UNIT 3  THE USE OF METAPHOR IN POETRY

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3.0 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

This Unit discusses the use of metaphor in poetry. After going through it, you will learn that

- metaphor, like simile, is based on comparison between two dissimilar things;
- the language we use being metaphoric in origin, some of our expressions have lost their original metaphoric character and have become dead metaphors;
- the traditional definition of metaphor as shortened simile has become modified in that metaphors are not derived from simple logical comparisons;
- while the traditional use of metaphor is for bringing out the points of similarity between two things, the modern use of it is to make it serve as a central concept of the poem;
- in many poems the simile and the metaphor are indeed combined as in a chain. This suggests that though a simile is at the root of every metaphor, it is metaphor that makes the poem vivid and symbolical;
- if the suggested resemblance of the things compared is far-fetched or arbitrary, the metaphor acquires the character of a symbol or a conceit;
- poets no longer consider a metaphor as a distinct rhetorical element but associate it with other stylistic elements as 'metaphors';
- metaphor has become a condition of poetry and a means for the evocation of connotations and associations central to the poem;
- in modern poetry, metaphor implies a transaction between contexts and helps the overt meanings of images to acquire metaphoric significance; and
- further, in consonance with the modern disbelief in a rational order of the universe, the logic of poetic language rather than the mathematical logic of a rational universe conditions the poetic imagination.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

In Units 1 and 2 we have discussed 'Symbols' and 'images' and in this Unit we shall take up another important ingredient of poetry, viz., metaphor. The command of metaphor has been held to be the shilling-mark of a poet and so its importance to the creation of a poem cannot be overemphasised. Metaphor is not a mere rhetorical
device—a figure of speech—but a means of making a poem highly evocative and thus enlarging its significance and power.

This Unit discusses the different views concerning metaphor—traditional and modern—to bring out its multifarious functions in poetry which are explained with appropriate illustrations. The issues that the use of metaphor in poetry raises are complex in that the metaphor, in the modern view, is a 'stereoscope of ideas'.

3.2 TRADITIONAL DEFINITION OF METAPHOR

The simplest definition of metaphor, as also the oldest one, is that it is a shortened or an implied simile. A simile makes explicit comparison between two unlike things indicated by the words, 'like', 'as', or 'than'. When we say, 'Arjuna fights like a lion', we are using a simile in which a comparison is made by using the word, 'like'. Where such a comparison is made without using such words as 'like' or 'as'—as in the following example, 'On the battlefield Arjuna is a fox—we are using a metaphor. In other words, when a speaker says that something is, or is equivalent to, something in most ways actually unlike it, he is using a figure of speech called a metaphor. In other words, it is a description of one thing in terms of another. Comparison between two things, unlike each other, is the basis of both simile and metaphor. The point(s) of analogy must be logically clear, whether the comparison is explicitly stated, as in a simile, or only implied, as in a metaphor.

Language is metaphoric in origin because human beings feel and think in figurative formations. Many Words and phrases which we use today were originally conceived as metaphors. Daisy, for example, is derived from 'day's eye', at one time a metaphor. Likewise, initially, 'Right meant straight', 'wrong meant twisted' and 'supercilious' meant the 'raising of the &ye-brow'. Such common phrases as the arm of a chair, at break of day, 'to grasp an idea' began as metaphors and through overuse have lost their original character and are now treated as dead metaphors.

3.3 DISTINCTION BETWEEN SIMILE AND METAPHOR

Although, superficially, the distinction between simile and metaphor looks simple, it is not really so. They differ in significance. Simile merely joins two separate entities together as a fusion of two objects to make a new one that shares in some degree the attributes or qualities of both. While in a simile the comparison is straightforward and often prosaic, in a metaphor an altogether new kind of association is created by discovering and combining resemblances between two otherwise dissimilar objects. Simile being more explicit than metaphor is, therefore, less evocative. However, it must be remembered that a metaphor has its origin in a simile.

3.3.1 Change in the traditional notion of metaphor

It must also be noted that the traditional definition of metaphor as an abbreviated simile has been undergoing a subtle change. It is difficult nowadays to find many examples in poetry of metaphors which are derived from simile. logical comparisons as in the following poem by Sir Walter Raleigh:

What is our Life?

