Zoomorphic symbolism: Elucidating the Paradoxical Clans in Nithilan Swaminathan's *Maharaja (2024)*

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Abstract

Swaminathan's *Maharaja* film, currently the subject of much discussion, presents the narrative of a middle-class father who pursues a tyrant who coerced his daughter into adultery. The narrative of this film is straightforward from a visual perspective; however, the director employs his artistic abilities to employ distinctive symbols throughout the film and encourages viewers to delve deeper into these symbols. The aim of this paper is to provide an explanation following an analysis of the symbols employed in the film. For this, the analytical part employs the methodology of symbolic analysis which is the study of words or images that create concrete ideas. In order to achieve this, the current paper concentrates on three categories of symbols: Zoomorphic symbolism, character symbolism, and object symbolism. Consequently, the analytical section reveals that the symbols employed in the film are crucial in conveying the primary theme of the film. Furthermore, the manifestation of paradoxes in each symbolic category makes this film more iconic in both aspects; artistic and thematic.

Keywords: Symbolism, paradoxes, film studies, *Maharaja*, narrative and linguistic analysis.

Introduction

Symbolism uses words or images to convey distinct ideas. We encounter symbols daily, like flags, icons, and colors that guide us—such as restroom signs or green and red lights for go and stop (Segal, 2018). In literature, symbolism works similarly, using imagery to create visual messages in the reader's mind, even without illustrations. For example, the symbolic covers of the *Twilight* series convey meaning visually. In literature, "symbolism" refers to conveying ideas with minimal words, where one thing is said but another is implied. Though seemingly unrelated, these ideas are linked in the human mind through their unique coincidence in time and space. Symbols allow for multiple meanings, expressing what text alone cannot. The term "symbol" in English denotes a linguistic mark representing many realities. A literary symbol is a linguistic mark with at least two potential meanings. Semiotics studies symbols, focusing on their description and application in analysing texts, though it often views symbols collectively within broader cultural contexts (Akhmadovich, 2024).

Symbolism offers a shortcut to deeper meaning, enhancing a story's interest. Symbols can be small, like a wedding ring symbolizing commitment or infidelity, or central, like a natural disaster representing climate change. They help readers make associations, such as identifying villains through a recurring mark or item. Symbols can also foreshadow events, like using a storm to signal danger (Clift & Clift, 2020). When repeated, symbols become motifs, like an argument that consistently precedes tragedy, signalling something bad is about to happen. Symbolism is recognized when an image in a text suggests a meaning beyond its literal interpretation. It may be repeated or emphasized by the author. For instance, a character with piercing green eyes might symbolize jealousy. Symbols can be overt, like naming an evil character Nick DeVille with a horn-like hairstyle, or subtle, revealing their significance only upon a second reading after knowing the story's conclusion (Klapp, 2017). Expressive writing (Javaid & Mahmood, 2023) and influencers (Ramzan et al., 2023) can change interpretation and impact of scenarios. Moral injuries may be caused with more revealing and haphazard symbolization (Javaid et al., 2024).

The analysis of symbols in film suggests that viewers engage in deciphering hidden messages related to universal life experiences. These symbols often reflect life's essential themes deeply and fully, shaping the film's narrative and emotional impact. While some aspects of a scene may be clear, symbols can remain opaque, adding layers of meaning. This opacity draws interest

in symbol analysis, as symbols in film, though conventional, offer both subjective and objective stability. They serve as anchor points in understanding the film's reality, transforming into abstractions filled with meaning and emotion (Smith, 2022). Music, poetry and lyrics uses symbols which affects emotions (Javaid et al., 2024).

Based on the brief introduction of symbols and symbolism, this paper aims to employ symbolic analysis of the film *Maharaja* (2024). At first, Maharaja's non-linear narrative, which is reminiscent of "Memento" or "Following," generated perplexity and skepticism regarding its coherence. Nevertheless, the audience is captivated by the intricate conundrum as the narrative advances. The film's grave themes are juxtaposed with Vijay Sethupathi's rigid yet unexpectedly humorous character and his absurd fixation with a dustbin in the first half, which excels in the development of suspense. The narrative transitions into a more intricate and ominous realm with the introduction of Anurag Kashyap. The police's dismissive stance toward the preoccupation is a satirical depiction of bureaucratic indifference; however, their subsequent involvement presents a moral quandary. The audience is compelled to address intricate concerns regarding vigilantism as a result of their decision to assist Maharaja in his pursuit of revenge, which blurs the distinction between law and morality (Swaminathan, 2024). Hence, taking symbols as a core aim to analyze the film, this paper focuses on three distinctive aspect of symbols and symbolism.

