Imagery in Ramesh K. Srivastava’s *Neema*.

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Ramesh K. Srivastava’s *Neema* is a novel dealing with the life of a village girl Neema who is full of vitality but unfortunately married off to a poet named Jeewan Jyoti, who is sexually impotent. The novel oscillates between the high expectations of an imaginative girl and the harsh realities of life which ultimately thwart them. In depicting these two aspects of Neema’s life as also of other characters, Srivastava makes use of plethora of images.

Imagery is a set of mental pictures or images taken from a wide variety of objects for illustrating a subject. It is a literary device which is synonymous with the figure of speech, particularly similes, metaphors and symbols. In an article on Shakespeare’s *Othello*, Ramesh K. Srivastava writes about the formation of these images: “A man, while seeing or thinking about someone or something, unconsciously finds an identical object in the storehouse of his memory. The articulation of this similarity forms an image” (1980:1). These images could be visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, tactile, organic and kinesthetic. New critics have begun to discover patterns of images as also thematic imagery.

Srivastava’s novel *Neema* opens with the depiction of a domestic scene in which children enjoy their activities. It is done through various images, some of which are related to the theatre and theatrical performances. The novelist compares the activities of Neema, Sunnoo and other children to a sort of “a primitive theatre where are played not only bear-dances and monkey ballets but peculiar concoctions of farce, low comedy, romance and acrobatic feats” (1986:9). While Neema sings a song, Gopal strikes spoons on an iron plate as musical accompaniment. Sunnoo, with a pitcher at his hip, begins to move his limbs rather clumsily in imitation of a dance. This way the children theatrically enliven the family in the afternoon.

In an interview, Srivastava had told M. L. Mehta that the imagery in *Neema* was both “an ornamental device” and “an effective functional one” (172). An important function of most images which Srivastava uses in the novel is for characterization, whether of the outer features or for the inner portrayal of deep human feelings and complex emotions which demand extended images—especially the depiction of Neema’s romantic yearnings, matrimonial dreams, and then a series of frustrations, or of Jeewan Jyoti’s fears of confronting his wife once his lies are exposed.
The activities of Jawahar and Gopal cause momentarily an atmosphere of pleasantness amid otherwise serious strain of the novel. Sunnoo is a grown up child, rather an adolescent. Being an orphan, he dresses shabbily like “a scarecrow” while his split lip becomes “a broken utensil.” His attitude of tolerance is “like a thick plastic coating [which] saved him from the corrosive acid” of humiliation because he had “something animal-like within him which when given a beating and a piece of bread remembered only the latter—and for this he was prepared to wag his tail, scratch his head with someone’s toes, and engage in a thousand frolics and fun” (14). The sense of self-respect was kept away from him “like shoes one outgrows or like a rusty nail inserted in a wall for a possible future use and then forgotten” (14).

For a village girl, Neema is somewhat over-ambitious, extrovert, friendly and fearless; she considers herself a soldier prepared to face bullets and splinters, thorns and brambles. Besides, she has, too, some animalistic and voluptuous traits. Her act of “nibbling a piece of mango pickle,” of sucking her fingers, and of clucking her tongue and lolling it “like a bitch” point towards the same direction. The voluptuous trait is revealed clearly in her search for companionship with Pushpendra, with Chaman Lal, with Rasik Lal, with Jeewan Jyoti and finally with Sunnoo. Parvati, in contrast to Neema, is a “locomotive engine,” “a hard seed in a delicate fruit” and a hurricane which sweeps “fun and frolic away, leaving only some twisted, splintered feelings behind,” while her tongue oscillates between the roles of “a leather whip and a soothing ointment” (45).

