

THE CORROBORATIVE SIGNIFICANCE OF LEITMOTIFS IN THE THEMATIC PATTERNING OF K.R. MEERA'S *THE UNSEEING IDOL OF LIGHT*

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Abstract

K.R. Meera is a prolific Malayalam writer. She is the winner of Kendra Sahitya Akademi Award for her celebrated novel, Aarachar, translated into English as Hangwoman. Originally written as Nethronmeelanam in Malayalam, Meera's The Unseeing Idol of Light stands for her artistry and eloquence. The novel was translated into English by Ministhy S., an IAS officer who hails from Kerala. 'Leitmotif' is a recurrent element, such as a type of incident, device, reference, or formula, which occurs frequently in works of literature. The plot of The Unseeing Idol of Light evolves through the skillful amalgamation of various motifs associated with individual characters and the theme of 'obsession' is communicated through the connotations these motifs carry with them.

Key Words: Leitmotif, Thematic patterning, Obsession, Connotation, K.R. Meera

Introduction:

K.R. Meera has made a name for herself in Indian literature as the author of multifarious short stories, novellas and novels in Malayalam. She has bagged some of the most exalted literary prizes including the Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award, the Vayalar Award and the Odakkuzhal Award. Her well-acclaimed novel, *Aarachar*, translated into English as *Hangwoman*, has won for her the Kendra Sahitya Akademi Award in 2015. Being an unrivalled figure in contemporary literature, she is relentlessly followed by the literary enthusiasts all over India.

Originally written as *Nethronmeelanam* in Malayalam, *The Unseeing Idol of Light* stands for its author's artistry and eloquence. Although it hinges on a radical treatment of rather tralatitious themes like love, loss, blindness and light, 'obsession' is at the core of the novel's thematic structure. An obsession is so vexatious that it can drain off all the mirth and merriment from one's life. People tend to live in an illusory world which presents before them the person or thing they are obsessed with, ad nauseam. The thoughts revolve around this object of obsession. The desperate soul lives with wandering thoughts, implacable perturbation, and wool-gathering. The result is, obviously, tumult and turmoil. The loss of addictive love leads to utmost loneliness and inner vacuity. At its zenith, the emptiness after the loss vehemently baffles the psyche of the haggard human.

Translated from Malayalam to English by Ministhy S., the novel invites the reader into the life of Jayaprakash, an ordinary librarian and his tenacious attempts and efforts to revive his lost wife, Deepti. Prakash loses his eight months pregnant wife during a train journey to Calicut. The acute pain of separation and unexpected trauma enervates Prakash and he starts losing his eyesight too. His bosom friend, Shyamaprasad comes to his help all through his endless quest for ten long years to recoup his wife. Though Prakash eventually develops an affinity with Rajani, his one-time assistant in the library, he fails in doing justice to both the women. The novel entertains various subplots associated with each individual character in its nonlinear pattern of storytelling.

M. H. Abrams defines a motif as “a conspicuous element, such as a type of incident, device, reference, or formula, which occurs frequently in works of literature. The German leitmotif (a guiding motif) is also applied to the frequent repetition within a single work” (*A Glossary of Literary Terms* 169-170). Originally, the term was used to relate to repeated thematic melodies in larger musical symphonies. It was Thomas Mann, the famous German writer, who had extended its meaning to refer to the recurring parts of a literary narrative integrated into the central thread of its storyline. The *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory* describes leitmotif as a term which “can also be used more profitably to designate an associative linkage between a narrative unit and a characteristic connotation, and it is precisely this linkage which generates the leitmotif’s significance in repetition, variation, and recombination with other connotations.” (388)

Evolution of Plot through Motifs:

Darkness:

The Unseeing Idol of Light makes use of different aspects of darkness. Via Prakash, Prakash’s dead father, and his father’s college mate- Abha Das Munshi, the subtleties of the bright/ dark dichotomy are cleverly rendered. Prakash gets afflicted with glaucoma soon after the mysterious vanishing of Deepti. The absence of a loving wife drives her husband into darkness. His blindness, but, coincides with the opening of his inner eye. Prakash’s insight gets sharpened as his eyesight gets diminished. It’s only then that Prakash starts experiencing the world through the other four senses. He very well remembers his wife’s smell of jasmine flowers, the soft texture of her delicate skin and the black mole behind her neck. Her voice resembling the sound of “a finger knocking softly against a bronze pitcher” (Meera 14) and even her taste are recollected! As Shyam rightly observes, Deepti is in Prakash’s fingertips, on the tip of his tongue, in his body and mind. Though light has vanished from his eyes, he identifies a book from the shelf in the library sooner than anyone else.

