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THE LANGUAGE OF FLOWERS: NATURE IMAGERY IN LITERATURE

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Abstract

William Shakespeare in his play *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1605) says “fairies use flowers for their character”, associating flowers to identify the features of individual fairy. Flowers have a powerful meaning in every culture and it has always been used to express emotions on different occasions. Most flowers still carry the same meaning as they once did. But some flowers like peonies, myrtle and purple violet have lost their presence with time. One hardly sees them these days. It must be investigated if flowers lend a physiological, emotional, spiritual or cognitive vibration in the human mind, and allow people to put in abundant labour in its cultivation rather than in the more basic elements of survival. This research paper is titled “The Language of Flowers: Nature Imagery in Literature” and it focuses on scrutinizing the symbolic language of flowers in nature and human culture. It studies the social meanings of flowers and what meaning they carry when are brought home, gifted or offered at important ceremonies like marriages, death and other religious rituals. Flowers like chrysanthemums, gypsophila, azalia, forget-me-not, amaryllis, rose, lilies, carnations, cherry blossom and many more have been studied. In some cases, the texture, look and the colour of the flower represent a certain feels quintessentially fixed with it, and some flowers have stories behind its naming. The study into such believes is the intent and objective of this research.

Keywords

Flowers, Symbolism, Flora, Literature, Nature, Imagery.



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The Persian poetry flourishes with floral fancies, the Greeks are known to have blossomy similes, the English knows no poet who did not sing the glory of flowers and no culture in the East is complete without offering garland to its glory. The 18th century poet, Anna Barbauld in her famous *To a Lady, with Some Painted Flowers* compares in every single line, praise of his beloved comparing to a flower:

Flowers to the fair: To you these flowers I bring,
And strive to greet you with an earlier spring.
Flowers sweet, and gay, and delicate like you;
Emblems of innocence, and beauty too.
With flowers the Graces bind their yellow hair,
And flowery wreaths consenting lovers wear.
Flowers, the sole luxury which nature knew,
In Eden's pure and guiltless garden grew. (Barbauld)

H. G. Adams, renowned 19th century English poet, in his work on the "Moral, Language, and Poetry of Flowers" (1888), studies a large number of plants and shares her knowledge about the use of these offerings of nature. It elucidates the importance it holds for the people of different parts and various cultures. His poem "Children and Flowers", in his "Moral, Language, and Poetry of Flowers", beautifully portrays the influence of flowers and floral associations on the minds of youngsters. upon youth by floral association. These feelings are, as Adams says; "though deadened perchance in after life by too close intercourse with the human world, some little flowerets may at any time recall the memory of, and cause a longing to renew the covenant his childish heart with nature made" (qtd. in Ingram 7). Similarly, Letitia Elizabeth Landon, an English poetess and novelist of early nineteenth century, in her poem "Manmadin, The Indian Cupid, floating down the Ganges" (1822) published in the anthology *Fragments of Rhyme* describes the beauty in the following words:

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Pillowed on a lotus flower,
Bees born with the buds of spring
Each made of a signal flower,
Emblem of its varied power;
Some formed of the silver leaf
Of the almond, bright and brief,
Just a frail and lovely thing,
Some in spring's half-folded bloom,
Some in summer's full perfume;
Some with withered leaves and sere,
Falling with the falling year;
Some bright with the rainbow-dyes
Of the tulip's vanities;
Some, bound with the lily's bell,
Breathe of love, that dares not tell
Its sweet feelings; the dark leaves
Of the ocynum. (Landon)

John Ingram in his book *The Language of Flowers* (1887) explains the symbolic significance of over 100 species of flowers. His book carefully studies the importance of every single flower on mind, body and soul. Some flowers, Ingram believes, are comprehensive in their approach, like marigold: "the Marigold is emblematic of pain: place it on the head, and it signifies trouble of mind; on the heart, the pangs of love; on the bosom, the disgusts of ennui" (9).

In the 19th century, the nature was taken seriously in the sense that flowers carried their specific meanings. For example bluebells represented "kindness," peonies meant "bashfulness," rosemary meant "remembrance," tulips expressed "passion," and wallflowers stood for "faithfulness in adversity". Some plants signify negative meanings, such as aloe-vera, which meant "bitterness," pomegranate which meant "conceit," or the rhododendron which meant "danger." Flowers were also categorised on the basis of their colors. White coloured violet meant "innocence", whereas purple colour violet meant that the giver's "thoughts were occupied with love" while giving it to the recipient ("The Language").

Efrat Huss et al in their study "The Meaning of Flowers: A Cultural and Perceptual Exploration of Ornamental Flowers" (2017) published in *The Open Psychology Journal*, believes that "Since ancient times people have been attracted by flowers and have invested precious energy to cultivate them even though there is no known reward for this costly behaviour in all cultures" (140). Huss et al. conducted a study to study the dynamics between flowers and human beings that made up of evolutionary, cognitive, perceptual, emotional or socio-cultural components. It studies the shift within different cultures, the study probes. Huss says:

For more than 5000 years, people have invested energy to cultivate flowers although there is no known reward for this costly behavior. Man grows flowers even if they do not provide direct food; although flowers in spring are useful as a sign that there was enough rain in

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winter so that there will be food in summer. In spite of some basic survival uses, such as edible or medicinal flowers, most flowering plants grown in the flower industry in modern times are not used for any purpose other than visual pleasure and emotional satisfaction. A large industry of growing and selling ornamental plants has flourished. (141)

One wonders, what do people associate flowers with their physiological, emotional and cognitive abilities that cause them to invest so much energy in them rather than in the more basic elements of survival! Huss concluded a connection between human emotions and flowers. A similar study was conducted by Jeannette Haviland-Jones called “Flowers Improve Emotional Health” (2016) by The State University of New Jersey. Jones studied 147 women to research the link “between flowers and life satisfaction in a 10-month study of participants’ behavioral and emotional responses to receiving flowers”; and the “results show that flowers are a natural and healthful moderator of moods” (Haviland-Jones).