The inner portrayal of Neema’s character has been facilitated by the use of first person narrative through which the entire novel becomes a detailed chronicle of her hopes and fears, which come out through various images, and poetic expressions. Neema would have liked Pushpendra to be her husband. This idea was “like a tiny tip of a folded leaf sprouting from an earth-covered seed.” When Neema is engaged to a *dooja*—a widower, she begins to find consolation in the sisterly voices of ideal women: Draupadi, Sita and Anasuya. Considering a lamp to be an ideal merger of wick and oil, she thinks to be like them: “The wick soaks itself in the love of oil. The oil moulds itself into the shape of the container, gives company to the wick . . . . When the old wick remains, new oil is replenished and yet how harmoniously they dispel the world’s darkness. I must also be like the replenished oil, never grudging, never refusing to merge myself with the other” (62-63).

Jeewan Jyoti has been delineated basically as a very sensitive person, highly imaginative and gifted with a poetic temperament, but weak in the decision-making power. He is depicted as a dry leaf tossed about by changing winds, now going in one direction, now in the other. His mother Subhasini compares him with “a pumpkin sapling which dies when you point your finger at it.” Sexually powerless and unfit to be a husband, Jeewan Jyoti, for Jayanti Sharma “is not the harbinger of light in Neema’s life; instead he brings the darkness of suffering to his helpless wife.” Besides, “the impotent and castrated man is symbolic of a society that is impotent, unable to generate new ideas and march towards progress” (138).

When Jeewan Jyoti does reveal his malady to Neema, he does it half-heartedly, that is, only through a poem in which a military officer is rewarded for heroic achievements in war but which makes him sexually impotent. In such a situation, the hero is afraid of meeting his wife. Jeewan Jyoti is nervous, shaky and unsure of himself as he expresses his condition through several images: “The lamp that lights the world has dark at the bottom. The eyes
that see all things are blind to themselves. The mirror fails to reflect itself, the physician to diagnose his own sickness, the barber to trim his own hair” (94). On the contrary, Neema is a woman who would have liked to be sexually subdued and satisfied by the strength of a male member, as opposed to Jeewan Jyoti who has a placid calmness “like that of the Buddha.” Neema’s urge is compared to “the froth of boiling milk” while Jeewan Jyoti’s sexual power to that of “a sprinkling of a few drops of water,” obviously inadequate for quenching her thirst.

Neema’s long-cherished dreams and expectations, her growing dissatisfaction with Jeewan Jyoti and her imaginative search for a substitute have been expressed through hints, suggestions and flitting images as also through highly metaphorical language. For Atma Ram, Srivastava’s simple narrative “flows like a song or a waterfall, taking various turns and shapes, as the situation warrants—poetical, dramatic, ironical, humorous and descriptive” (73). In her conversation with Pushpendra, Neema spells out her preference for masculinity, an earthiness and ferociousness, “an occasional gale, a storm to carry me away, a rain of hail stones to lash me physically” (87). Though Neema’s character appears to be that of a sexually-starved woman looking for an animal companion, she, like a typical Indian wife, remains faithful to her husband and suffers silently for three years after her marriage. In the first week of her marriage, Neema’s expectations were “fresh, rising, curling up like wisps of fragrant smoke from an incense burner,” but gradually the same expectations “thinned as the time progressed and then melted and merged with the common air” (97). Like a starved, ill-nourished person yearning for a sumptuous meal, Neema yearns for an embodied masculinity in Pushpendra and in Rasik Lal.

Rasik Lal’s act of exhibiting his masculinity by physically lifting Neema in his arms and waving “her body like the two wings of the bird,” created in her a tingling sensation “like so many strings of a guitar touched simultaneously with violence and then allowed to vibrate.” His bulging muscles touching her soft skin bred in her sweet sensations “lying dormant, the distilled pleasure of my adolescent years like bits of raisins in milk, now floated to the surface.” She portrays herself “like a thirsty person, waiting with parched lips, anxious eyes and expectant heart for a few drops of water,” whereas she finds in Rasik Lal “the fountain” but which belongs “to someone else and hence to be touched stealthily” (102).

