

‘झूला’ - Swing: Associations in Literature

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Abstract

This research paper explores the literary and cultural symbolism of the swing, examining its representations in poetry, fiction and devotional literature. While commonly associated with childhood play and innocence, the swing transcends its physical form to embody deeper emotional, psychological and spiritual meanings. It functions as a metaphor for nostalgia, freedom, memory and transition; suspended between joy and sorrow, motion and stillness, past and future. Drawing from diverse literary works, the paper analyses the evocative use of swings in ‘Swing Song’ by A.A. Milne and ‘The Swing’ by Robert Louis Stevenson, where the swing symbolizes the wonder and transience of childhood. In fiction, Harper Lee’s ‘To Kill a Mockingbird’ presents the swing as a symbol of childhood freedom within a racially divided world, while Arundhati Roy’s ‘The God of Small Things’ portrays it as a device reflecting emotional turmoil, trauma, and the oscillation between psychological states. The study also explores the spiritual and cultural resonance of the swing in Indian devotional traditions, especially within ‘bhakti’- devotional poetry. Prominent poets such as Mirabai and Surdas frequently depict Lord Krishna and Radha on the ‘jhoola’ – swing, with their verses symbolizing divine joy, rhythmic love and cosmic harmony. By examining these varied texts and traditions, the paper reveals how the swing serves as a potent literary and cultural symbol; bridging childhood and adulthood, the material and the spiritual and the remembered and the imagined. Ultimately, the swing becomes a suspended space that holds layered narratives of emotion, identity and meaning.

Keywords: Swing, Literature, Symbolism, Innocence, Freedom, Devotion

1. Introduction

The swing, a humble object suspended in motion has long captivated the human imagination. While commonly associated with childhood and playful innocence, literature reveals its deeper symbolic capacity. Whether as a site of nostalgia or spiritual contemplation, the swing functions as more than a plaything; it is a liminal space, suspended between opposites; freedom and restraint, joy and sorrow, childhood and adulthood. This study examines how poets and authors from different cultural backgrounds use the image of the swing to convey complex emotional, psychological and spiritual experiences [1].

In Western literature, the swing often evokes the wonder and transience of childhood. Poems such as A.A. Milne’s ‘Swing Song’ [2] and Robert Louis Stevenson’s ‘The Swing’ [3] use the motion of swinging to celebrate imagination and carefree joy, while also hinting at its fleeting nature. However, in

fiction, the swing frequently takes on more nuanced meanings. In Harper Lee's 'To Kill a Mockingbird' [4], swing is used to portray moments of comfort and safety amidst a backdrop of racial tension. In Arundhati Roy's 'The God of Small Things'[5] the swing symbolizes emotional instability, loss and internal conflict. Eastern traditions, particularly in Indian devotional literature, assign sacred connotations to the swing. In bhakti poetry, poets like Mirabai and Surdas present the swing as a divine seat for Radha and Krishna, representing love, longing and cosmic unity. Their verses [6] express this union through rhythmic movement and spiritual intimacy.

This paper delves into the multifaceted symbolism of the swing across various literary genres and cultures, posing key questions: What does the swing symbolize? How do authors use it to convey deeper aspects of the human experience? Through this inquiry, the swing reveals itself as a link between the ordinary and the profound.

2. Literature Review

The literature review examines a range of poems, novels and devotional bhajans to explore the symbolic meanings and associations of the swing across different cultural and literary traditions.

2.1 A.A. Milne's 'Swing Song'

In A.A. Milne's poem, 'Swing Song', from his 1924 collection 'When We Were Very Young', the swing becomes a powerful symbol of childhood joy, freedom and imagination. As the child narrator swings "up in the air so blue" [2], the swing is no longer just a toy; it becomes a bridge to the sky, nature and dreams. The poem's gentle rhythm mirrors the motion of the swing, evoking a sense of movement between reality and fantasy. Its verses capture the lightness, delight and wonder of childhood, while also hinting at its fleeting nature. They go beyond describing play; it captures how a simple swing ride opens up an entire world of discovery and delight. In this way, poet presents the swing as more than an object of play; it becomes a space of escape, creativity and emotional freedom - a vivid reflection of the beauty and innocence of being a child.

