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REVISITING IMAGERY IN KEATS: AN APPRAISAL

“Heard melodies are sweet but those unheard/ Are sweeter...” These lines are only an instance of the magical power of words that John Keats, the youngest and perhaps the greatest of the great Romantic poets, comes to evoke so spontaneously. In creating wonderful word pictures, in arousing sensuousness, there is hardly any parallel to Keats. The present paper is an endeavour to revisit and reassess the imagery—the vivid mental pictures wrought so spontaneously—in Keats’ famous Odes, thus highlight his uniqueness in the entire range of British poetry.

Keats is acknowledged as a distinguished word-painter in English poetry. He is considered as a deft artist at making vivid and minute images. His attribute of creating word-pictures with the help of words surpasses all other traits in his poetry. A reader comes across a number of pictures in his poetry in quick succession. He not only produces beautiful pictures but describes lifeless things as if they were alive and with senses to feel, think, hear and see. The reader can feel, see and think about these images through his mental eyes. In poetry, words are embedded with the power to create mental pictures which help the reader to recreate poet’s experience. Keats describes a scene or image in such a marvelous manner that it appears to the reader as if the scene is taking place before him. Another noteworthy thing here is that most of his images are sensuous in nature. In fact, Keats is remembered as a poet of sensuousness rather than a poet of contemplation. Sensuousness is that quality in poetry which affects the sense of sight, smell, hearing, taste and touch of the reader. There is a rich feast for the senses in his poetry. This kind of poetry is not devoted to any idea or a philosophical thought; rather its main

objective is to give delight to the readers. The reader can experience a number of sensations in his poetry.

Keats always loved the life of sensations rather than that of thought. Therefore, the beautiful pictures that he depicts in his poems through words, appeal to the sense of sight, smell, taste, hearing, and touch of the readers. In this aspect, he closely resembles Edmund Spenser – the famous English poet of the Elizabethan age who too had mastery in representing beautiful word-pictures. Keats' intention in writing such poetry is not to give an important idea or thought but to give delight to the senses of the reader. What he saw, heard and experienced triggered his emotion and imagination. Again, he exhibits the tendency to escape from the cruel realities of the real world to the beautiful and enchanted world of the imagination – a world that is so pleasant and soothing as compared to the material world which is full of sordidness and harshness.

Keats had a tremendous faith that poetry should be appealing to the senses. He was of the view that it should be a poet's creed to represent the beautiful and colourful word-pictures. He aimed to achieve the highest kind of sensuous beauty in his poetry rather than any spiritual didacticism. He was a great worshipper of beauty. Initially, it was outer beauty of the things which appealed to him. Then he went beyond that beauty and revealed the hidden truth behind that beauty. For instance, he first just hears the sweet song of the nightingale in "Ode to a Nightingale" but after some time, his imagination is charged and he becomes able to 'hear' the eternal voice of the nightingale. Likewise, in "Ode on a Grecian Urn", he looks at the pictures carved on the urn. After his imagination is stirred, he can hear the unheard music of the pipes carved upon that urn. Thus, the reader can experience various colours and textures in his poetry.

When Keats represents nature scenes in his odes, he is mainly interested in depicting sensuous beauty in his pictures. While reading his odes, the reader comes to experience scent, colour, sound, touch, taste through his word-pictures. It may be interesting to note that Keats was more sensuous in his earlier poetry than his later poetry. His sympathies broadened and mind matured with the passage of time and the sensuousness is replaced by an intellectual and spiritual passion in his later poetry. At the later stage of his life, he came to realize that he could attain immortality only by doing some greater tasks rather than indulge in sensuous delights. It could be said that sensuousness is penetrated by sentiment and intellectualism in his odes as odes form

part of his mature poetry. Also, it can be safely asserted that his poetry is not only a record of sense impressions but it is a spontaneous overflow of his imagination.