After knowing the reality about Jeewan Jyoti’s disease and unable to bear the repeated humiliations heaped by her mother-in-law, Neema confronts her husband, expressing her wish to reveal to Subhasini that it was not her daughter-in-law who was infertile but her son who was impotent. Horrified at the prospect of being disgraced before his mother, Jeewan Jyoti pleads with Neema repeatedly to do “anything” but not to tell this fact to his mother. This attitude of her husband gives her a great shock. The great image of Jeewan Jyoti that she had formed in her mind is replaced now by a feeling of hate in which he appears to her a low person “like a column sinking in a quagmire.” At one time, she had had his image “standing lofty, high in the sky, touching the horizon, kissing the stars. Then I saw it dwarfing, sinking so rapidly, that his fall made me giddy.” She then begins to associate him with other images of low creatures, “with earthworms stretching, shrinking, wriggling, the spineless worms” (111). He appears like a piece of raw vegetable whom she in her extreme anger would like eating “raw, like Kali, as if he were a radish, a carrot or a cucumber—kach, kach, kach” with blood spilling through her jaws (128). These images aptly portray the emotional
upheavals within her. Neeta Maini writes: “Srivastava’s writing is resilient like the skin of a porpoise and moves with the currents of the story. It is at various stages poetical, dramatic and descriptive” (1991:192).

To express his general and philosophical views through other characters, Srivastava occasionally uses highly reflective and poetic images which become so elaborate, so extended that they take the form of epic similes and metaphors. For him sweet and uninhibited laughter becomes “an unhampered fountain of pure water originating from a mountain, where the ugly, ominous shades of utilitarian or mischievous human beings have not fallen, which the dirty pollutants of deception and trickery have not contaminated, and which, like the water of the Ganga, carries with it minerals curing sick minds” (41). After the failure of her marriage with Jeewan Jyoti and of marriage plan with Rasik Lal, Neema finally does get married to Sunnoo. On this occasion, she reflects over her married life in terms of the extended metaphor of flying kites: “My life has been like a kite flying in the sky, tossed by winds hither and thither. Then its thread snapped and it went into other hands. It was flown and enjoyed by him and then abandoned to fate. Now by chance it had fallen into the hands of a third person who would not launch it into the sky, but would keep it on earth where there would be no dreams of dizzy heights and no change of ownership” (215).

India is rich in its ancient myths and legends, and it is natural that frequent references to them become a part of everyday life for most Indians. The novel Neema, too, has many references to these mythological images. The ramshackle, old school building was counting down its limited days before its fall “or waiting, like the cursed Ahilya, for some minister’s touches” (23) for its salvation. Tirath Ram took a plum-sized hemp ball which gave him “a good Shanishchar’s hunger and afterward an equally good Kumbhakaran’s sleep” (25). When Neema thinks about her involvement with so many male characters, she ponders over the question of its propriety. Then she recalls reading the book The Religious Vulgarities and seeks consolation in the fact that even male gods, such as, Shiva, Rama, Vishnu, Brahma, Krishna, Chandra, Surya, and sages Vishwamitra and Vashishta had illicit sexual relations with other women. Similarly, Sage Vyasa, too, in the Mahabharata had given two sons—Dhritarashtra and Pandu to the widows Ambika and Ambalika. Recalling the tales of male gods, Neema thinks “of doing what they did, particularly when I had much more justification than they had” (148). Of course, the images from Indian myths are scattered in the novel and form no pattern or plan but they do add a tinge to some of the characters.

