

## Symbolism in Yann Martel's *Beatrice and Virgil*

**Chandra. R**

PhD Scholar, PG & Research Department of  
English  
Thiruvalluvar Govt Arts College  
Rasipuram, Tamilnadu, India.  
jaichandra2007@yahoo.co.in

**Dr. P. Mythily**

Associate Professor & Head,  
PG & Research Department of English  
Thiruvalluvar Govt Arts College  
Rasipuram, Tamilnadu, India.  
mythusada@gmail.com

### Abstract

Yann Martel is one of the world renowned writers of this century by his novel *Life of Pi*. *Beatrice and Virgil* is a story of Holocaust but the approach is eccentric. The painful result of World War II particularly the Holocaust is dealt by very few people except by historians and biographers. People hesitate to talk about the suffering of Jewish people, even after half a century which signifies the agony of Jewish people. As a non-Jewish author of the Holocaust he has to clarify about the genre and the choice of the narration (usage of animals for the story) to his readers in the novel itself. Depth of the theme is dealt through semiotics and the interpretation depends on the readers it may be of surface level or deeper level, and also induces them for their further reading of the history of the period. Skillful application of various narrative techniques of the author demonstrates the theme in a distinct way. *Beatrice and Virgil* is an allegorical story of Holocaust. This paper unearths the various meanings of symbols used by the author for better understanding of the text. While replicating the life of people, literature never fails to show lights on the negative side of society though it resolves to give delight. Usage of various literary devices and application of theories are all for better understanding of the text. Author's symbolic representation of the theme has multi-purpose, such as self defense while handling sensitive subjects and also for adding aesthetic value to their work.

**Key Words:** Holocaust, Jewish people, agony, genre, semiotics, allegory, aesthetic value

*Beatrice and Virgil* is a story within a story which revolves around a person called Henry, who is a writer by profession becomes widely known by his second novel of its prominent role is given to wild animals. His next novel is about Holocaust which he has written after his five years of research. Because of its unique nature he has produced it in the form of flip book which contains two genres one is an essay and another one is a novel which ends in the middle of the book. He receives mail from his readers and responds to it regularly. His new book is rejected by the publishers, so he decides to quit his writing career and moves away from Canada to start a new life. He and his wife settle themselves in a new country and she continues her medical profession, Henry engages himself by learning music, enrolling himself with theatre groups and having a job at a coffee shop. He receives mail from the readers particularly one reader who has sent him a photocopy of the book called *The Legend of Saint Julian the Hospitator* and with a requisition of his help for his writing a play with a sample dialogues of a two characters of *Beatrice and Virgil* which is written by the reader. *The Legend of Saint Julian Hospitator* is a story of a saint who has killed number of animals in his early part of his life and later he becomes a saint. He finds out the reader who is a taxidermist in his house cum workshop because the person sends mail from the same place where Henry lives. In his workshop he sees a stuffed howler monkey and a donkey; they are the characters of his play. The taxidermist also has similar name as Henry later only he comes to know that he also wants to write the same theme of Holocaust. The taxidermist asks the help of Henry for writing a play calls 'The Horrors' which is about extinction of animals by humans. While visiting a taxidermist Shop his dog gets rabies and it bites his cat, both of them died of rabies attack. At the advanced stage only he finds out that he is not writing animal story, it's a story of Holocaust and he is a Nazi collaborator and has the personal experience of controlling one of concentration camps. It is a psychological allegory. The taxidermist wants to write a book on Holocaust because of his guilt consciousness. *Beatrice and Virgil* words of pain, hunger and fear represent the Jewish people's psyche. Even his profession of taxidermist also gives him a way out for his guilt feeling by giving life to those dead animals.

### Theoretical framework

In order to enrich the value of a literary work symbolism is used. It enables the writer to initiate the idea of their own in a lucid manner which allows the reader to have the obscure meaning the author intended. The psychological perceptivity of the character is transferred through various signs and words. The literary device of symbolism is an inseparable part of literature which facilitates to substantiate the background which is required for clear understanding for readers. "The word is a symbol, and its meaning is constituted by the ideas, images, and emotions, which it raises in the mind of the hearer."(whitehead -3)

Widening the meaning of symbolism is the reason for writers to have this as literary device in their work. "She argues that art is a symbolic form that through its dynamic structure expresses the forms of experience that language is unfit to convey". (Langer, Susanne). Symbolism expresses beyond the limits of plain words, and induces the reader to search for more meaning in the works. Generally the subject of the work also decides the usage of particular literary devices. "Symbols are far more than communicative devices or descriptions of the empirical world; the brain endlessly makes them, as evidenced by dreams, religious experience, art, ritual, and even science".(Langer, Susanne)

Northrop Frye in his essay Ethical Criticism: Theory of Symbols is used for literary analysis the symbols can be separated from literary structure. The inception of literary criticism is started by interpretation of religious text. Dante's term 'polysemous' states that any literary work has multiple meanings, and the author cannot have final word or meaning on it. Once the literary work is published it is the readers who interpret or give multi layers of meaning to the text even the author may not intended.

