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Interpreting Lee's *Rose*: Symbolism as a Bridge between Memory and Identity

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ABSTRACT

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*Employing the qualitative text-centered approach with thematic and interpretative structured analytical design, this study has examined Lee's (1986) poetic collection, *Rose* examining "rose" as a complex, multi-layered symbol to bridge present reality with the memory of the past. The paper aims to seek out how the poet reflects his bicultural experiences in a diverse cultural background by using different symbols and imageries. The research has addressed the drawback of*

conventional, romanticized judgement of the flower creating a gap by inspecting Lee's use of images to navigate the trauma of diasporic life. Close reading of the text's structural design has indicated that the rose functions as "doomed profane flower" and linguistic homonym for "rising" which allows the object to transition from symbol of decay into a mechanism for spiritual revival. The implication of these symbols elevates the domestic elements to the sacred sensory for the "thousand-mile-sadness" of displacement. The study concludes that symbolism in the poem serves as profound tool to transform the fragility of life being in diasporic nationality into a resilient bridge between the finite reality of loss and the eternal nature of love.

Keywords: Diaspora, imagery, identity, rose, symbolism.

INTRODUCTION

Published in 1986, *Rose* is an anthology of English poems written by Asian-American poet, Li-Young Lee who was born in Jakarta, Indonesia to Chinese parents. The collection of his poems has been a work of Asian-American Literature that depicts common mind-set experienced by second generation Chinese in the United States. Lee seems to intend to generalize his creation into common human feelings and experiences. He says, “I can’t tell if my being Chinese is an advantage or not but I can’t imagine anything else except writing as an outsider” (Zhu, 2000). Lee’s poems in *Rose* may have multiple perspectives to evaluate critically. But the main issue raised in this research paper is to seek out how the poet reflects his bicultural experiences in a diverse cultural background by using different symbols and imageries. The study has focused on analyzing these symbols with connotative meanings to the reference of some of the poems collected in *Rose*. The research has been primarily centralized in examining Lee’s two poems, “Persimmons” and “Always a Rose” anthologized in *Rose*. Beside these two, other relevant poems have also been exemplified to elucidate the poet’s use of symbolism.

Symbolism is an artistic movement in the late nineteenth century that tried to express abstract or mystical ideas through the symbolic use of images. And a symbol is an arbitrary sign (written or printed) that has acquired a conventional significance (Abrams, 1993). Symbol is taken an ornament of poetry because it makes the poem more beautiful and figurative, and meaningful seeking out the deeper level meaning. In literature, symbol is applied to a word or phrase that signifies a concrete object or event which in its turn signifies something abstract, having a range of reference beyond itself. Abrams (1993) further classifies symbols as “conventional’ or ‘public’ that refer to symbolic object of which the further significance is determined within a particular culture. The other symbols are ‘private’ or ‘personal symbols’, they often represent something by exploiting widely shared association between an object or event or action and particular concept, for example, the general association of a peacock with pride and of an eagle with heroic endeavor, or the rising sun with birth and setting sun with death or climbing with effort or progress and descent with surrender or failure (Abrams, 1993). This study has utilized Abrams’ definition of ‘symbolism’ and ‘symbol’ while interpreting Lee’s *Rose*.

In the collection, Lee has included simple poems that create natural and earthy feelings for the readers. The symbolism and imagery in his work, come from deep well of his experiences. Reviewing over *Rose*, Ranter, writes:

In this outstanding first book of poems, Lee is unafraid to show emotion, especially when writing about his father or his wife. "But there is wisdom/ in the hour in which a boy/ sits in his room listening," says the first poem, and Lee's silent willingness to step outside himself imbues *Rose* with a rare sensitivity. The images Lee finds such as the rose and the apple are repeated throughout the book, crossing over from his father's China to his own America (Ranter n.d.)

Ratner's criticism signals the power of imageries and symbols in connection of the nature that the audience find in Lee's poetry specifically in *Rose*. In deeper level, the poem has nostalgic association between Lee's physical setting and emotional longing for his ancestral land in China.