2.2 Robert Louis Stevenson's 'The Swing'

In R. L. Stevenson's poem, 'The Swing', from his 1885 collection 'A Child's Garden of Verses', the swing serves as a joyful and symbolic image of childhood freedom, imagination and wonder. Written from a child's perspective, the poem celebrates the exhilaration of swinging "up in the air and over the wall" [3] where the child glimpses the surrounding natural world. The swing becomes a vantage point, offering not only physical elevation but also a moment of imaginative escape. Its rhythmic motion reflects both the physical act of swinging and the emotional waves of joy, curiosity and awe. Here, the swing transforms into a metaphor for the transitional state of childhood; a liminal space between dependence and independence, fantasy and reality. Through vivid imagery, the poet captures the magic of simple experiences and the richness of a child's inner world, presenting the swing as more than a toy; a symbol of innocence, freedom and the fleeting beauty of youth.

2.3 Harper Lee's 'To Kill a Mockingbird'

In Harper Lee's novel, 'To Kill a Mockingbird', the swing in the yard symbolizes childhood innocence and emotional comfort. At first, it represents freedom, joy and the carefree nature of early life; a small space where the characters feel safe and happy. Its gentle motion offers a sense of peace and escape from the world around them. As the story moves forward, the swing gains deeper meaning. Set in a

society marked by racial injustice, it begins to reflect the fragile and fleeting nature of innocence. The back-and-forth motion mirrors the emotional journey of the characters; moving between comfort and fear, clarity and confusion.

The swing quietly witnesses moments of personal growth and reflection. It stands apart from the harsh realities nearby, showing the contrast between the simplicity of childhood and the complexities of the adult world. Over time, it becomes a symbol of change, a reminder of how innocence fades as one becomes more aware of life's injustices. Through this evolving image, the swing becomes more than just a toy; it is a gentle metaphor for emotional growth, loss and the transition from innocence to maturity.

2.4 Arundhati Roy's 'The God of Small Things'

In Arundhati Roy's novel, *'The God of Small Things'*, the swing becomes a powerful symbol of both innocence and emotional complexity. More than just a plaything, it serves as a space of temporary freedom, escape and quiet reflection. Its back-and-forth motion echoes the novel's shifts in time and mood, moving between joy and sorrow, memory and loss. The swing is often linked to rare moments of peace within a world shaped by rigid social norms, caste restrictions and emotional trauma. It provides a brief sense of relief from cultural expectations but also carries an undercurrent of tension. As it sways, it captures emotional shifts; between love and fear, hope and disappointment.

The author uses the swing as a metaphor for life's instability and the fragile nature of comfort. It embodies the contrast between what is desired and what remains out of reach. Through this simple object, the novel explores deeper themes of identity, memory and emotional conflict, making the swing a quiet yet powerful presence throughout the story.

2.5 Bhajans by Mirabai and Surdas

In the bhajans of Mirabai and Surdas, the 'jhoola' - swing plays a meaningful role as a symbol of divine love, spiritual joy and emotional connection with the divine. Within the bhakti tradition, the image of Radha and Krishna on a swing represents both intimacy and devotion. The swing becomes a sacred space where human longing meets divine presence, blending physical movement with spiritual emotion. Mirabai's bhajan "JhoolatRadhaMadhav Ban Maahi" [6] uses the swing to express a moment of spiritual upliftment. The gentle motion of Radha and Krishna swinging together reflects a deeper rhythm of love and devotion, where the swing becomes a metaphor for the soul's journey toward union with the divine. Surdas also uses the swing to depict the changing moods of devotion. The back-and-forth motion mirrors the emotional flow between separation and reunion with Krishna. In both poets' works, the swing is more than a physical object; it becomes a symbol of spiritual longing, emotional surrender and divine connection.

3. Methodology and Materials

This research paper uses a qualitative literary analysis to explore the symbolism of swings in literature and devotional traditions. The study looks at how swings are represented in poetry, novels and devotional songs; focusing on the emotions, psychology and spirituality they symbolize. The paper compares different works to identify common themes and meanings related to the swing, using literary works from various genres that feature the swing motif.

- A.A. Milne's 'Swing Song' – A poem about childhood joy and freedom, using the swing as a symbol of innocence and play.