Prakash learns through his correspondence with Abha Das Munshi that the true reason behind his father’s suicide was also the impending blindness. He realizes that his father took it as karma’s return because in his younger days he too caused a copiose his sight as part of his revenge on the man who had arrested and harassed Abha. A judge by profession, Prakash’s father punishes himself for the crime he had committed as a young man. Prakash

recollects his father's favourite game of searching for things blindfolded, with a black cloth tied around his eyes. When Prakash becomes blind this game of his father turns out to be the reality of his life. Thus darkness does not go away with the judge. It picks up the posterity through Prakash.

Abha Das Munshi, the first female advocate general of Calcutta High Court, and a Naxalite in her student days, is blind too. She has declared that "she had given up her eyes to remove societal blindness" (Meera 61). Abha accuses herself of "having gifted darkness" (Meera 57) to Prakash's father and ardently wishes to be by his side during "the trials of excruciating darkness" (Meera 57). But destiny assumes for her the responsibility to unravel the mystery behind the death of Prakash's father. The darkness motif thus spreads through the lives of the father, his lost lover, and his son, drawing an indissoluble connection between the three and thereby propelling the narrative forward.

Bats:

The novelist employs the symbol of bat throughout the novel. The eight year old Prakash spies his father's body covered with the lawyer's gown hanging from the branch of the huge mango tree, like a bat. After Deepti's exit, Prakash witnesses his own life hanging "upside down blindly like a bat" (Meera 5). On the day of Deepti's departure, the old mango tree where the bats hung "seemed to be dressed in a long silk kurtha and mundu, with its hands clasped behind, mournfully sighing: 'Son'. Prakash had responded emotionally: 'Father!'" (Meera 19). Wherever there is a reference to Sooraj, the blind boy whom Rajani sponsors, the imagery of guava fruit half gnawed by bats, or the guava seeds spat out by them, strikes the reader. Once Sooraj kills a bat using his catapult and the creature falls on the ground, "its fangs exposed, its wings fusing together as if in prayer, its claws springing upwards in death-resembling an orphan child stretching out its arms to its lost mother" (Meera 104). These images are particularly important considering Rajani's belief of Sooraj as Prakash's son whom Deepti has taken away with her.

The bat image is repeated umpteen times in the novel's unfolding of events. Prakash's entry into Rajani's life is compared to that of a bat in darkness and during their intimate moments, "like two bats who find each other using sound, they mated again and again. On his fair and rosy throat her teeth left visible traces- like the fang marks around the crimson core of a ripe guava" (Meera 42). Whenever Prakash passes through the canal road near the mango tree with bats hanging on them, he hears his father calling him and he calls back "Acchan". Rajani, who rests against Prakash's chest helplessly, is equated to a baby bat. Even the shrieking of iron gates is, to Prakash, the squeaking sound of a baby bat. The news of Rajani's marriage with Chandramohan makes Prakash feel once again that he is "hanging upside down, like a bat in a pitch-black well. Struggling to escape from the dank and desolate entrapment, he too flapped his wings desperately, in a rhythmic *ha, ha, ha*" (Meera 101). The bats are, in the narrative of the tale, the symbol of loneliness and all that is gone

from Prakash's life. His bygone past thus creates an obsession for bats in Prakash's subconscious mind.