Symbolism has been one of the central concern in analyzing the verse which functions to bridge the tangible with the abstract. In this context, Chinese-American poet, Li-Young Lee's work has drawn scholarly attention for its subtle yet profound symbolic texture. Critics have consistently focused that Lee's poetry resists direct statement, instead of relying on evocative imagery and symbols for articulating complex emotional, spiritual and philosophical experiences (Bloom, 3003). The ordinary objects such as food, body and natural elements used in Lee's poems may have greater layered meanings while examining through lyrical introspection.

Spiritual and mystical dimensions of symbolism are also the subjects of interest for the critics. Drawing the ideology from Christian and Eastern philosophical traditions, Lee's figurative language recurrently signals towards perfection and the ineffable (Underhill, 2002). The idea pinpoints that symbols in this poetry are not only decorative but also the vehicles for spiritual revelation. Hence, this symbolic mode allows Lees to articulate experiences that lie beyond the limit if rational discourse within a border tradition of mystical poetics.

In Lee's poetry, memory is not treated as an inactive memory of the past, rather it is an energetic, interpretive process that shapes identity and perception. Sharma (2021) contends that in diasporic literature, memory often operates symbolically, contemplating between personal history and collective experiences. In Lee's works, emotional and cultural histories have been encoded using objects and images as mnemonic devices. Hence, the role of memory seems to play as a symbolic structure. Furthermore, Lee's *Rose* has also been explored through the lens of diasporic identity and cultural hybridity. His symbolic language often draws on both Eastern and Western traditions which has created a hybrid aesthetic that challenges fixed cultural boundaries as Zhou (2019) suggests symbols in diasporic works of art often umpires

between multiple cultural frameworks replicating the fragmented nature of identity which acquire new meanings within his diasporic context.

In *Rose*, silence is not merely lack of speech but also a meaningful presence that conveys emotional depth and spiritual tension that has created a symbolic complexity. To support this argument Park (2015) argues that in Asian-American poetry, silence often functions as a response to historical displacement and cultural marginalization. The impact of the dominant American culture to bicultural and non-white people can be obviously realized in *Rose*.

Sensory and embodied dimensions have also been given attention in Lee's *Rose*. Vendler (2010) is of the opinion that lyric poetry often transforms sensory understandings into symbolic tone for inner states. Lee's use of tactile, visual, and olfactory imagery intensifies the symbolic resonance of his poems, enabling readers to engage with abstract ideas through concrete sensation. This symbolism is closely linked to the body, which becomes a site of memory, desire, and spiritual inquiry.

Eco-critical perspectives focuses on the symbolism of natural elements in *Rose*. It suggests that nature in poetry often transcends its literal function to become symbolic language of ethical and existential inquiry (Buell, 2005). Lee's poetry has used ample natural imageries like flowers, water, and light which embody the themes of temporality, beauty, as well as spiritual yearning. The rose itself carries a rich intertextual themes as symbol of love, mortality, and divine beauty (Cirlot, 2001). Lee uses these symbols in order to infuse them with personal and contemporary characters.

After reviewing the extensive literatures of scholarship on Lee's symbolism, there remains a clear gap in closed analysis of the specific poems. Most studies have examined his work in broad sense as how symbolism operates within this specific text. Furthermore, existing research often highlights the themes as memory, nature, and spirituality less focusing in interconnected imageries. This paper fulfills this gap by spotlighting a concise and integrated analysis of symbolism in *Rose* by answering the research question, how has Lee connected his diasporic life by using trivial but very life impacting objects as symbols?

RESEARERCH METHODS

This research employs a qualitative, text-centered approach in literary analysis with close reading technique. This intensively examines Lee's *Rose* by seeking imageries and their symbolical meaning in deeper level. The interpretative research design has primarily been based on evocative imagery (Bloom, 2003) and sensory, embodied experiences (Vendler,

2010) that unpack the layered meanings of the central symbol via structured analysis. The study has also stressed on imagery as the figurative element that that 'functions symbolically' (Buell, 2005). By tracking the symbolic expression, the study has focused on tactile, visual and olfactory imagery within the poetry and decoded how physical body serves as site of memory, spiritual inquiry and emotional resonance (Sharma, 2021) to retrieve repressed human emotions in mental isolation.

The analysis connects the thematic approach by examining how symbolic language interacts with spirituality and mysticism, diasporic experience and identity, silence and absence. The paper has applied Chandler's (2017) semiotic framework to analyze the signifier (the image of the rose) and signified (the thematic meanings, such as mortality or love) and applied Abrams' (1993) definition of symbol and symbolism. The study does not go beyond the selected poems of *Rose* by Li-Young Lee which will focus only on internal textual evidence to maintain the rigor of close reading.