“Ode to a Nightingale” is a superb example of Keats’s mastery of depicting beautiful imagery in his poetry. There are numerous examples of sensuous imagery which affect the sense of sight, taste, hearing, smell etc in this beautiful ode. In lines 16, 17 and 18, the poet presents an imagery of sense of sight where the poet says: Full of the true, blushful Hippocrene/ With beaded bubbles winking at the brim,/ And purple-stained mouth” (256). Here the reader visualizes the scene of that wine and the beauty of the bead shaped bubbles which are formed on the surface of that wine when it is poured into a glass. The bead shaped bubbles are winking at the edge of the glass in which the drink is poured. The reader can experience beautiful colours as well in the above lines. He describes a wine of red colour which makes the colour of the lips purple after drinking that wine. In the same lines the reader perceives the sense of taste of the wine. In stanza 5 the beauty of the place where the poet has reached in his imagination is described marvelously. Keats says:

The grass, the thicket, and the fruit-tree wild;
White hawthorn, and the pastoral eglantine;
Fast fading violets cover’d up in leaves;
And mid-May’s eldest child,
The coming musk-rose, full of dewy wine. (ibid)

Here the reader finds rich feast for his senses of sight and smell. Keats is so competent at representing such beautiful nature scenes in his poetry. Even if it is dark, the poet can smell each flower easily. Here the reader is able to visualize the beauty of the place where the poet has reached in his imagination. He can experience the beauty and smell of these flowers described in these lines. Then in line 50 Keats says: “The murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves” (ibid). After reading this line the reader’s sense of hearing gets activated and he starts hearing the sound of flies described here. In lines 65 to 70, Keats says:

Perhaps the self-same song that found a path
Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home,
She stood in tears amid the alien corn;
The same that oft-times hath

Charm'd magic casements, opening on the foam
Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn. (257)

In the above lines, Keats describes a Biblical character Ruth who was feeling sick for home and then he talks about the fairies which were kept prisoners in charm'd magic casements which were opening to the sea. Both Ruth and fairies are represented as sad and it is Keats mastery that he depicts this scene in such a marvelous manner that the reader feels as if it is really happening to him. These lines are good example of sense of sight. In line 63 the poet says: "The voice I hear this passing night was heard..." (ibid). Here in these two lines, the reader perceives sense of hearing. He starts imagining as if he is really listening to the song of that particular nightingale. Then in line 71 the reader again perceives the sense of hearing when the poet says: "Forlorn! the very word is like a bell / To toll me back from thee to my sole self!" (ibid). This music produces pain in his heart and the reader is able to experience poet's pain. Keats says that the word 'forlorn' is like a bell which makes him remind the reality. Here the reader becomes able to hear the sound of that bell described by the poet. The sense of smell is also perceived by the reader in lines 47, 48 and 49 when the poet says: "Fast fading violets covered up in leaves / And mid May's eldest child / The coming musk-rose, full of dewy wine" (256). The reader can smell the fragrance of these flowers described by the poet.

"Ode to Psyche" is also replete with sensuous imagery. The reader can experience various mental images which are generated because of the beautiful description of the poet. The reader experiences beautiful images of sight when the poet from line 9 to 15 describes the scene very beautifully where psyche and Cupid are lying. He says:

Saw two fair creatures, couched side by side
In deepest grass, beneath the whisp'ring roof
Of leaves and trembled blossoms, where there ran
A brooklet, scarce espied:
Mid hush'd, cool-rooted flowers, fragrant-eyed,
Blue, silver-white, and budded Tyrian,
They lay calm-breathing, on the bedded grass. (260)

The reader is awestruck at such a wonderful description and he begins visualizing these all beautiful nature scenes. In lines 16 and 17 the poet says: "Their arms embraced, and their