Jasmine:

Prakash's memories of Deepti are interlaced with the sweet aroma of slightly crushed jasmine flowers. The smell of jasmine evokes in him an unavoidable zest to grab Deepti. When the author narrates the first meeting between Prakash and Rajani, the jasmine flowers that adorn Rajani's hair permeates a radiant smell which sets the scene. Involuntarily, Prakash gets immersed in it and Deepti's memories spring up in his mind. When Rajani entered Prakash's office, on a rainy day, with her appointment letter,

She was totally drenched and wet buds – some open and others yet to open and others yet to open – were coming loose from the string of jasmine in her hair and scattering everywhere. Prakash became very wary as the scent of jasmine overwhelmed the damp-paper smell of the library... As she turned away, a jasmine bud fell on his table causing him to lose all control. He... rushed into the toilet behind the cabin where he started masturbating furiously. (Meera 26)

It is the fragrant jasmine which prompts the blind Prakash to imagine Deepti in Rajani. Prakash tries to feel the same in all his sexual encounters with Rajani. On every occasion when he goes to Rajani, he carries with him a long string of jasmine buds because that is the only parallel which is possible to create between Rajani and his obsessive memory of Deepti. Jasmine has amorous undertones in the novel as *Valiyamma* (the elder sister of Prakash's mother), later, heats the oil with jasmine flowers to give to her long departed husband on his arrival after three decades.

Frog:

Rajani arouses in Prakash the visual and auditory image of a frog. The frog croaks in his mind just as Rajani's memories touch him. He repeats the lines, "*Chakshushravanagalasthamamdardurambhakshanatinnuapekshikkunna pole: Like the frog, in the mouth of one that hears with its eyes, croaks for its food...*" (Meera 73), silently or audibly, as Rajani comes to his mind. Her overdependence on him, the impossibility of her escape from his 'mouth', and the futility of her life's wish to possess him are all entangled in the gist of this line. Even the sound of her sobs resembles a frog's croaking. Rajani, too, takes pleasure in using the analogy of the frog and the tadpole. "What's the difference between a tadpole and a frog?" (Meera 132) is the opening question that Rajani asks her husband Chandramohan on their first night together. As she herself admits, she has come out of the evolutionary stage of the tadpole and the present phase of the frog's life doesn't let her regrow her "lost limbs" (Meera 132).

Innerwear:

Shyam's search for Deepti drags him to morgues as part of identifying unknown dead bodies suspected to be hers. The horrible sight of the naked bodies and the identification of

the dead person's clothes thereafter, make him grow a preoccupation for innerwears. Shyam's obsession with new underwear starts as his intention not to be identified with the grubby old under garment, after his death. However this "precaution" (Meera 85) develops into a mania later on. He buys thirty or thirty one pieces at the end of every month, depending on the number of days that the following month has.

He refused to leave his house without wearing new underwear. He could not shake the feeling that he would end up an unidentified corpse, doomed to lie in a mortuary somewhere. And in that case, his underwear might become the sole means of identifying him. He hoped his dear ones would be able to identify him by the newness and the brand of his underwear. (Meera 86)

In an unknown land called *Icchapuram*, Shyam lays sick in a dispensary at the mercy of Shobhana, the woman with whom he had been betrothed ten years ago. Shobhana buys for him new shirts and trousers. But being aware that he is not wearing any underwear beneath his pants, Shyam becomes self-conscious and presses his legs together as tightly as possible. He moves "closer to the bedpost, seeking refuge" (Meera 170). Shyam marries Shobhana and after making love to the woman he loves, for the first time in his life, he sleeps without his underwear! In the novel, the innerwear stands for the furtive side of a human being which is kept away from the public eye.

Television:

The life of Prakash's *Valiyamma* revolves around the TV remote. She even determines time by watching TV. *Valiyamma* revels in comedy shows played on it and laughs loudly. On the day of her husband *Damu Valiyachan's* arrival, Prakash notices that the TV in the house is silent. It can be assumed that *Valiyamma* fills the vacuum in her life, created by the sudden abandonment of her by her husband, with a non-human entity which entertains and amuses her without giving her moments of dejection. She lets herself engrossed in it so that it makes it easier to forget what she has lost in her melancholic past.

Conclusion

Tormenting memories create obsessive anxiety. People who fill up the void in the lives of their loved ones draw indelible images of themselves on their minds. These images, depending upon the source of origin, may take positive or negative connotations. When they are put in the hands of a gifted author, they reach incredible heights. The clever craftsman knits them together to frame an all-inclusive narrative. The motifs are, thus, shards of the figurative domain of a literary work. The leitmotifs in *The Unseeing Idol of Light* are dexterously coalesced together by the master writer to fabricate an immortal piece of literature.

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