

ON THE DEFINITIONS GIVEN TO THE CONCEPT OF “SYMBOL”

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Abstract. *This article surveys the definitions of the concept of “symbol” (ramz) as developed in philosophy, psychology, history, and religious studies, drawing chiefly on Turkish scholarly sources. It traces the etymology of the term (Latin symbolus, Greek symbolon – “to join, to bind, to compare”), reviews a range of definitions by scholars such as Kılıç, Schwarz, Çetindağ, Schimmel, and Mensching, and clarifies the relation of the symbol to neighbouring terms – tamsil (allegory/comparison), misal, majoz (figurative usage), haqiqat (literal usage), oyat (sign), allegory, analogy, metaphor (istiora), mazmun, mutashabih, and tashbih. The study concludes that the symbol, by expressing the spiritual through the material, links the human being to abstract and spiritual reality and opens new paths for thought.*

Keywords: *symbol (ramz), symbolism, sign, allegory (tamsil), figurative usage (majoz), literal usage (haqiqat), metaphor (istiora), analogy, sign-verse (oyat), Turkish sources.*

INTRODUCTION

Concerning the word “symbol” there exist various theories created by philosophers, psychologists, historians, and scholars of religion, and their use differs from one another according to the field. There exist various definitions of the symbol which, even when similar, do not correspond to one another in meaning (Atasağun, 1997:7).

The word for symbol derives from English “symbol,” French “symbole,” and German “Symbol,” and in the dictionary it is defined as “a sign upon which a group of people have agreed and onto which a particular meaning has been loaded, concerning some thought or reality that is difficult to understand or perceive” (Wellek & Warren, 1993:163).

A symbol is an image that brings out a hidden meaning (Kılıç, 1995:56). It is taken from the Latin “Symbolus” and the Greek “symbolon” (Schwarz, 1997:282-283). The

term “symbolon” derives from the words “syn” and “ballein” and signifies meanings such as “to unite,” “to bind,” “to compare,” “to explain,” and “to gather” (Çetindağ, 2011:264). Proceeding from these meanings, the symbol may also be expressed as a “messenger,” a “bridge” between the two levels of consciousness (classified as the material and the sacred), and a “means” that gathers in one place the elements separated as sky and earth, spirit and matter (Schwarz, 1997:283).

The word “symbol” is often used in the sense of “sign,” but in a symbol the signifier can never fully take the place of the signified. That is, no symbol can fully disclose the meaning of the thing it points to, because symbols do not belong to the thing they signify; rather, they are a complex “means” that forms a conception of it (Koç, 1998:99).

According to another definition: “A symbol is a sign that takes the place of a particular thought, idea, or thing, that denotes a concept or thought, that can be seen with the eye, and whose meaning is understood” (Cevizci, 2000:840).

In the dictionary the symbol is said to denote the same meaning as the sign. Signs onto which a particular meaning has been loaded through the agreement of a group of people, for the purpose of expressing thoughts that are difficult to understand, are also called symbols (Çetindağ, 2011:263).

The term symbol is also used in the senses of sign, indication, and image. It possesses a distinct historical meaning in the memory of a society or of people and is a general name given to the expressions used in conveying feelings and thoughts. In other words, a symbol means to express, to show, and to imply one thing by another on account of a mutual connection or resemblance (Karataş, 2011).

A symbol is a sign that reflects a certain truth which is indefinite and invisible, and a form of expressing things that are not understood (Kılıç, 1995:71).

According to the scholar Gustav Mensching, anything can be a symbol, but nothing becomes a symbol of itself: a symbol is established by a particular person or society. In every symbol there are two substances. The first is the substance that has been symbolized or accepted as a symbol; the second is the spiritual truth that this substance expresses. The symbol arising from these two substances may belong to any sphere of life. Mensching says that every symbol expresses a certain truth in itself, and he likewise emphasizes not confusing the symbol with the truth it expresses; if this is not heeded, the symbol loses its essence and the truth it expresses also remains hidden (Schimmel, 1954:68).

In philosophy, symbolism is expressed as the symbolic appearance of a particular expression and as a system of tropes in which one is used in the place of another (Atasağun, 1997:371). It brings mysterious and hidden things into the world of feeling and perception and helps to perceive them through subjective views. Symbolism gives people feelings, emotions, and impressions about mysterious phenomena that cannot be observed (Kılıç, 1995:57).

The main function of symbols is to establish, by various means, a connection with truths that are difficult to attain, and to present to people differing views of the world of concepts. Through this, symbols give their audience the possibility of attaining experiences of various levels (Schwarz, 1997:285). For symbols to accomplish all this, they must always be in practical use.