pinions too / Their lips touch'd not, but had not bade adieu" (ibid). At such a beautiful description the reader starts visualizing the position of Psyche and Cupid. Here the reader experiences the embrace and touch of Psyche and Cupid. There are various other scenes in this ode which appeal to the sense of sight of the reader. There are a lot of examples of words and phrases which activate the sense of sight of the reader. The words and phrases such as "Phoebe's sapphire-region'd star" (line 26), "Vesper, amorous glow-worm of the sky" (line 27), "temple" (line 28), "alter heap'd with flowers" (line 29), "chain-swung cense" (line 33), "shrine", "grove", "oracle" (line 34), "pale-mouth'd prophet" (line 35), "branched thoughts" (line 52) and various other phrases and sentences appeal to the sense of sight of the reader. There are many sentences and phrases which activate the reader's hearing faculty as well. After reading the very first line of this ode "hear these tuneless numbers" the reader's hearing faculty is activated. In line 3 also where the poet uses the phrase "thy secrets should be sung", the reader becomes conscious and curious to hear these secrets. In line 44 when the poet says, "So let me be thy choir, and make a moan", the reader's sense of hearing is activated. Then in line 53 there is another example of sense of hearing, where the poet says- "Instead of pines shall murmur in the wind". In line 32 there is an example which activates reader's sense of smell where the poet uses the phrase "no incense sweet" (ibid). All these mental pictures recreate writer's experience in the mind of the reader and give delight to him as well.

There is an abundance of sensual imagery in "Ode to Autumn" as it is altogether replete with sensuous imagery which appeal to the sense of sight, taste, smell and hearing of the reader. The poet describes the season of autumn in entirely sensuous terms. In first stanza, the poet describes this season as "Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness" (268). The sight of mists and taste of the ripe fruits in autumn season is experienced by the reader after reading this first stanza. The poet describes ahead various scenes of ripen fruits and vegetables in lines 5, 6, and 7 where he says: "To bend with apples the moss'd cottage-trees / And fill all fruit with ripeness to the core / To swell the gourd, and plump the hazel shells" (ibid). This stanza is replete with the feast of sense of sight. The reader starts visualizing all these scenes. Then in the next stanza the poet describes various activities of autumn season by personifying autumn season. In line 14 and 15, the poet says: "Thee sitting careless on a granary floor / Thy hair soft-lifted by the winnowing wind" (ibid). He has personified this season as a lady sitting carelessly near the heaps

of grain and her hair is softly lifted by the winnowing wind. The reader can easily visualize autumn as a woman. Then in lines 16 and 17 the poet says: "Or on a half-reap'd furrow sound asleep / Drowsed with the fume of poppies" (ibid). Here the reader visualizes as if autumn which is personified as a lady is slept on a half reaped furrow because of the intoxicating smell of poppies. Then in the next lines autumn is represented as a gleaner crossing the brook. The poet says: "And sometimes like a gleaner thou dost keep / Steady thy laden head across a brook" (ibid). The picture of the gleaner who is carrying a heavy load on his head comes before the eyes of the reader when he reads these lines. Then in lines 20 and 21 Keats says: "Or by a cyder-press, with patient look / Thou watchest the last oozings, hours by hours" (ibid). Here autumn is being represented as a lady watching patiently the apple juice oozing out from the cyder-press. All these scenes create mental pictures in the mind of the reader. Then the third and the last stanza is replete with various sounds of the autumn season. After reading this stanza the reader is able to hear all these sounds described in this stanza such as: mourning of small gnats, bleating of full-grown lambs, singing of hedge-crickets, whistling of a redbreast and last of all twittering of the swallows.

"Ode on Melancholy" is also replete with sensuous images of sight, touch and taste as well. In line 4 and 5 the poet creates the image of touch where he says: "Nor suffer thy pale forehead to be kiss'd / By nightshade, ruby grape of Proserpine" (269). The reader experiences the sense of touch while reading these lines. Then in the second stanza in lines 11 and 12 Keats presents a rich feast of the sense of sight when he says: "But when the melancholy fit shall fall / Sudden from heaven like a weeping cloud" (ibid) The reader is able to visualize this amazing scene of falling of melancholy fit suddenly from the heaven. Then in line 15 the poet again creates a beautiful picture of morning rose when he says: "Then glut thy sorrow on a morning rose" (ibid). The beauty of morning rose is marvelous. In line 16 the poet again creates a beautiful image of salt sand-wave when he says: "Or on the rainbow of the salt sand-wave" (ibid). In line 17 Keats again presents a beautiful picture of globe shaped peony flowers when he says: "Or on the wealth of globed peonies" (ibid). Such a beautiful description of the beauties of nature is unsurpassable. In the last three lines of the second stanza Keats presents the beauty of an angry beloved in such a marvelous manner that no other poet could do. He says: "Or if thy mistress some rich anger shows / Emprison her soft hand, and let her rave / And feed deep, deep