- Robert Louis Stevenson’s ‘The Swing’ – A children’s poem where the swing represents the freedom and joy of childhood.
- Harper Lee’s ‘To Kill a Mockingbird’ – A novel where the swing symbolizes the innocence of childhood in a divided society.
- Arundhati Roy’s ‘The God of Small Things’ – A novel where the swing symbolizes emotional struggles and shifting psychological states.
- Bhajans by Mirabai and Surdas– Devotional songs that depict divine love and surrender, using the swing as a symbol of spiritual connection.

These works were chosen because they highlight different aspects of the swing as a symbol of emotions, childhood, spirituality and personal growth.

4. Comparative Study: Association of Swings across Cultures and Literatures

The swing, though a simple physical object, holds significant symbolic value across various cultures and literary traditions. Its representation in both Western and Eastern literature demonstrates its wide-ranging emotional, psychological and spiritual meanings. This comparative analysis explores how the swing is used to symbolize childhood innocence, emotional turmoil, spirituality and transition in different cultural contexts.

4.1 Swings in Western Literature

In Western literature, the swing is often associated with childhood freedom and innocence. In poems like A.A. Milne’s ‘Swing Song’ and Robert Louis Stevenson’s ‘The Swing’, the swing is a symbol of youthful joy, imagination and nostalgia. These works highlight the carefree, fluid movement of childhood, where the swing serves as an expression of happiness and play. However, in more complex work such as ‘To Kill a Mockingbird’, the swing takes on a deeper metaphorical role symbolizing a fleeting moment of freedom in a racially divided society.

4.2 Swings in Eastern Literature

In Eastern devotional literature, particularly in the bhakti poetry of Mirabai and Surdas, the swing takes on a spiritual and symbolic significance. Here, the swing is often depicted as a sacred space where divine figures like Lord Krishna and Radha swing together, representing their eternal love and cosmic harmony. The swing in this context transcends its physical form, becoming a symbol of divine love, spiritual longing and the rhythmic nature of devotion. For Mirabai, the swing reflects her longing for union with Krishna, while Surdas uses the swing to express the undulating emotional path of devotion.

4.3 Comparative Analysis

While the swing in Western literature typically symbolizes personal freedom, childhood and emotional experiences; in Eastern devotional poetry, it takes on a more spiritual and transcendent role. In both traditions, however, the swing embodies motion and transition whether between childhood and adulthood in Western works, or between the human and divine in Eastern texts. The emotional or spiritual oscillation of the swing represents a constant movement between opposing forces; joy and sorrow, innocence and maturity, the material and the spiritual.

Despite differences in focus, both Western and Eastern literature use the swing to explore the themes of duality and transition. In both traditions, the swing oscillates between two opposing states; whether it is

the carefree moments of childhood or the sacred play between the divine and the devotee. The swing, therefore, serves as a liminal space, a symbol of both escape and transformation. It offers a brief respite from the ordinary and invites reflection on the complexities of human experience.

5. Conclusion

This comparative study highlights that the symbolism of the swing, while culturally varied, shares common threads of motion, transition, emotional and spiritual oscillation. In Western literature, the swing reflects the fleeting nature of childhood and the turbulence of emotional states, while in Eastern literature, it signifies spiritual devotion, divine love and cosmic rhythm. The swing transcends its physical form, becoming a powerful metaphor for life's transitions and dualities.

Whether representing the innocence of youth or the longing for divine union, the swing remains a potent symbol that transcends cultural boundaries to explore complex human emotions and experiences. Through this study, we gain deeper insights into how a simple object - the swing; can capture the richness of human life across cultures and time periods. This exploration could be extended in future research to include other artistic representations of the swing in visual arts, cinema and even contemporary culture, further revealing the deep cultural meanings that the swing holds in diverse creative forms.

Acknowledgements

I sincerely thank my dissertation guide, Prof. Meghna Sutaria, for her invaluable guidance, encouragement and support throughout the course of this research. This research was carried out independently, without any external funding.

Author's Biography

Shaili Chokshi is an architect and educator with over a decade of experience teaching architecture and design students. Passionate about interdisciplinary connections, she explores the interplay between architecture and other art forms - literature, music, dance and visual arts; seeking deeper cultural and emotional meanings in spatial design.

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