By expressing a particular thought or phenomenon through numbers and shapes, symbols make it possible to embody truths that people can perceive. In symbolism, the comparison of an abstract reality with an existing thing is the central matter. In particular, an element used in literary texts is considered to have become a symbol only when it produces a particular thought or feeling in the reader's mind. For example, in the Turkish language the flag has symbolic value because it calls to mind the homeland, the goose foolishness, and the fox cunning (Karataş, 2011:11).

Related Terms and Synonyms

In the course of the research, the definitions of the various forms that express the meaning of the word "symbol," which many encounter, are set out as follows.

Tamsil is a term used in the sense of depicting similar things and expressing a thought by giving an example in symbolic language. In the dictionary tamsil derives from the verbal noun "muthul," which carries the senses of "resemblance, comparison," and signifies meanings such as "to compare, to resemble, to express equality" (Durmuş, 2011:434).

The word misal carries meanings such as "example, model, likeness." In Islamic Sufism, the "World of Misal" ('alam al-mithal) is the name of a world believed to exist between the world of spirits and the world of matter, in which the archetypes of all existents and their not-yet-materialized forms exist before they come into being.

The term majoz is used in the field of literature with respect to a word that is transferred from its original meaning and used in another meaning. According to the theory of the formation of figurative usage, things and phenomena – whether by people or as a result of a divine power – were first expressed in their true meaning; in

later periods people observed dominant features in certain things and phenomena and established a connection between them and things and phenomena similar to them but of weaker quality (Durmuş, 2003:217-220). In figurative usage a word or group of words is used at one and the same time, but various meanings are loaded onto them (Büyükbayram, 2004:10).

Haqiqat (literal truth) is used as the opposite of majoz, and in the dictionary it signifies “a thing (word) that stands in its own place or has been left fixed.” As a term, too, it denotes an expression used in its true meaning. Majoz and haqiqat denote mutually opposite meanings both lexically and as terms (Durmuş, 2003:218).

In the dictionary the word ramz signifies meanings such as “to indicate, to explain by pointing to a particular thing; indication, sign, symbol, hidden expression, expressing a meaning through a sign, to allude.” It is a name given to a picture, number, and the like that express a particular idea (Durmuş, 2007:556; Çetindağ, 2011:260).

Oyat (sign/verse) is a sign that shows the existence of a thing or a purpose. Accordingly, it is also used in the senses of “clear sign, proof, lesson, indication.” In Islam, this term, used for the small parts within the suras of the Holy Qur’an, signifies the meaning of a proof and miracle pointing to the existence of Allah and the prophets (Yavuz & Çetin, 1991:242).

Allegory (from the Greek “allegorein” – to speak through images) is the expression of a particular thought through an animating device and through metaphor (picture, image). Allegory is the concretizing of abstract concepts – in other words, signifying one thing through another with the help of symbols in order to increase the credibility and impact of a thought or feeling. Put differently, it means to express a thought or concept by making it concrete through another existing thing (Karataş, 2014).

Analogy is the resemblance between things that are essentially different but possess the same features. Analogy is the likeness of one thing to another.

Metaphor comes in the sense of istiora. It means to express some matter by another path. Metaphor is the expression, in another form, of the thing intended to be conveyed, making use of the sense systems such as seeing, hearing, and feeling (Büyükbayram, 2004:10-11).

Mazmun (content/implied meaning) in the dictionary signifies “hidden meaning, concept.” In literature it is used in the sense of explaining a thought or feeling while concealing it within a word or group of words. It is considerably more subjective and

less generalized than the symbol, is limited to the text in which it is expressed, and differs from one text to another.

The word *mutashabih* comes in the senses of “likened, resembling one another, denoting one another.” In Islamic literature, verses of the Qur’an used in a figurative meaning beyond their true meaning are called *mutashabih* verses (Anonymous, 1986f:8484).

Istiora (borrowing/metaphor) signifies meanings such as “to take something as a loan from some place or person, to quote,” and on one side it may also be understood as a kind of *majoz*.

Tashbih (simile) signifies the meanings “to liken, to compare.” The name of the literary device used in comparing two things that share common features in order to reinforce a meaning is called *tashbih*.

CONCLUSION

By way of conclusion, it is fitting to note that clear information has been obtained about the various forms in which symbols appear, their synonyms, and the place and functions they hold in the everyday life of the population. When symbols are considered from the standpoint of expressing the spiritual by means of the material, they serve to connect the human being with abstract and spiritual reality and open up new paths for thought. These features endow the symbol with power in terms of both time and space.

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