upon her peerless eyes” (ibid). Here the sense of sight and touch as well is recognized when the poet talks about imprisoning of her hand. All these scenes are described by the poet in such a marvelous manner that the reader can visualize these without any obstacle. Next in lines 17 and 18 the poet says: “Though seen of none save him whose strenuous tongue / Can burst Joy’s grape against his palate fine” (270). Here the reader experiences the taste of the grape which is bursted by tongue. Hence it is a good example of sense of taste.

While reading “Ode on a Grecian Urn”, the reader visualizes images of sight at various places. In first stanza the poet asks the urn many questions because he is wonderstruck at seeing the pictures depicted on the urn. In lines 8, 9 and 10 the poet asks some questions regarding the pictures depicted on the urn. He says: “What men or gods are these? What maidens loth? / What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape? / What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?” (258) The reader is also in a state of wonder after reading these questions and he starts visualizing all these pictures. Then in second stanza the poet says: “Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard / Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on” (ibid). After reading these lines reader’s hearing faculty gets activated and he starts hearing this music played on the pipes depicted on the urn. In third stanza the poet says: “And, happy melodist, unwearied / For ever piping songs for ever new” (ibid). After reading these two lines, reader starts hearing this song sung by the musician depicted on the urn. Here reader’s hearing faculty gets activated. When in stanza 4 the poet describes the sacrificial scene the reader starts visualizing all this said by the poet. The poet says: “To what green altar, O mysterious priest / Lead’st thou that heifer lowing at the skies / And all her silken flanks with garlands drest?” (259) The reader visualizes all these scenes because of the wonderful description of the poet. Pertinent use of language at proper place is responsible in creating these mental pictures. Then in lines 35, 36 and 37 of stanza 4 the poet describes the little town in a marvelous manner by saying: “What little town by river or sea shore / Or mountain-built with peaceful citadel / Is emptied of this folk, this pious morn? ” (ibid) It appears to the reader as if he is really watching that sight of the empty town.

In “Ode on Indolence”, the poet presents the beautiful imagery of the three figures of love, ambition and poetry. In first stanza in lines 3, 4, and 5 the poet says: “With bowed necks, and joined hands, side-faced / And one behind the other stepp’d serene / In placid sandals, and in white robes graced.” It appears to the reader as if he is really watching these three figures in the

same gestures described above. In stanza 5 in line 43, 44 and 45 the poet says: “My soul had been a lawn besprinkled o’er / With flowers, and stirring shades, and baffled beams: / The morn was clouded and no shower fell.” Here the beauty of poet’s soul is described in an amazing way by comparing it with a lawn where a lot of flowers, shades and beams are sprinkled over it to beautify it. The reader starts visualizing this beautiful imagery of the soul of the poet and gets delight after reading this description.

After going through these word-pictures the reader’s imagination is stirred to such an extent that he forgets his own self as also his surroundings and is able to visualize all these pictures depicted by the poet through his mental eyes. While experiencing these wonderful pictures he reaches a wonderland. Not all poets are deft at presenting word-pictures in their poetry. The success of a poetic creation depends on the compatibility of the poet. The poet’s compatibility lies in the type of words and phrases used by the poet and the manner in which he arranges these words. It is magic of the selection and arrangement of words which produces required effect. This way a poet is akin to a magician who attracts the attention of his spectators by doing some tricks. Likewise employing beautiful word-pictures in his poetry the poet’s main objective behind this is to give delight to his readers. The effect of these word-pictures is to stir the imagination of the reader. It is success of the poetic creation if a reader starts seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling what the poet has experienced on his pulses. When judged on these parameters, John Keats comes out with flying colours as a painter without brush – a painter who uses words instead of a paint brush and creates marvelous images.

Works Cited

Keats, John. *Selected Poems*. New Delhi: Rupa, 2000. All textual references have been quoted from the same edition. In all such cases, the page numbers have been given within parentheses immediately following the quotations.