What is our life? a play of passion;
Our mirth, the scream of division;
Our mother's moves the tiling-houses:
Where we are dressed for this short comedy.

The poet compares our life to 'a play of passion'. 'Play' here is the metaphor for life, and since the two terms are basically unlike, the poet underscores in the lines that follow the qualities 'life' and 'play' share in common. The brevity and triviality of
stage-plays has been compared to the brevity and triviality of life—'this short comedy'. In order to further emphasize the points of analogy between the two, the poet refers to human laughter as equivalent to musical accompaniment of wombs as dressing rooms. The 'play of passion' has finally been called 'this short comedy' to suggest that life, after all, is not as serious a business as we take it to be.

### 3.3.2 Difference between traditional and modern uses of metaphor

If we compare the poem of Sir Walter Raleigh given above with the following poem by Emily Dickinson we will notice that, while in the former metaphor has been employed for merely noting of a likeness between life and a stage-play, the latter uses the metaphor 'Iron Horse' for train as the central concept of the poem:

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I like to see it lap the Miles
And lick the Valleys up,
And stop to feed itself at Tanks;
And then prodigious step
Around a Pile of Mountains,
And supercilious peer
In Shanties by the sides of Roads;
And then a Quarry pare
To fit its sides
And crawl between,
Complaining all the while
In hond, hooting stanza;
Then chase itself down Hill...
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### 3.4 Simile and Metaphor in a Chain