Some of the images which Srivastava uses for the depiction of characters are from animals, birds, insects and other such creatures. While these images could largely be for the purpose of illustration of an aspect of a character, they may also indicate an undercurrent of the novelist’s attitude towards them as if trying to suggest that the characters had some traits of these animals. Parvati calls Jawahar, Gopal and Sunnoo as monkeys and Neema as a lizard. Gopal, falling from the cot, appears “like a slipping lizard.” Parvati’s intrusion into the merry-making activities of these children is like that of “a hungry dog pouncing at cackling chickens.” Members of Jayadev’s family after having festive food snore “like frogs screaming on a rainy day.” Sunnoo is compared to a monkey, a donkey, a cobra and “a hoof-mouthed animal.” He accepts all humiliations “like a sold cow.” His request to Jayadev Chand not to thrash him is “like that of a trapped dog.” The grotesque movement of Sunnoo’s waist appears “like the shifting haunch of a camel.” In Parvati’s presence, he
sulks away “like a tortoise into a crevice.” In his growing tolerance to beating, he becomes “a male buffalo.” Neema, with pimples all over her face, appears “an ugly she-frog.” She refuses to marry a policeman to avoid being “a sheep in a lion’s den.” After her marriage, she continues to move about freely “like a young doe, domesticated” but her agility still intact. When Subhasini calls her “barren,” the word stings her “with the force of twenty scorpions” (106). Chaman Lal’s act of croaking behind Tirath Ram is like that of “a cock proclaiming the dawn.” Whereas Pushpendra is called a “shameless, idle monkey,” Rasik Lal is “a wild animal embodied in a human case,” “a brute in a civilized dress, an animal in human form” (121).

Srivastava also uses the “objective epitome” technique to reveal the subjective conditions of Neema through animal imagery. In the following passage, he describes how a lizard chases and swallows an insect:

On top of a door from outside Rasik Lal’s room, I saw a golden lizard advancing cautiously, probably lovingly, towards an insect. With its claws open, fingers clearly visible, and its tongue lolling out, the lizard grabbed the insect and clamped its jaws on it a couple of times. The wiry legs of the insect gradually disappeared into the swollen cheeks of the lizard. It gazed at me with its popping eyes as I cracked my fingers and clucked my tongue, but munching its grub, it slipped away through an opening of a doorsill into Rasik Lal’s room (114)

Here the novelist is not only attempting to compare the lizard and the insect respectively with Rasik Lal and Neema but through the detailed account of the lizard-insect drama, he is conveying the subjective conditions of Neema. Being somewhat imaginative, she becomes suspicious of Rasik Lal’s movements and after “replaying the entire picture of the lizard’s exploits” in her mind, she does not pay much attention to his loving words and advances because her mind was on the exploits of the lizard while in reality she was visualizing Rasik Lal. The lizard becomes an agent to warn her against trusting him. When Rasik Lal had made her sit on his cot and was caressing her head, she went on pondering over the victimized insect.

Comic images serve the purpose of injecting humour in a novel in order to make it fairly interesting and readable. In an interview, Srivastava had pointed out to M. L. Mehta that since humour is a part of everyday life, it should be “represented in a work of realistic art. Besides, a good work must be readable before it conveys anything” (171). Srivastava ensures, writes Neeta Maini, that his works “are quite interesting and eminently readable” (192). Swati Srivastava thinks that an important source of Srivastava’s wit and humour “is from his comic images—largely similes and metaphors—which are often used by bringing two similar, dissimilar or odd objects together for defining or clarifying things and the result is decidedly comic” (104). Hence Srivastava makes use of comic images in general as also for the portrayal of characters, such as, Jawahar, Gopal, Sunnoo and their teacher Tirath Ram. Tirath Ram, the village school master, is described as an old engine that “shunted his torso in the room, parked it in the chair, signaled his head down on the table and switched off his headlights” (25). His body is compared to an old engine, his mouth to a cave, his saliva to a thin stream, his snoring sounds to a ship’s bottom scraping a rock and his leaning mustachios to the Tower of Pisa.
A skilful literary artist selects an apt image to evoke a multi-dimensional picture of someone or something in words what a painter does in colours. In this respect, Vijay Mohan Sethi and Satnam Kaur place Srivastava by the side of Khushwant Singh and Mulk Raj Anand: “Their skill as artists lies in their ability to create living and breathing characters along with their whims, likings and disliking, their peculiarities and eccentricities which not only enrich literature by bringing in diversities but many times become spokesmen of their creators’ ideas and viewpoints” (211). In his novel Neema as also in his short stories, Ramesh K. Srivastava has done exceedingly well in giving a life-like representation of his major and minor characters through a phantasmagoria of sparkling images which tickle the reader’s imagination while weaving a colorful tapestry of the Indian society.

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