Literature Review

Hall (2018) provided general insights, while Righter (2024), and others contributed to short story analysis. Fletcher, (2021) offered valuable context for thematic and symbolic analysis, particularly in poetry. The review underscores the importance of understanding thematic and symbolic analysis in literature, especially in short stories, which have historically conveyed profound teachings. Notable works include Hall (2018) on the educational value of short stories and Rival (2021) on thematic analysis in collaborative learning. The research also highlights contributions from various authors in musical and pedagogical contexts.

Unrue (2008) quotes Robert Penn Warren, stating that the more we examine Katherine Anne Porter's work, the more we see its inner coherence, reflecting her genius in confronting modern civilization. This coherence, rooted in Porter's philosophy and style, is shaped by her experiences and expressed through symbolism. Teixeira (2017) requotes Whitehead that

symbolism represents human imagination and thoughts, with words as symbols that evoke ideas, images, and emotions in the listener. Furthermore, Stryker argues that symbols allow authors to convey their messages from multiple perspectives (Stryker, 2017). Communication and language skills conveys emotions impactfully (Javaid et al., 2023). Media use symbols and sensitive (Iqbal et al., 2023). It impacts language learners' motivation (Ramzan et al., 2023).

Ellis (2022) explains that a symbol can be anything perceived by the senses—an action, sound, object, or movement. Common symbols have widely recognized meanings, like a white dove for peace or a four-leaf clover for luck. Literary symbols, however, can have multiple interpretations. For instance, a "mountain" might symbolize nature in one context and an obstacle in another. Similarly, the "sea" could represent peace, a new world, or destruction. Burke (2023) adds that humans naturally find deeper meaning in objects and actions, like a badge symbolizing authority or a clenched fist representing anger or readiness to fight.

Literary works are filled with symbols and figurative language, reflecting the author's feelings, thoughts, and desires (Tursunovich, 2022). However, readers often struggle to grasp the author's intended meaning, leading to various interpretations. Symbols in literature are influenced by the author's cultural and social background, which shapes the uniqueness of each work. This symbolism allows authors to express their ideas and emotions in a distinct way (Morgan, 2017). Language challenges causes stress if things are unaddressed meanwhile artificial intelligence impacts cognition and behaviour (Javaid et al., 2024).

T.S. Eliot, a key modernist poet, is known for his complex use of symbolism, as seen in his poem *The Waste Land*, which reflects post-World War I disillusionment (Somani, 2023). Roland Barthes, a notable literary theorist, explored how everyday objects and cultural phenomena function as symbols in *Mythologies*. His theories on symbolism are used to analyze modernist literature, focusing on the relationship between signs, meanings, and cultural contexts (Pezzini, 2017).

Interpreting symbolism in modernist literature is challenging due to its subjective nature and multiple possible meanings. Recent research emphasizes the impact of contextual factors—such as socio-political climates, cultural movements, and authors' personal experiences—on symbol interpretation (Eysteinsson, 2018). This contextual understanding enriches the analysis of symbols in modernist works. Studies on T.S. Eliot and Roland Barthes highlight the complexity

and diverse dimensions of symbolism, underscoring the need for ongoing research to deepen our understanding of modernist literature (Abbar, 2023).

Objects in film and television can symbolize complex ideas and emotions. In *Parasite*, the "scholar's stone" initially represents the Kim family's hope for prosperity but later symbolizes their desperation and the negative effects of greed. In *Inception*, the spinning top symbolizes the protagonist's struggle to differentiate between reality and dreams, with its ambiguous ending leaving the audience questioning the nature of the world (Rodowick, 2023).

In film and television, characters often symbolize abstract ideas. For instance, in *The Dark Knight*, the Joker represents chaos and terrorism, while Batman symbolizes vigilante justice. In *Pan's Labyrinth*, the fantastical creatures embody the protagonist's desire to escape harsh realities and explore themes of innocence, imagination, and storytelling (Darowski, 2024). They analyze how color in film symbolizes deeper meanings. For instance, Captain America's red, white, and blue costume symbolizes U.S. values, but in *The Winter Soldier*, its muted colors reflect his conflicted loyalties. The color red often signifies passion, danger, or tension. In *American Beauty*, red roses symbolize repressed desires and the gap between appearance and reality (McGowan, 2019).

Methodology

Symbolism influenced key twentieth-century writers in a variety of ways. This theme is the foundation of two significant English studies: Wilson's Axel's Castle (1931), which examines Yeats's fascination with Villiers's drama, and Kermode's Romantic Image (1957), which examines important symbols such as the dancer and the tree (Stryker, 2017). The Symbolist method emphasizes internal associations, which liberate poetic language from logical order and referential accuracy. Symons (2014) characterizes this "liberty" as a return to the "authentic speech" of mystery in literature, suggesting that one should begin with an enigma and proceed to remove its key. Language that is obscure is frequently the consequence of this emphasis on mystique, particularly when symbols hold personal significance for the artist. Nevertheless, numerous Symbolist authors incorporate traditional hermetic or esoteric sources, such as the Rosicrucian symbols in Villiers' Axel. Symons (2014) posits that the true origins of symbolism can be traced

back to ancient mysticism, which sought to invoke the infinite and validate the possibility of immortality through a network of symbols.