Let us discuss the importance of flowers involving the occasions of major public gathering – death and marriages. The present paper also studies which flower held (and still holds) what emotion.

Flowers Representing Death

Generally, floral arrangements at a funeral gathering represents a sight of comfort, it is also a reminder of your love. When it is used after funeral, the overall ambience it creates, surrounding the deceased as well as the bereaved, it exudes and humans final destination. Flowers Reflects the life and Legacy of the person who has passed away. They help to express our feelings when we fall short of words and unable to articulate innermost feelings. Many flowers like Azalia associated with rebirth and undying natural beauty. They give human beings the message of taking care of oneself and are generally offered to the person who has spots to be because it represents the sentiment of care and a whole full feature. This is an important message for the bereaved.

Another flower that is used to celebrate is Baby’s Breath. The scientific name of this flower is Gypsophila. This flower thrives in dry, sandy and rocky terrines and it symbolizes innocence and purity of heart like that all the baby’s. Though this flower is used to honour all age groups, but this is specifically offered at the funeral of a young baby. Carnation is one of the most famous flowers that is occasionally used up almost every cultural celebrations. But it is a less known fact that in the Victorian ages pink carnations were very specific to the funeral organizations and arrangements because it’s symbolized a lasting friendship and an undying remembrance of the departed soul. Though this flower finds its usage in many other rituals and in a general sense of gifting too.

Chrysanthemums are known to be the oldest known flowers of human civilization. They were cultivated in the 13th and 14th century in China and are famously known to be associated with celebrating death, sympathy and grief. In the western countries, they are the most commonly used flower in the funeral arrangements and are very commonly placed on graves of the departed souls. Another lesser known flower is called Forget-Me-Not. They are symbols of undying devotion and love for one’s spouse. As the name suggests, they are largely offered by the spouse of the departed soul. They represent true love and a hope of being remembered even after death. In

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history women often wore this flower in the 15th century Germany to represent faithfulness and hope of undying love. About the flower Forget-Me-Not, there is a famous German legend. Once upon a time a knight was walking with this lady along a river, in a mood tender yet romantic. To express his romantic intension, the knight picked some flowers to gift them to his lady love. Unfortunately, the weight of his weapons caused him to fall down into the water. When he was drowning he threw the bouquet of this blue flowers to his beloved and shouted "Forget Me Not". That's how this flower got its name.

Perhaps the most famous flower that has found its way into the modern times is Lily. White lilies are still the most essential flour to denote sympathy, love, care and even grief. Catholics associate this flower with Virgin Mary and Christ's resurrection. Other flowers like Gladiolus, hydrangea, Iris and orchids are also commonly found flowers that symbolize various emotions people exude. These flowers collectively represent feelings of desire for longevity, everlasting love, guiding souls to the afterlife, faith friendship and admiration, sincere and heartfelt sympathies.

Flowers Representing Marriage and Union

Marriage is one of the most important events of one's life. There are ways in which a bride or a groom like to bring a personal touch to their weddings- decoration being the foremost. There are very popular, common and universal flowers like rose and carnations that deck up the marriage hall with its visual beauty and fragrance. Daffodil represents new beginnings, iris represents faith and loyalty and perseverance is symbolised by hydrangea. Even the colour of the flower rose suggests different meanings for different colours. White rose suggests purity and virginity, red suggests romantic and dark red carnal love and pink coloured rose symbolise joy and admiration. Nancy Mattia in her article "Everything You Need to Know About What Your Wedding Flowers Mean" (2022) says "While most flowers have good vibes and positive sentiments, you'll want to steer clear of those whose meanings have a negative association—begonia symbolizes "beware" and tansy, "hostile thoughts" (Mattia).

Amaryllis is an exotic flower, also available in a coral hue and other variety of colours, is seen by the world as a splendid beauty. It has a lily-like look and stands beautiful in a marriage hall. There are many brides that hold a little bouquet of anemone. It is a delicate flower and it represents hopeful anticipation. Anthurium is a widely used flower used for table decoration. It stands for hospitality and a warm new connection. Calla Lily, carnations, cherry blossom, chrysanthemum, clematis, daffodil, dahlia, daisy, forsythia and many more are also present at wedding functions. Together, flowers symbolise various parts of a marriage hall and bride's dressing. She wears gardenia on her hair, holds a bouquet of lilac, gerbera daisy (available in various colours) or hyacinth or hydrangea, or a potpourri of them. In every culture, flowers have held a significant place in ceremonies. Without them, no ritual is complete.

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