

Pantheism, Status Of Religion And The Picture Of Nature In Margarete Atwood's *Surfacing*

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Abstract

Human beings have a natural instinct to identify themselves with something powerful in order to gain some kind of spiritual relief or peace of mind and soul. Conventionally people turn to God or Christ but history witnesses that the question of existence and quest for a non-conventional religious deity for a complete harmony of heart and soul is an ever acknowledged fact. I find the same phenomena in Margaret Atwood's second world famous novel *Surfacing*. Research proves my stance that in *Surfacing* the search for a non theistic deity i.e. nature and the process of self realization (pantheism) go side by side and finally the narrator succeeds in identifying herself by having a direct association with the nature which serves as a source of spiritual guide to her.

Keywords: Religious Deity, Nature, Pantheism, Non Theistic Deity and self realization, Atwood's *Surfacing*

Introduction

Margaret Atwood a feminist, humanist, speculative critic, fiction, short and children story writer, novelist and poet was born November 18, 1939 in Ottawa, Ontario Canada. She spent much of her early childhood in Ontario close to nature and wilderness. Her father worked as an entomologist. At the age of 11 she with her family moved to Toronto. As a born and God gifted creature she started writing at the age of six but she started writing professionally at the age of sixteen. She studied at Radcliff College and Howard University. Her most famous works are *Surfacing* (1972), *Edible Woman* (1969), *The Handmaid Tale* (1985), *The Circle Game* (1996), *The Tent* (2006) and her latest work *The Door* (2007) and *The Heart Goes Last* (2015).

The novel *Surfacing* is about an anonymous narrator's journey towards her native town in search of her lost (dead) father with her three friends but actually on the pretext of this journey she reminisces the memories of past, and hark back to mind the days spent with her mother

father and brother. The main theme of the novel is the loss of personal and political identity and the suppression of woman and nature. The novel also serves as a conflicting nature of relationship between nature and technology. Religious decline, abuse of nature and woman go side by side in novel. This novel was written when Author's native land hoping for becoming an independent French speaking nation.

Pantheism is the eyeshot that the Nature and God are the same. Hence the Pantheists don't believe in a personal and anthropomorphous. Intrinsically, pantheism refers the thought that 'God' is best seen as a litigate of relating to the Cosmos. (Mander 2012). From the traditional and old to mod periods, it has been used in influential lit by many fictitious assimilators. It is delineated as the philosophy that God and the Nature are the same and so according to researcher 'God is everything, and everything is God' (Eagle 435). The idea started to diffuse more broadly in the later 18th and the early 19th centuries, in Deutschland with Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, and in Pommyland with the quixotic poet William Wordsworth, John Keats, and Percy Bysshe Shelley, and the transcendentalist philosophers in America above all Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. Throughout the 19th century it became the rife fictitious art in extolling nature. The notion of pantheism comes out in various wordses and expressions by philosophers, writers and poets of different yonkses and stages.

Literature Review

Virgil (70-19BC) sees Heaven and earth, the moon's shining globe, the watered plains, the sun and stars are all fortified by some Spirit working within them [Aeneid vi. 724-727 (30-19BC)]. Similarly, William Wordsworth (1770-1850) opines "*a motion and a spirit drive all thinking things, all objects of all thought, and rolls through all things*" (Tintern Abbey, 102-104). John Keats (1795-1821) also exerts "*God does make individual beings, Souls, Identical Souls of the sparks of his own essence*". Leconte de Lisle (1818-1894) intends the spirit has different shapes like flower, living water, bird and light into the elated splendor of this charming world, and takes on our robe, rests, primal purity and taciturnly in God [Le Bernica (1862)]. Likewise, Alfred Tennyson (1809-1892) takes 'the seas, the hills, the sun, the moon, the stars, and the plains' are all 'the Vision of God' (The Higher Pantheism). William Blake (1757-1827) in his *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1793) maintains 'God only Acts and Is, in existing beings or Men'. S. T. Coleridge (1772-1834) in his *The Eolian Harp* (1795-1817) gestates the "Soul of each' as 'God of all". Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832) opines if God didn't animate the bird with the mighty sense towards its young in feeding it, the world would not be able to exist! if the

same didn't imbue every living thing in nature. But heavenly force is circularize all over and aeonian love is alive everyplace (Conversations with Eckermann, 29 May 1831). Oscar Wilde (1854-1900) states that we are made one with what we touch and see and we are determined into the sovereign air, with our heart's blood each crimson sun is fair, with our young lives each spring impassioned tree flames into green, all life is one. Walt Whitman (1819-1892) discovers and lays eyes on God in every object (Adapted from Romantics: Nature-Worship and Pantheism by Harrison).

In the book *Elements of pantheism* there comes another characteristic of pantheism. In the same book he says "Pantheism does not coexist uncomfortable with science it fully embraces it as a part of human exploration of divine universe" (Harrison 11).

In *Not altogether human pantheism and the dark nature of renaissance* it is stated

"It (pantheism) finally serves as a nexus for the unresolved tensions in the United States between protestant and catholic notion of authority, Substantiation and identity"
(Hardack Richard 26).

The Novel *Surfacing* has been evaluated by the critics in eco-critical, eco-feminist, and post modern perspective. It has also been viewed as Atwood search for political identity, a deep peep into human mind and self realization.