In many poems, the simile and the metaphor are combined as in a chain. Consider the following extract from Matthew Arnold's 'Dover Beach':

```
The sea of faith
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled;
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
Retreating to the breath
Of the night-wind down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world.
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In these lines faith has been referred to as a sea that ebbs and flows. In the next line a simile compares the sea of faith to 'the folds of a bright girdle' in a way that the principal term of the simile is itself a metaphor. From here onward, the stanza goes back to the metaphor of faith as a sea ebbing down the gravelled beaches of the world.

In the following lines of Shakespeare, a similar use is made of simile and metaphor:

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Sweet are the uses of adversity,
Which, like the toad, ugly and venomous,
Wears still a precious jewel in its head
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Just as a simile is at the root of every metaphor, it is metaphor that elevates a simile into poetic utterance and gives to it concrete vividness.

### 3.4.1 Complex metaphors

Metaphor has also often been used by poets in such a manner that the end of one metaphor leads on to another closely related to it.

The resultant compression not only makes the poetic structure all the more complex but also enlarges the connotations and heightens the emotional power and dramatic effect of the poem, as illustrated by the following examples:
i) Yeats’s lines on the old man:

A tattered coat upon a stick, unless
Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing
For every tatter in its mortal dress...

The main metaphor in these lines is that of the aged man, his ‘soul... in its mortal dress’ proclaiming the vital principle of life in him. There are, also subordinate metaphors — the human body as the ‘tattered coat’ and the skeleton as the ‘stick’ which in a way telescopes into the main metaphor. Together, these metaphors contribute to the total effect of the poem.

ii) In Antony and Cleopatra, Caesar says to Antony:

Let not the peace of Virtue which is set
Betwixt us, as the cement of our love
To keep it built, be the Ram to batter
The fortune of it...

Caesar’s sister who is Antony’s wife is the ‘peace of Virtue’ which is to be nourished by the cement of their love for each other, and must not be allowed to become the ram to batter down their mutual goodwill. Love has been conceived as a structure that can be built or destroyed by human effort. The central metaphor of ‘cement of our love’ has been employed to describe both activities.

3.4.2 Symbol and conceit

Occasionally, the suggested resemblance of the things compared is far-fetched or arbitrary and the metaphor acquires the character of a symbol or conceit as in the following examples:

a) The opening lines in a poem by Hart Crane speak of:

The calyx of death’s bounty giving back
A scattered chapter, livid hieroglyph...

The poem describes a sinking ship and, in the words of the poet, ‘As soon as the water has closed over a ship, this whirlpool sends up broken spares, wreckage, etc., which can be alluded to as livid hieroglyphs making a scattered chapter so far as any complete record of the ship and her crew is concerned’.

b) When an elaborately ingenious metaphor is used to compare things which most people consider dissimilar, it is called a conceit, as in the following stanza by John Donne, where he compares the souls of two lovers to the legs of a draughtsman’s compass:

If they be two, they are two so
As stiff twin compasses are two,
Thys od, the fixt foot, makes no show
To move, but doth, if th’ other do.

3.5 VARIETIES OF METAPHOR

From the examples given of the use of metaphor in poetry in the preceding sections, it is evident that a metaphor may perform varied functions. Poets no longer use metaphor merely as a figure of speech or as a decorative device. Modern poets have come to believe that metaphor is the basic characteristic of language and of poetry in particular. To consider metaphor as a mere figure of speech is to limit its scope in poetry. It is no longer considered a single element of style; in modern poetry there are other stylistic elements which may be called ‘metaphors’. Conceit, Personification,
Metonymy and Synecdoche are now regarded as varieties of metaphor. An allegory is only an extended metaphor through which the basic analogy in the poem is elaborated; symbol too becomes, in this sense, an extended metaphor.

Activity 1
i) Distinguish between simile and metaphor. (40 words)
ii) Consider the varieties of metaphor. (100 words)

(Check your answers with those given at the end of the Unit)

3.5.1 Contemporary concept of metaphor

Metaphor has become, in course of time, a condition of poetry and a means for the evocation of a host of associations central to the poem. It is now widely believed that a metaphor does more than merely record resemblance or identification between two disparate elements. Instead, it acts as a linchpin, joining two contexts which may be conventionally unrelated. A true metaphor is a transaction between contexts, 'a stereoscope of ideas'.

3.5.2 Use of metaphor in modern poetry

In the following two lines by Nelly Sachs, the metaphors do not conform to the traditional definition:

Wailing wall night!
Carved in you are the psalms of silence.

('Chorus of Things Invisible')

'Wailing wall' and 'night' do not indicate a logical and meaningful relation between them. Nor, for that matter, do the words, 'psalms' and 'silence'. However, these words interanimate each other and build up an intense poetic effect. To understand metaphor is to understand that words in a poem stand in a relationship to each other and exert a mutual influence. It is in such instances, when such a vital correlation between words is built up, that metaphor is taken to be a transaction between contexts.

3.6 IMAGE AS METAPHOR

Image-making in modern poetry often involves the association of a word with the images it evokes so that the poetic effect is concentrated in these and their overall
impacts is that of a metaphor! The following poem provides excellent illustration of this quality:

At a Convent

Everything else is the same—
the fluent locomotion
of a swan on mute waters—
insurgent breasts chained
with silver crosses.

This one or that