The agony of an individual cannot be transferred to the other people in the same way as it is experienced by the first person. When the Holocaust is narrated by the second generation it is also got transferred or even in the first person narration also depends on the usage of code, language or sign for transmitting their experience. Receiving capability of the reader also varies based on their cultural background. When almost all narration of Holocaust from victim, but this story is narrated by an offender.

The choice of the name of Beatrice and Virgil is taken from Dante's Divine Comedy as they are the characters which guide him from inferno, purgatory and paradise. The budding author of the play Henry is a Nazi collaborator who needs salvation for his crime so he has chosen the profession of taxidermist. It is like giving life to dead animals and writing play through which he gives voice for animals which are voiceless. Though he could not have his confession openly, he tries to make it through his play. His play symbolizes indirect confession of his crime. When he sees the dog he doesn't have concern for it, which shows that he doesn't have real concern for animals but he informs earlier that the purpose of writing play is his concern for animal extinction. The setting is the Shirt which is a long blue vertical stripe that symbolizes Jewish uniform in concentration camps. His strange behavior is understood by his wife and the shopkeeper shows his trauma affected psyche. The game symbolizes the suffering of Jewish people, they were not just collectively killed, more than killing, they were tortured physically and mentally.

Henry receives mail from a reader along with a copy of Flebaurt's *The Legend of Saint Julian Hospitator*, and an excerpt from a play, the dialogues about fruits. Though many fruit names are discussed mainly two fruit names are used repeatedly one is apple which is the national fruit of Germany and pear which symbolizes longevity and salvation.

Henry misconceives that the writer of the play empathizes animal suffering, in order to do something for them he chooses the taxidermist as profession, and isolate him from the human beings who are the reason for the mass extinction of animals, but gradually he understands the true nature of the taxidermist. "Take the dead and make them look good. How was that for murderous irrationalism neatly packaged and hidden? Taxidermy indeed. Henry now understood why all the animals were in the presence of the taxidermist. Henry shuddered. He wanted to wash his hands, his soul, of this man forever. He felt tainted by him. "(190)

Holocaust is a product of a racist ideology of an autocrat, silent spectators and unconcerned bureaucrats. The taxidermist tries to write a play as a result of his shamefaced persona, which makes him give life to a dead animal by stuffing it. The taxidermist justifies his profession symbolically "When I work on animals, I work in the knowledge that nothing I do can alter its life, which is past. What I am actually doing is extracting and refining memory from death. In that, I am no different from a historian, who parses through the material evidence of the past in an attempt to reconstruct it and then understand it. Every animal I have mounted has been an interpretation of the past."(96-97) He states that he also wants to contribute to the society so he chooses his profession of taxidermy (writer of the play). "I wanted to see if something could be saved once the irreparable had been done. That is why I became a taxidermist: to bear witness." (98)

At the end of the play the boy's name is mentioned as Gustav, in history Gustav is a ship captain who saved around a thousand Jews.

“Henry remembered the story the taxidermist had sent him, *The Legend of Saint Julian Hospitator*. Henry now understood the taxidermist’s keen interest in the Flaubert story: Julian slaughters quantities of innocent animals, but it doesn’t affect his salvation. The story offers redemption without remorse. That would be an attraction to a man who had something to hide.”(189)

During the war period, in order to avoid the target of Nazis, the Jewish people start to live in hiding. They involve in smuggling for food and living, sometimes they may be identified by Nazis and the immediate punishment is killing, which is portrayed in the following lines.

“They figure he was told to strip and was then shot. They think the red cloth was probably his. He might have been a peddler.” (196)

Beatrice and Virgil plan to play a game with the red cloth, which signifies that according to their religious belief red cloth would prevent their misfortunes.

“Why do they stay? After finding a dead body, wouldn’t the more natural reaction be to run away?” They think of it as a place already plundered and now safe.”(196)

This dialogue portrays Jewish people’s fearful situation, and their search for a safer place.

They don’t smell his body before that? Sometimes life stinks just as much as death. They don’t.”(185)

These conversations depict their living conditions in the concentration camps, any time they may be killed, it cannot be prevented, and the death is better than their sufferings. In the meantime they said they wanted to pray. This shows their faith in God, they believe that the only savior who can stop everything, even though they are undergoing all those tortures because of their religious belief.

With these scenes the author exposes the sufferings of Jewish people in Holocaust. The Jewish people’s mental status is depicted by portraying the external environment. Through this novel the author symbolically portrays the genocide in the name of ‘The Horrors’ with the animal characters of Beatrice and Virgil. The deliberate mass killing of Jewish people is executed legally in specially built areas such as prison-war-camp, labour camp, extermination camp concentration camp, transit camp with transportation facility for deporting Jewish people .