As a library based research, the study has utilized Lee's *Rose* as a primary source and books of renowned scholars, articles from reputed journals, authentic interview archives and other internet sources have been widely utilized as secondary sources based on their relevance to Lee's poetry. Sources were further evaluated for their academic credibility, theoretical relevance, and contribution to understanding the relationship between symbolism and bicultural experience.

CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF *ROSE* SYMBOLICALLY

In the poems collected in *Rose*, Lee has used personal symbols typically. For example, in the poem 'Persimmons', the poet uses the terms 'slapped back my head' to symbolize the torture he gets for being non- white, 'stomach is white' to indicate his marriage to American white woman, 'painted blind' denotes the painting of his father that he did after he lost his eyesight. His painting was of persimmons for deep love for his motherland, China. These terms may have been used mutually to symbolize something special to indicate the poet's struggle for assimilating bicultural life and existence in the USA. In the poem, 'persimmons' are the symbol of several elements that figured importantly to Lee's life. They stand for painful reminiscences of cultural barriers, language and custom and loving connection to an elderly blind father at present. Remembering an incident as a schoolboy in the USA, he writes:

In sixth grade Mrs. Walker
Slapped the back of my head

And made me stand in the corner
for not knowing the difference
between *persimmon* and *precision*

How to choose... (Persimmons, p 17 1.1-6)

He remembers the event in which he was punished for not knowing the difference between 'persimmons' and 'precision'. In the poem, persimmons are a symbol of several elements that have figured importantly in narrator's life as a Chinese descent. The words sound similar and that push him into trouble. Persimmons remind China where these fruits were originally grown. The delicate fruit persimmons, in this context symbolize the cultural barrier between immigrant schoolboy and native born American teacher because she does not internalize his difficulty in pronouncing words in American native accent. As a boy of Chinese ancestry, the poet gives value to the inner meat of the fruit that has Chinese taste and was of Chinese origin. In the sharp contrast, his teacher Mrs. Walker, focuses on the technical aspect of the language only. She is superficial in evaluating the eternal relationship between the fruit and the boy for whom English was the second language. It was her hasty reaction to interpret persimmons on a shallow level to which there was poet's attachment as the son of Chinese father.

Persimmons remind him of an adult sexual relationship with his wife Donna, who was white as a Caucasian woman and his attempts to teach her Chinese words which he could no longer remember. He uses 'persimmons' as the symbol of close affinity between him and his father. To comfort his blind father the poet gives him a sweet ripe persimmon, so full and redolent with flavor. Later, yet, again the father and he 'feel' a silk painting of persimmons, "painted blind/ some things never leave a person." Persimmons in the poem also symbolize the love and attachment of Lee's family to the Chinese culture and heritage that they had to abandon unwillingly. Similarly, his father symbolizes the strong model of the memory of Chinese tradition, heritage and history that the poet learns by studying the father's activities and behaviors. The father could paint the vivid portrayal of persimmons even when he was blind. It proves his attachment to his previous nationality.

Most of Li-Young Lee's poems are his memories. He is renowned for his vivid imagery, and his ability immerse readers in the precise moment of the poem enabling them to clearly perceive both the events unfolding the emotions he experiences. His poems are not allegorical; they are just meant to capture a moment of a memory in exact detail. In an interview, Bill Moyers asked Lee, "I'm touched by 'The Gift'. Tell me why you wrote it?" Lee replied, "I was with my wife in a hotel and I woke up and heard her sobbing..." Lee bases his poems

of experiences he had in his life, and he attempts to reflect them in his poem. When asked in that interview, "Are you able to let go of your father as a subject? Do you think you've written your last poem about him? Have you settled that old quarrel?" Lee replied, "I don't think I've settled that old quarrel, but I think for the good of my own writing, I have had to force myself to look beyond him, although in a way I'm being guided again by him to look at things that were important to him. I'd like to write about my own struggle with belief and disbelief and I'd like to write my own experiences as an immigrant and refugee." He writes about direct experiences rather than expressing truths about life. (*Breaking the Alabaster Jar: Conversations with Li-Young Lee*, 2006). These reactions of Lee transfer an insight about his power of symbolizing simple things for powerful connotative meanings.

