical nature of life. The poet's incorporation of these images suggests her resilience and capacity for healing, despite the trauma she has endured.

The themes that emerge from Zebian's symbolism are multifaceted. Her poetry shows the complexities of love, identity, and loss, revealing a deeply personal and relatable narrative. The symbols used in her poetry serve as a testament to the enduring impact of past experiences on our present and future. Through Zebian's masterful use of symbolism, she invites readers to reflect on their own experiences, fostering a sense of understanding and empathy.

In conclusion, Najwa Zebian's poetry offers a rich tapestry of symbols that warrant close analysis. Her use of imagery and metaphor provides a profound exploration of the human experience, delving into themes of love, loss, and self-discovery. As readers, we are invited to immerse ourselves in her poetry, uncovering the layers of meaning hidden within her carefully crafted symbols.

Conclusion

Najwa Zebian, a talented poetess, was betrayed by her lover and experience that left her in deep trauma and emotional turmoil. She was in trauma due to her lover's disloyalty. In response to this she wrote her poetry to express her feelings of pain, hope, revenge and love. She has used many symbols for expressing her thoughts. For example, she has used 'heart' for her love and lover. Similarly, she has used 'dark' to refer to the hypocritical attitude of her beloved. She has used many other symbols such as 'flower,' 'sky,' 'bird,' 'book' and 'sea' for various purposes and effects. This research says that most of the symbols have been used to express main themes of her poetry.

References

- Dash, B. B. (2022). Symbolism in W. B. Yeats poetry: A critical study. *International Journal of English and Studies*, 4(3), 29-34.
- Dhain, Y. A. (2015). Symbolism in *Heart of Darkness*, *International Journal of Social Science and Humanities Research*, 3(2), 486-490.
- Dutta, P. S. (2014). *Symbolism in The Lamb and the Tiger* M. A. (English), ACIB (London), 395 Ramakrishna Palli (Mission Palli), Sonarpur, Kolkata 700150.
- Greenham, D. (2019). *Close reading: The basics*. Oxford Publishing Agency
- Ilame, V. (2020). The symbolism and imagery in Housman's poetry with special reference to 'By Rue My Heart Is Laden.' *International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences*, 5(4), 945-948.
- Joshi, C. R. (2016). Symbolism and T. S. Eliot's theory of objective correlative. *International Research Journal of Interdisciplinary & Multidisciplinary Studies*, 2(10), 48-55.
- Symons, A. (1899). *Symbolist movement in literature*, London: Constable and Company Ltd
- Sharopidinovna, Z. A., & Nasirovna, G. D. (2021). Specific features of symbolism in literature. *EPRA International Journal of Research and Development*, 6, (4), 233-235.
- Zebian, N. (2018). *The nectar of pain*. Andrew McMeel Publishing