Holocaust is an idiosyncratic historical event based on eugenics ideology, religious conflicts, anti-Semitism, racism, which legalizes authorities to kill millions of people due to the annihilation of gypsies, disabled people, homosexuals’ and Jewish people. The disastrous event of Holocaust is started by Adolf Hitler who believes in Aryan supremacy theory. Almost six million Jewish people are killed by them as they are believed to be an inferior race. In order justify their ideology of lebensraum the Jewish are announced as non citizens and the messages are dispersed against them, such as that they are the reasons for their defeat in First World War and other negative rumors about them are dispersed by posters and announcements which is portrayed in the play(novel). After seeing the poster about Virgil, Beatrice tries to convince the people it is not true.

“BEATRICE : (still talking to an imaginary interlocutor) Such outrages I have read. They’re impossible to avoid. Posters, newspapers articles, pamphlets, books-their poison finds its way into people’s hearts and minds and from there onto their tongues. Yet they have nothing to do with truth or reality” (79) The people are transported through train to Auschwitz (concentration camp), but they are unaware of where they are going. Once they leave the place the place will be silent and the gas chambers also will be silent.

“VIRGIL: Why don’t we try. (Virgil stands up. He takes in a big breath. He says the following at the top volume.) ALL ABOARD, ALL ABOARD! QUICK, ...CHOO-CHOO, DON’T FORGET YOUR DRINKS AND SNACKS! DON’T WANT TO GO HUNGRY! KEEP AN EYE ON YOUR LUGGAGE! ...PREPARE TO DEPART.(to Beatrice) Well, the silence, did you hear it? (141)

Shooting and any other way of killing these people will take time and their noise will make others protest. In order to avoid all these inconveniences away from the living area these gas chambers are built and make them to inhale carbon monoxide so that they are able to kill more people at a time. Moreover there are multiple camps available so they are sent to different camps no one knows where they are going and what will happen to them.

The hand posture is given which portrays the saluting gesture to Hitler.

“The taxidermist made a gesture with his right hand in front of his chest. “I’ve done a drawing for the actor,”he added. He held the page in the above the desk. It was a drawing in four sections.”(142) There is a mention of address “68Nowolipki Street” where the excavation of the archive provides valuable testimony about life in the Ghetto 1943 which was a period of liquidation. Once Germany is surrendered in the Second World War, Russian

army visits the concentration camps there they see the Jewish people belongings of hats and shoes are available at various concentration camp of Germans, which are the proof of Holocaust is also mentioned in the novel(play).

### Conclusion

Science and technology aims to improve the quality of life of people. But Holocaust and world wars are all negative examples of its usage. If history is forgotten, then people are ready to repeat the same mistakes. Beatrice and Virgil's speech represents the psyche of Jewish people, they were in a confused state where to go, whom to believe, where to hide and where to get food. When history is given in art form it gets analyzed, discussed and criticized, which makes it reach more people and make them think about it. World Wars are over whereas wars (including bio-war) are happening around the world for the purpose of border sharing, power sharing and also in the name of religion. It's not the problem of Europe or a particular religion. It's the problem of humanity which has to be realized and respect the inborn right to live, which is possible only when people are aware of these stories, that make everyone think over it. The author has made his contribution in his art form and symbolically represents the most sensitive part of history of holocaust and makes the people to rethink about it.

### References

- 1) Anti-Semitism <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/anti-semitism>
- 2) Encyclopedia.com <https://www.encyclopedia.com/environment/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/langer-susanne>
- 3) Holocaust, European history <https://www.britannica.com/event/Holocaust>
- 4) Introduction to the Holocaust <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/introduction-to-the-holocaust>
- 5) Oxford Bibliographies <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780190221911/obo-9780190221911-0009.xml>
- 6) Martel, Yann. 2011. Beatrice and Virgil. New York: Spiegel & Grau Trade Paperbacks
- 7) Northrop Frye and Critical Method: Theory of Symbols - Macblog <https://macblog.mcmaster.ca/fryeblog/critical-method/theory-of-symbols.html>
- 8) Semiotics | Definition, Theory, Examples, & Facts | Britannica <https://www.britannica.com/science/semiotics>
- 9) Symbolism its meaning and effect by Alfred North Whitehead <https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.166010>
- 10) The Holocaust: An Introductory History <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/an-introductory-history-of-the-holocaust>
- 11) Theory 101: Saussure's Sign in Semiotics <https://medium.com/@heryantosolim/theory-101-understanding-semiotic-a1eb9b0d6d8c>
- 12) 68th anniversary of discovering the second part of the Ringelblum Archive <https://www.jhi.pl/en/articles/68th-anniversary-of-discovering-the-second-part-of-the-ringelblum-archive,404>