The methodology for analyzing the symbolism in the film *Maharaja* (2024) commences with the identification of objects, characters, settings, or events that possess deeper meanings beyond their literal interpretations. Three types of symbols will be interpreted in the film analysis; animal symbols, object symbols and character symbols. Through animal symbols, a narrator uses a specific animal to conceal literal meaning and attempts to attract the reader to delve into the appropriate meaning like owl, object symbols can be a non-living thing but conceives an important message like flower, and a character represents a particular theme or concept (Todorov, 1986). Comprehending the context surrounding these symbols and analyzing the patterns in their interactions with characters, themes, and narrative. Afterward, considering the various character perspectives and the ways in which these symbols either support or contradict the film's themes. Additionally, secondary sources that employ symbolic interpretation techniques are scholarly interpretations of the symbols. Finally, the analysis is supported by evidence from the film, including cinematic techniques and symbols, and the findings are synthesized to relate them to the film's broader themes.

Zoomorphic symbolism, symbols and paradoxical clans in the film

Zoomorphic symbolism

"The snake", as an animal symbol, represents a variety of hues that are associated with the Nallasivam and Selvam. The snake makes an appearance in the film on two separate occasions. The first time, it is observed exiting Maharaja's home. The second time, it is seen in the police station. Nallasivam is explicitly referenced both times it appears. From a cinematic perspective, it is evident that Maharaja has been lying on the ground, and a snake is passing over his body without causing any damage to him. In the same vein, Nallasivam enters the residence with his companion and departs without inflicting any damage on Maharaja. Nevertheless, as the snake exits the house by shattering the glass in the window, Nallasivam exits the house and does rape of Jothi, which is equivalent to the snake breaking the glass. The snake's second appearance in the older documents at the police station is once more reminiscent of Nallasivam's character. Nallasivam is also a character who has the resemblance of a snake and is disguised as a police officer. He is involved

in illegal activities such as theft and adultery. The snake, which is the epitome of the character directed by Nallasivam, has been expertly depicted on the screen by the director. He is both a corrupt police officer and a rapist, which is a perfect representation of the snake's nature. Additionally, the snake's nature is strikingly similar to that of Selvam. We also observe the snake's nature in Selvam when we attempt to analyze his character. In the same way that a snake eats its eggs and children, Selvam subjected his own daughter to torment and permitted Nallasivam to engage in adultery with her.

The director does not depict the *"wolf"* in the film, as the snake is depicted. However, the wolf is symbolically depicted in the film's posters. Selvam's character is purportedly that of a family man; however, there is a predator concealed within him. In the same way that a wolf goes out to hunt at night, Selvam also goes out to pilfer at night. The wolf attacks in a flock, and Selvam steals with his companions in a similar manner. Additionally, the wolf is exclusively concerned with his family, and he is capable of preying on anyone other than his family. Selvam, on the other hand, endeavours to ensure his daughter's happiness, despite his willingness to jeopardize the lives of other people's daughters.

"The eagle" like the wolf, was also depicted in the film's official posters, which undoubtedly reflected the Maharaja's character. eagle, the character depicted on the film's advertisements, is actually the Maharaja, as evidenced by certain passages in the film. For instance, the eagle consistently emerges victorious in its conflict with the snake. In the film, the characters of Nallasivam and Maharaja are similarly antagonistic, and in the end, Maharaja crushes Nallasivam's skull. Additionally, the Maharaja's decision to confront his daughter's oppressors independently serves as an illustration of the eagle's inherent valour. Thus, the director skilfully depicts the three major characters in the film by employing the metaphor of a snake, wolf, and eagle. The actions of each character are comparable to those of their respective attributes. Not only does animal symbolism bolster the character, but it also aids in comprehending the character's more intricate aspects.

Object symbolism

In the opening scene of the film, Maharaja is depicted standing in a toy shop when a vehicle strikes (Selvam's) home, resulting in the deaths of his wife and daughter. This scene depicts the

Maharaja holding *"a statue"* of a mother and daughter in his hand just prior to the accident. The statue promptly falls from his hand as soon as the accident occurs. Both the mother and daughter's icons are shattered. The director suggests to the audience that his wife and daughter have disintegrated like idols by employing this metaphor.