In his poems, Lee has concretized his experiences by using the symbols that are directed to his own life, would-be events and the events already happened to others. In the sense, though the dealings in the poems look private, they are common instincts of people, globally. Therefore, his feelings can be generalized. He uses simple words to symbolize extraordinary meanings, for example: In "Dreaming of Hair", he writes: 'Out of the grave of my father's hair burst' (p. 22). Here, the hair is an ominous symbol of death. He points out, 'My love's hair is autumn, hair there/ the sun ripens'. Here, the word 'autumn' denotes the transition period of the nature from greenery to bareness. The metaphorical comparison between autumn and hair symbolically means that his lover's (probably his wife's) hair is about to drop out of the head. Dropping hair signals the growth in age that pushes all to death. "The sun" symbolizes the driving force of time that transforms everything different forms and stages.

These symbols can be juxtaposed with the use of hair in the poem "Early in the Morning", In this poem, Lee writes: "She sits at the foot of the bed. / My father watches, listens for/ the music of comb/against his hair" (p 25). Here, he uses the simple image of his father braiding his mother's hair. The 'hair' in this line symbolizes the fertile life, beauty and pleasure. The shining braid of his mother is the source of ecstasy and satisfaction for his father. 'The music of comb' indicates the joy of life that is full of optimism, hope and aspiration.

Lee's core poem "Always a Rose", written in ten parts, has been divided into the five steps of meditation. (Underhill, 2011). To illustrate these ideologies, he uses different symbols in the poem. In the first two parts, he meditates himself *for awakening of self*. In these parts he uses the images of 'dark window', 'a long spiked crooked stem', 'Dead darkness', and more. These images have been used to symbolize the poet's deep meditation after his father's death. His indication might be to signal the death that is universal phenomena. After someone dies,

a rose flower is plucked and offered to the grave. A rose is transitory that blossoms, fades and falls down. Plucking the rose means to change its position into deadly condition. In these parts, the poet uses the rose to symbolize death. He thinks of the black Chinese rose that his grandmother described and ate as a girl. As a rose in this context, is offered to the dead body, he thinks he mistook a red rose on his sister's breast. He uses rose for different purposes such as rose for prayer, rose for Books of Martyrs, rose for those who went on dying. To the sharp contrast of the usual association of the of dark beauty, aspiration, hope, love and so on, he uses it as the symbol of the dark side imagines after his father's death.

Then the poet goes ahead describing the other step of meditation that is *purification*. Here, he uses the rose as the symbol of purgation of impure things such as 'bitterness', 'dirt', 'black flavor in the throat'. He personifies the rose addressing it with the second person pronoun 'you' and compares him and his wife to the rose flower. He addresses the rose as:

You live you die with me in spi of me,
like my sleeping wife
Lying here, with her at my right and you at my left,
The dying lies between the dying. (p. 39, l. 67-70)

By addressing a rose as a living thing to communicate, the poet utters his relationship to his wife and finds that they are no more different in the case of existence in the earth. Both, in spite of being different in physical constitution, were created by the nature and both will be gone. The poet feels happy in being like the rose flower, as it is the symbol of purification and sweetness.

In the third section, the poet symbolizes rose to be the part of *illumination*, a condition of spiritual awareness. It is the rose that makes him recall his ancestral land China. He imagines:

And always a rose for one love, lost
In another country from whom I get year-old letters
And always a rose for one I love
Exiled from one republic and daily defeated in another
Who was shunned by brothers and shunned by Go
Who couldn't sleep because of voices
Who raised voice, then his hand against his
children against his children going. (p 41, l 149-57)

In these lines the poet appeals to the rose to play the role of God to retain the spiritual awareness to insure his father's identity. From the core part of his heart, he pours forth down his inner

anxieties for being an outsider. The phrase 'another country' points to the USA where he has been residing being defeated because in the eye of white Americans, he and his father are foreigner. He feels as if they have been ignored by brothers in China being so far away and even by God. The term 'republic' indicates the People's Republic of China where his father had been exiled from. He expresses his deep concern on the crisis of existentialism that has discouraged him from living as a glorified citizen. Another problem he has been facing is to assimilate the bicultural conflict and minimize it within himself. Symbolically, he associates rose to Holy Ghost as the means of hallowing all the impurities barricading his emotional freedom.

