# SYMBOL OF FEAR IN RUMAAN ALAM'S "*LEAVE THE WORLD BEHIND*"

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## Abstract

Fear in contemporary literature is often represented not through explicit violence but through ambiguity and symbolic elements. This study examines how fear is constructed symbolically in Rumaan Alam's *Leave the World Behind*. Drawing on Frederick William Dillistone's theory of symbolism, this research interprets symbols as visible signs that represent invisible psychological realities. To strengthen the analysis, Starkstein's concept of fear is applied to explain how uncertainty and the absence of information shape the characters' emotional responses. This study employs a qualitative descriptive method, using narrative descriptions, dialogues, and events from the novel as primary data. The findings reveal that darkness functions as the dominant symbol of fear, representing confusion, loss of control, and psychological instability caused by the unexplained blackout. In addition, the black color symbolizes death, danger, and the unknown, particularly through images of animal corpses and abnormal animal behavior. These symbols collectively construct an atmosphere of anxiety and uncertainty, emphasizing that fear in the novel emerges from ambiguity rather than direct confrontation with visible threats. This study contributes to literary studies by demonstrating how symbolic strategies are used to represent psychological fear in contemporary fiction.

Keywords: symbolism, fear, darkness, black color,

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## INTRODUCTION

Fear is a fundamental human emotion that influences perception, behavior, and decision-making, particularly in situations characterized by uncertainty. Starkstein (2018) explains that fear often arises when individuals are unable to clearly identify threats, causing imagination to fill the gaps left by missing information. In literary works, fear is commonly depicted through explicit dangers such as violence, monsters, or catastrophic events. However, many contemporary novels portray fear through indirect narrative strategies, including symbolism and ambiguity

In literature, studies of Symbol is a literary term that represents a particular mood or sentiment in a written work. It is the utilization of an individual, object, word, or event to represent something else, such as an idea, in literature. X.J Kennedy (2005: 251) states that symbols typically do not have a specific meaning, instead, they serve as a hint. It means that symbols in literature usually do not have one fixed or specific meaning; instead, they function as hints that suggest deeper ideas beyond their literal form.

Symbolism plays an important role in literary works as a device for conveying meanings that cannot be expressed directly. Through symbols, authors are able to represent abstract ideas, emotional states, and psychological conditions within concrete images and narrative situations. Abbar explains that symbolism functions to reveal deeper layers of meaning embedded in literary texts and allows readers to interpret meanings beyond literal representation (Abbar, 2023).

Symbols work through implication, inviting readers to interpret emotional and psychological meanings based on context rather than through direct explanation. This concept supports the present study because Rumaan Alam's *Leave the World Behind* expresses fear not through explicit descriptions but through symbolic cues such as darkness, and black color. These elements do not state their meaning directly, but subtly hint at uncertainty, anxiety, and hidden danger. In this way, the novel aligns with Kennedy's view by using symbols to guide readers toward understanding the characters' fear through suggestion rather than certainty.

*Leave the World Behind* follows Amanda and Clay, a middle-class white couple who rent a luxurious vacation home in a remote area with their two children. Their peaceful retreat is interrupted when the owners of the house, an older Black couple named G.H. and Ruth, unexpectedly arrive, claiming that a mysterious blackout has crippled the city. Cut off from the outside world with no phone service or internet, the characters are left to interpret incomplete information, leading to rising tension and fear. The novel never reveals the exact nature of the disaster, leaving both the characters and the readers in a state of ambiguity. This technique makes the novel a rich text for semiotic exploration, as meaning is constructed through indirect cues rather than explicit details.

The remainder of this article is organized as follows. Section 2 outlines the research methodology, including the research design, data sources, and analytical framework. Section 3 presents the analysis and discussion, focusing on the symbolic representations of fear in the novel. Section 4 concludes the article by summarizing the

main findings and highlighting the study's contributions to literary and psychological criticism, as well as suggestions for future research.

### *LITERATURE REVIEW*

*Symbolism has long been recognized as an important literary device for expressing abstract ideas and emotions. According to Dillistone (1986), a symbol is a concrete object or image that points beyond itself to an invisible reality, such as emotional or psychological experience. In literary texts, symbols enable writers to convey meanings that cannot be fully articulated through direct explanation. Colors, settings, and recurring images often function symbolically to reflect characters' internal states.*

*Fear, from a psychological perspective, is closely related to uncertainty and anticipation. Starkstein (2018) explains that fear does not necessarily depend on the presence of an immediate threat; rather, it intensifies when individuals lack information and control. This concept is relevant to literary analysis, particularly in narratives where ambiguity dominates the plot. When readers and characters are denied clear explanations, fear emerges as a cognitive and emotional response to the unknown.*

*Previous studies have explored fear in literary works through themes of apocalypse, isolation, and social breakdown. However, most of these studies emphasize plot and character responses rather than symbolic elements. In the context of Leave the World Behind, limited research has specifically examined how symbols such as darkness and color contribute to the*