The director's artistic presentation of a simple *"waste can"* in the film has elevated it to the status of a significant character, a testament to his creativity. The director employs this symbol in a variety of contexts, and the significance of the dustbin varies with each situation. For instance, the garbage can is depicted as a protector who spared the life of the Maharaja's daughter at the outset. The film's characters and viewers are both left with the impression that the garbage could have spared the life of the Maharaja's daughter after the house collapsed. Later, Maharaja employs the same garbage can as an instrument to identify the perpetrators of his daughter's crimes when the narrative transitions to its central theme. He employs the name of the waste can throughout the film, despite the fact that it was never stolen. The Maharaja's intention was to employ this fabricated narrative to reach the criminal with the mark on his back. Finally, Nallasivam, the mastermind of corruption, obtains a duplicate and falls into the same trap. He intended to substitute the garbage can for the prize money. Consequently, the film's suspense is maintained by the various roles that a simple garbage can performs in various situations.

Additionally, the symbols of *"shoes and feet"* present intriguing concepts regarding human nature and society in a distinctive way. Initially, the shoes are depicted as a wish, had the Maharaja refrained from purchasing shoes for his daughter, he may have arrived home on time, and the sequence may have taken a different turn. The situation was exacerbated by his daughter's wish to purchase shoes. Conversely, when one of Pooja's fellow wore her shoes in the sport camp, Pooja presented the shoes to the girl as a gift. In this way, the shoes are utilized as a metaphor for moral instruction and sacrifice. An additional footprint necklace that functions as an identity and encompasses various other features. Selvam recognizes that he had given the necklace to his daughter when the girl whom he believed to be Maharaja's daughter displayed the same necklace in the final scene of the film. Additionally, the scar on the daughter's shoulder verified that she was indeed Selvam's daughter.

In addition to above object symbols, *"the attire"* of the Maharaja and Selvam is also depicted in a unique manner. Maharaja's *"blue shirts"* in the opening scenes indicate that he is

leading a happy life, whereas Selvam's dark and reddish shirts suggest peril. Additionally, the selection of shirts worn by the two primary characters provides insight into their psychology and personality. For instance, the character's clothing design would be intricate when he is anxious or uncertain, while it would be straightforward when he is satisfied.

Paradoxes and the character symbolism

The writer has employed several metaphors and created a stark paradox in the names of the characters. This discrepancy is evident in the names of both the protagonist and supportive characters. The names of these characters and their meanings imply a form of humor; however, when viewed in the context of their actions, they evoke more astonishment than laughter. For instance, the film's protagonist, Maharaja, is a "barber" by profession. From this perspective, it is perceived as an apparent contradiction, as his personality and conduct are comparable to those of a king. A Maharaja is empathetic toward his subjects. In the same vein, the Maharaja holds his own daughter and the daughters of others in high regard. He fulfills his daughter's desires, he also purchases toys for Selvam's daughter. Additionally, the vehicle collides with Selvam's home, resulting in the deaths of all present in the home, except Selvam's daughter. The girl is granted the status of his daughter by the Maharaja, which suggests that she will be grown up in the same manner as Maharaja's own daughter.

Selvam, which means *"rich,"* is a character who possesses a significant amount of wealth; however, his personality is entirely distinct from wealth. He is a wicked individual who not only steals money from others but also dishonored young girls. Nevertheless, he only has funds for his daughter, as he assures his wife that she will not be in need. Likewise, Nallasivam is meant to represent God, but in actuality, he is a devil in human form. Which is rife with corruption and criminal activity. He not only permits criminals, but also engages in larceny and adultery with them, despite his status as a police officer. A person's physical desire is so repulsive that even Satan is embarrassed. For instance, he compares the outer layer of a garbage can to the body of a female. And when the Maharaja inquires whether he is not embarrassed of engaging in all of this, he responds that he is bold. Another minor character, whose name is a policeman, is frequently implicated in a crime. Apart from them, a trash can has played an important part in the movie. Maharaja calls Lakshmi which means *"money,"* but actually it's a *"dustbin,"* which is an example

of a paradox. Hence, it is evident that the names of the characters in the film are presented in a particular order, which simultaneously generates a paradox and reveals a more profound significance that reflects a particular attribute of each character.

Conclusion

Maharaja, the movie, is a masterful use of symbolism, characters, and narrative, which does not only reflect the director's vision but also introduces artistic innovation to the film's structure. Three kinds of symbols are illustrated in the film; snake, wolf, and eagle are the most significant animal metaphors employed. Nallasivam's character is symbolized by the snake metaphor, Selvam's by the wolf, and Maharaja's by the eagle. Not only are these three animals synonymous with the characters, but they also contribute to the film's artistic approach. Additionally, the paradoxes of names offer audience a superficial sense of amusement, but upon closer examination, they reveal a concealed philosophy. The name Maharaja may appear ironic in light of his profession; however, the contrast is admirable due to the manner in which his character exemplifies a pure spirit. In addition to these, the director has effectively employed metaphors to elevate even the most minute details, such as the color of the main character's clothing or the design of the shirts. Thus, the film's unique quality is its ability to facilitate a more profound comprehension through the use of symbols, along with its exceptional story and characters.

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