might have knelt before
the son of man
and burnt Him to ashes.

But the river has changed its course...

(Shiv K. Kumar)

In the first stanza the image 'of a swan on mute waters'—'insurgent breasts chained with silver crosses' build up a set of associations that are skilfully linked to the underlying myth of the second stanza. Together, they lead to the central metaphor of the river that has changed its course. There is a hierarchy of direction—images, myth, metaphor—which contributes to the evocative sorcery which is the characteristic feature of this poem. The lines demonstrate a highly sophisticated use of metaphor as that quality of poetic language which fuses disparate features of style into an organic whole. Metaphor has, indeed, travelled far from its early conventional analogy pattern.

Activity 2
Refer to the following poems in Block 1. Choose any 3 and answer the following questions:

a) 'Hastinapur' Block 1, 1.2
b) 'The Bustle in a House...' Block 1, 1.5
c) 'Evening Landscape by the River' Block 1, 2.2.3
d) 'Roll on, thou deep and dark blue Ocean, roll;' Block 1, 2.3.2
e) 'Little Exercise' by Elizabeth Bishop.
f) 'Pledge I to you' Block 1, 3.5

i) Can you identify and explain the central metaphor(s)? (100 words)
ii) Are there any images, symbols and subordinate metaphors which help to build up the central metaphor? (100 words)
3.7 ANALOGICAL AND CONTEXTUAL NOTIONS OF METAPHOR

The fact of the matter is that modern poetry no longer believes in the idea of a rational order of the universe that can be adequately represented by 'a network of rational analogies'. It has gradually been replaced by a juxtaposition of unlike statements. The symbolical significances of the ambiguities thus created can prevent a poem from collapsing into a literal statement.

Metaphors are regarded rightly as the product of the emotions or of poetic vision, following not the mathematical logic postulated in the notion of a rational universe, but in the logic of poetic language, which assumes that the language of poetry is metaphorical per se even when it contains no metaphors in the sense of figures of style. The following two examples from modern poetry illustrate this shift in our understanding of the role of metaphor in poetry:

Gandhi
The multitude
Waiting
To be born
Better:
Under his tortuous steps
We have burst open his blood
To bleed

The Colossus
I shall never get you put together entirely,
Pieced, glued, and properly jointed.
Mule-bray, pig-grunt and bawdy cackles
Proceed from your great lips
It's worse than a barnyard...
Counting the red stars and those of plum-colour
The sun rises under the pillar of your tongue.
My hours are married to shadow.
No longer do I listen for the scrape of a keel
On the blank stones of the landing.

Sylvia Plath

3.8 SUMMING UP

Metaphor, like simile, is based on a comparison between two dissimilar things. Whereas the comparison is implicit in the former, it is explicit in the latter. Language being metaphorical in origin, some of the expressions we use have been originally metaphors but have how become dead metaphors.
• Metaphor is different from simile in that instead of joining two separate entities as a simile does, a metaphor uses them to create a new one sharing the attributes of both.

• The traditional view of metaphor has become modified in that it is employed not for bringing out the points of similarity between objects but for making it serve as a central concept of the poem.

• In many poems the simile and the metaphor are combined as in a chain so as to suggest that though a simile is at the root of every metaphor, it is metaphor that imparts to a simile the character of poetic utterance.

• Poets may at times telescope a metaphor into another so as to create a complete metaphor.

• If the suggested comparison between things is far-fetched or arbitrary, the metaphor concerned acquires the character of a symbol or a conceit.

• A metaphor may perform a variety of functions and is no longer regarded merely as a figure of speech, but is viewed as a basic characteristic of poetry and is classed with other elements of style as 'metaphor'.

• The contemporary view is that a metaphor does not bring out the resemblance between two disparate elements but acts as a linchpin joining the unrelated contents.

• In modern poetry it implies a transaction between contexts and helps the overt meanings of images to acquire metaphoric significance.

• Further, the source of the metaphor being in the poet’s own psyche and vision, it follows the logic of poetic language rather than mathematical logic, associated with the idea of a rational universe.

### 3.9 ACTIVITIES: AIDS TO ANSWERS

#### Activity 1

i) Refer to Section 3.3

ii) Refer to Section 3.5

#### Activity 2

The point to be noted is that metaphor in poetry, especially modern poetry, does not conform to the traditional definition of it but has been made to perform a variety of functions as the given examples show. It acts as a transaction between contexts, “a stereotype” of ideas. It constitutes the core of poetic utterance.

**Hints**

a) i) There is a shift from the past tense to the present in reference to the battle of Mahabharata.

   Does Hastinapura refer only to the city of that name or does it raise echoes of other cities in similar situations?

ii) What mood does the central metaphor evoke – disappointment, disbelief etc.?

   How is this mood created and infused into the central metaphor?

b) i) The central metaphor is of work, of compulsive yet meaningless activity.

ii) How is this poetic vision built up?

c) In this poem a scene has been created with the use of a number of images. Does it convey any metaphorical significance?

   On these lines you can start analysing any of your choices.

### 3.10 GLOSSARY

**Allegory** may be defined as an extended metaphor. The term is often used to describe a work of fiction in which the characters and their actions convey more than the surface meaning. These extended meanings involve moral or spiritual concepts.

**Metonymy**, the substitution of one word for another closely associated with it e.g. the pen is mightier than the sword. Here, the words pen and sword refer to different forms of power.

**Organic whole** an ordering or arranging of fictional material according to a form which has developed from a conception of the thought, personality and feelings of its author as opposed to dependence upon a fixed and mechanical structure imposed by convention.