*construction of fear. This gap highlights the need for a focused symbolic analysis that integrates literary theory and psychological perspectives.*

*Several previous studies have examined the role of symbolism in constructing fear and emotional tension in literary texts. Jihan (2023), in A Study of Symbolism in Josh Malerman's Bird Box, analyzes how fear and survival are symbolically represented through various narrative elements such as birds, blindfolds, the river, and the unseen entity. Using Frederick William Dillistone's theory of symbolism, the study demonstrates that these symbols function as emotional representations of the fear of the unknown. For example, the blindfold is interpreted as a form of protection against invisible danger, while the unseen entity symbolizes uncontrollable fear and psychological instability. The study concludes that symbolism significantly strengthens the emotional depth and thematic complexity of the novel.*

*Another relevant study is conducted by Wiranata (2020) in A Study of Symbol in Oliver Bowden's Assassin's Creed: Underworld. This research explores how symbolic elements, including objects, settings, and character traits, convey meanings beyond their literal interpretations. By employing both intrinsic and extrinsic approaches, the study highlights the role of figurative language and metaphor in expressing deeper emotions and ideas within the narrative. The findings reveal that symbolism enhances emotional intensity and reinforces thematic messages, supporting the present study's focus on symbolic strategies as a means of expressing psychological conditions in fiction.*

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In addition, Bezrukov (2024) specifically examines Rumaan Alam's Leave the World Behind by analyzing how fear is constructed through uncertainty, isolation, and psychological tension. The study argues that the novel relies heavily on ambiguity and the absence of clear information to evoke a persistent sense of dread. This perspective closely aligns with the present research, which investigates how fear is symbolically represented through darkness, silence, and disconnection rather than explicit violence or visible threats. Bezrukov's findings further emphasize the relevance of symbolic and semiotic analysis in understanding how contemporary fiction conveys fear.

## METHODS

### 2.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive research design to examine symbolic representations in Rumaan Alam's novel *Leave the World Behind*. The analysis is grounded in Frederick William Dillistone's theory of symbolism, which emphasizes the capacity of symbols to convey emotional and abstract meanings within literary texts. This theoretical framework is particularly relevant because it enables the interpretation of fear and psychological tension as expressed through symbolic elements in the narrative.

A qualitative descriptive approach is employed since the data consist of textual elements such as words, narrative descriptions, and symbolic expressions rather than numerical information. This method allows the researcher to explore meanings, interpretations, and emotional dimensions embedded in the literary text through close reading and textual analysis. By focusing on language and imagery, the study investigates how symbols function to communicate fear within the story.

Qualitative research is characterized by its interpretive nature and its reliance on theoretical frameworks to understand human experiences and meanings. As noted by Bazen et al. (2021), qualitative inquiry seeks to interpret phenomena as they are constructed within natural contexts through inductive and deductive analysis, enabling the identification of recurring patterns and themes. In line with this perspective, the present study examines symbolic patterns that reflect psychological responses to uncertainty and threat.

The primary focus of this research is to analyze how fear is symbolically represented through darkness and black color in *Leave the World Behind*. Because symbolism and psychological experiences cannot be adequately measured using quantitative methods, a qualitative approach is essential for interpreting the deeper meanings underlying characters' experiences, actions, and narrative descriptions.

### 2.2 Literary Approach

Through this literary approach, the study interprets the symbolic meanings of darkness and black color as representations of fear in the novel. These symbols are examined in relation to narrative atmosphere, characters' psychological responses, and moments of uncertainty and disruption. By focusing on textual evidence such as narration, dialogue, and imagery, the literary approach enables a deeper understanding of how

fear is constructed and communicated symbolically throughout the story.

### 2.3 Instruments

The main instrument in this research is the write himself. The writer conducts a close reading of the novel to identify and interpret key symbols associated with fear. Focus is placed on recurring symbolic words such as "dark", "black", and situations involving silence, isolation, or uncertainty. The writer takes detailed notes and observations from the text and applies Dillistone's theory to interpret how these elements function symbolically.

### 2.4 Data collection Procedure

The first stage of data collection involved a careful and repeated reading of Rumaan Alam's *Leave the World Behind*. This close reading was conducted to develop a comprehensive understanding of the novel's plot, characters, and situations in which fear and symbolic elements emerge. Through repeated engagement with the text, the researcher was able to identify patterns and narrative contexts relevant to the study.

During the reading process, particular attention was given to words, sentences, dialogues, and narrative descriptions that contain symbolic references to darkness, black color, and fear. These textual elements were examined as potential representations of psychological tension and uncertainty within the narrative. This step allowed the researcher to focus on passages that directly contributed to the symbolic construction of fear.

Once relevant passages were identified, the data were documented by recording exact quotations from the novel along with their corresponding page numbers. This procedure was essential to maintain accuracy and to ensure that all interpretations were grounded in verifiable textual evidence. Citing page numbers also enhances the transparency and credibility of the analysis.