Then the poet moves forward to another meditative state known as *Dark Night of the Soul*. When the meditative subject feels great pessimism it makes someone think of death. He again turns to the dark aspect of life along with the analogy of rose. He symbolizes rose to be the healer of his painful experiences that he has to go through. He requests rose to listen to his voice. He is full of nostalgia after the death of his loving father. The poet's argument is that life in not only flower it is the thorn too, that pierces and gives torture. He indicates dark side of life with the terms: "the old rose for the ending point of life, 'keeper of the back door for unnoticed life, 'igneous kisses for painful love, 'fed by what dies and rots'. These terms signal to the ugly parts of life we are bound to experience. He talks about the inevitable tragedies everyone has to accept in life. He marks as:

If I adore you, Rose
With adoration become nonsense become
Praise, could I stop our dying?
Could we sit together in new bodies? (p. 44 l. 233-36)

He harshly accepts that death as inevitable. The death of his father makes him think of his own death. The personified 'Rose' is not able to check the disasters that the poet is certain to go through. The symbolic analogy of the situation of the poet and the rose is serious dark night of human soul and bitter reality, too. He asks whether they could sit together in new bodies. He might be thinking about reincarnation. Although they can't stop death, they may be born again in new bodies with the re-entrance of immortal souls into a new body.

Finally, the poet addresses 'Rose' to be the symbol of *union*. He imagines his death together with the rose's. He might mean that human life is similar to that of the rose flower, it is created as bud (infant), blooms as delicate flower (youth), fades being ugly (old man) and drops mercilessly (death). Despite this fact, the poet loves rose too much and wishes to die together with it. He finally writes:

I love your nakedness
to my nose and bitter
to my tongue, among
the dying things
are you and I.(pp.45 1.269-74)

The imagery 'nakedness' symbolizes the nature that is beautiful. The term 'bitter' might mean the end of the beauty. The expression among the dying thing are you and I' emphasizes the union between him and the rose. The poet seems to be stating a philosophy of human life. The zigzagging modes of life that human beings have to go on, are really bizarre, mysterious and unforeseeable. To convey and clarify these indivisible aspects of life, he uses 'rose' as a beautiful symbol. Referring different stages of meditation with both joyful and bitter experience, finally the poet comes to the reconciliation with the rose accepting all aspects of life.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

In *Rose* the poet has used symbol as a strong weapon to hit upon the issues. His symbolization in the poems is effective that are general in terms but inflict deep and philosophical meaning. For instance he uses 'hair', as the symbol of both life and death in different contexts. Symbolism is a system of symbolic elements-both in lyric poems, long prophetic or epics. But in modern times, it has been used in secular literature as well. The poems in *Rose* are written in blank verse. However they contain elements of poetry for their versification. Widely praised by critics for their gentle tone, humble voice and lyrical form, Lee's poems have often been stylistically and thematically compared to a diverse range of poetry in the Asian, European and American literary traditions. In both poems, "Persimmons" and "Always a Rose", mainly analyzed in this research paper, the poet has used strong symbols to intensify the meaning. The first poem 'persimmons' symbolizes the love of entire Chinese culture. He contextualizes the symbols in relation to the experiences he is gaining in his daily life in the USA. In the latter one he talks about the philosophy of life addressing rose as a symbol. Hence, the symbolism in Lee's *Rose* the paper has been strong and worth noticing. In this way, the research has identified and analyzed Lee's symbols with the reference to his experiences in diverse cultural situation by answering the research question, projected.

Highlights of this study on symbolism will be significance in understanding how poetry mediates complex human experiences like memory and identity. The insights raised in the research has demonstrated the functions of symbols not only as aesthetic elements but also

as a bridge to connect personal history and broader spiritual and cultural dimensions. The interpretation also offers a deeper understanding of American diasporic poetry associated to inherited memory. More importantly, the research has aroused a greater sensitivity in readers to see symbol as a new avenue to judge poetry in terms of individual experience and collective consciousness. The future research could be carried out by associating Lee's poems to social and cultural distancing caused by diasporic life via psychological and sociological perspectives.

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