The collected quotations were then systematically classified into thematic categories. This classification was based on the characters involved, the type of symbol presented, and the thematic focus of fear within each passage. Grouping the data in this way enabled the researcher to identify recurring symbolic patterns and relationships across different narrative contexts.

Finally, all categorized data were organized into a structured data table to support systematic analysis. This organization facilitated a clear analytical process by allowing the researcher to trace each interpretation back to its original textual source. As a result, the analysis remained coherent, transparent, and methodologically rigorous.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings of the study by examining how fear is constructed symbolically in Rumaan Alam's *Leave the World Behind*. Rather than portraying fear through explicit violence or visible threats, the novel reveals fear through symbolic elements that reflect the characters' psychological responses to uncertainty during the blackout. Symbols such as

darkness, black color, silence, and unfamiliar environmental changes represent the collapse of certainty, the breakdown of modern comfort, and the emergence of confusion and anxiety.

Drawing on Frederick William Dillistone's theory of symbolism, this study interprets symbols as visible signs that communicate invisible realities, particularly emotional and psychological disturbances. In the novel, ordinary elements such as the loss of electricity, the absence of information, and the quietness of the surrounding environment function symbolically to express fear. These elements do not merely describe setting, but operate as indicators of inner tension and loss of control experienced by the characters.

Fear in *Leave the World Behind* is closely linked to ambiguity and the lack of reliable information. Situations such as the sudden blackout, unexplained noises at night, strange animal behavior, and the collapse of communication systems force the characters to imagine danger rather than confront a visible threat. This condition reflects Starkstein's concept of fear as both emotional and cognitive, arising from the anticipation of harm when individuals are unable to clearly identify what is happening. As uncertainty grows, fear begins to shape the characters' behavior, perceptions, and interpersonal relationships.

The novel illustrates how fear manifests differently among the characters. Amanda's heightened anxiety, Clay's attempts to rationalize events, and the children's panic demonstrate how fear influences human responses under conditions of instability. Moments of tension, such as unfamiliar sounds in the night or the unexpected arrival of strangers, reveal how quickly fear emerges when normal structures of safety collapse. These reactions show that fear becomes more powerful when individuals are forced to rely on imagination rather than factual knowledge.

Darkness functions as one of the most dominant symbols of fear in the novel. The blackout symbolizes more than the absence of light; it represents the loss of clarity, control, and orientation. Darkness transforms familiar spaces into threatening environments and intensifies isolation by cutting the characters off from the outside world. As visibility disappears, imagination fills the void, allowing fear to expand. In this sense, darkness symbolizes psychological vulnerability and the breakdown of rational understanding.

In addition to physical darkness, the novel presents darkness as a form of confusion and mental disorientation. Characters struggle to make sense of events, question one another's intentions, and doubt their own judgments. The inability to interpret motives or verify truth creates a symbolic blindness, where uncertainty dominates perception. Darkness thus becomes a metaphor for the collapse of meaning and the erosion of trust within human relationships.

Black color emerges as another significant symbol of fear, closely associated with death, danger, and the unknown. Unlike darkness, which often reflects environmental conditions, black color carries a deeper psychological dimension. Images of animal corpses, blindness, and imagined acts of violence evoke blackness as a representation of unseen threats and emotional instability. Through these symbols, fear is shown as an internalized condition shaped by uncertainty and imagination.

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Overall, Leave the World Behind presents fear as a psychological experience rooted in ambiguity rather than direct confrontation. By using symbolic elements such as darkness and black color, the novel portrays fear as a response to disconnection, loss of control, and the inability to understand unfolding events.

Through Dillistone's symbolism theory and Starkstein's concept of fear, this study demonstrates that fear in the novel emerges from what cannot be seen, known, or explained, reinforcing the power of symbolism in conveying emotional depth and anxiety in contemporary fiction.

## CONCLUSION

This study has examined the symbolic representation of fear in Rumaan Alam's Leave the World Behind. The findings indicate that fear in the novel primarily arises from ambiguity and uncertainty rather than from direct physical threats. The sudden blackout, the breakdown of communication, and a series of unexplained events generate emotional instability and cognitive confusion among the characters. In line with Starkstein's concept of fear, the novel portrays fear as a complex emotional and cognitive response that emerges when individuals are unable to clearly identify the source of danger.

Moreover, the analysis demonstrates that Alam constructs fear predominantly through symbolic strategies rather than explicit narrative description. Drawing on Frederick William Dillistone's theory of symbolism, this study reveals that elements such as darkness, silence, and black color function as visible signs of invisible psychological conditions. These symbols convey meanings related to vulnerability, anxiety, and the erosion of safety. Therefore, this study confirms that symbolism plays a central role in articulating emotional tension and psychological fear in Leave the World Behind, highlighting the effectiveness of symbolic representation in contemporary literary narratives.

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