Janice Fiamengo in his article "Postcolonial Guilt in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*" wrote that "Canadian bush is a pristine, The green world of escape and self revelation" The novel is also frequently reviewed as the subjugation of woman and nature by the male dominant patriarchal society. The abortion of narrator, the frequently insulted Anna by her husband clearly supports the idea of feminism. Onid Amani in his paper says "a related binary is that of male (associated with reason, civilization and culture) vs. female associated with (unreason, insanity, wilderness and nurture)." ("*Atwood's surfacing as a critic of the enlightenment of reason*"). According to eco feminist point of view Atwood talks about the Protection of environment and woman from the brutality of male dominant society as:

"Eco feminists are mostly concerned about the oppression of woman and About the oppression of earth. They believe that the domination of woman Over the years is directly connected to the environmental rape of our planet"

(Smith 21).

The novel has also been worked upon as "*The role of religion in Margaret Atwood's Surfacing*" in which Kristina Izeraerlova describes that religion plays a great role in narrator's life .The author of this article asserts

that three types of religion play their role in making narrator identical with self,

“These negative events challenge her existing perspective of life and she has to find a new meaning in her life and construct a new order to her world Natural religion consumerism and Christianity all in a different way”.

The same idea is observed by the author in his work Margaret Atwood when he declares an aspect of the novel which reflects particularly female quest and vision (Christ 316).

Methodology

This research follows the qualitative research paradigms as it keeps in touch pantheism and love in Atwood’s *Surfacing*. Paul Harrison In his book *Elements of Pantheism* gives following elements of it, first,

“Pantheism teaches love and reverence for nature. Nature was not created for us to use or abuse nature created us and we are inseparable part of it and we have a duty of care towards her”, “Pantheism has a healthy attitude toward sex and life in body” (Harrison 6).

For the analysis of various incidents occurred in the novel under discussion. It is a collection of inductive-subjective experiences based purely upon my perception.

Discussion Analyses

Pantheism in its initial stage is love for nature and feeling of relaxation in the company of nature and natural objects. In this respect we find elements of pantheism in *Surfacing*. The nature fascinates the narrator. Most of the chapters of *Surfacing* start with the elaboration of nature and natural objects such as we find images of “silver white lake” (chapter 4), “pre dawn” (chapter 5), “the sun set red, reddish purple” (chapter 10) “the sunset red, a clear tulip color” (chapter 20), “early dew, birds voices” (chapter 15). The narrator and her companions are seen to enjoy the natural phenomena. They enjoy “air breathing over them, trees moving their leaves with sound ripple and icy light of zinc moon over them” (34) we find a lot of references in the novel when they want to forget the materialistic city life by identifying themselves with the natural sceneries.

“We go outside and down to the dock and sit on the damp wood, watching the sunset, smoking a little. The clouds in the west are yellow and gray (Beautiful scene of sunset) and in the clear sky southeast of us the moon is rising. That’s great it is better than in the city” (33).

The narrator feels a sense of shelter, protection, and peace while confronting the pure and natural atmosphere. She spent her childhood in the wilderness, a place which is out of the reach of the destructive hands of “others” the narrator frankly admits, “*How have I been able to live so long in the city It isn’t safe I always feel safe here*” (67) and again she confronts us enjoying cool breeze “*There is a breeze filtering through the screened windows it is better here than in the city.*” (67). Pantheism means God is in everything and everything is God i.e. you can see God in every object of nature. Modern pantheists reject the conventional concept of god. Any thing which proves a source of satisfaction can be labeled as god. If you are a true lover of nature you can find god in every object of nature thus it becomes a source of spiritual comfort not an abstract, farfetched or supernatural being,

“*Once they thought you could see God in that way but all I see were landscapes and geometrical shapes; which would be the same thing if you believed God was a mountain or a circle*” (98).

The narrator expresses deep reverence towards nature and shows complete disgust towards its abuses. She expresses her anger on killing the fish by blasting in the lake and shows his contempt towards objectification of nature in the movie *Random Samples* made by David and Joe. Most of all she is utterly depressed on killing of the bird Heron by the Americans and dying birches. She also expresses her utmost desire to save the endangered or extinct varieties of nature. She laments, “*the trees are killed as soon as they are valuable, big trees are scare like whales*” (40).

Thus the narrator wants a complete harmony between marriage and sex and against the notion that marriage only means rearing child when she says “Child was imposed upon her” Like John Donne she also believes that marriage is not necessary if the two parties have a relationship of soul. She believes that without mutual understanding marriage has no meaning at all. She strongly resists Joes’ Idea of marriage because she is not able to develop harmony with this relationship. “*Why*” I said. *We are living together anyway. We don’t need a certificate for that*” (80)

Philosophy of pantheism deals with many of the issues and covers emotional relationship between human, nature and the universe as a distinctive approach to ethics. The narrator of *Surfacing* had a quite ethical and emotional attitude towards her parents and takes the duty of finding out father as moral one. While her other companions represents modern waste Landers and show no sense of morality towards theirs. Pantheism not only preaches a sacred reverence towards nature but it also morally purgates human beings and teaches them their duties towards relationships and towards the world or universe. When the narrators takes pains in search of her father this very things startles her companions, “*My reason for being*

here embarrassed them, they do not understand, they all disowned their parents long ago...David called his the pigs” (11).

Pantheism shows the disbelief in a set and established religion and a disbelief in the conventional God the same kind of disbelief and doubts are experienced by the narrator of *Surfacing* when she says, “*So I decided to pray too....I prayed to be made invisible, and when in the morning everyone could still see me I knew they had the wrong God” (67).* Even she thinks that nature gives a natural defensive power to her mother. Her mother seriously falls ill but the next morning we see her busy in her routine work as usual. The Question is that who provides this strength to her? It is the pure natural environment which makes people sturdy and help them recover from sickness. The narrator describes that

“Her face bloodless and shrunken, we talk in whispers, she look so different And she did not hear if we speak to her....but the next day she would be the Same as she had always been. We came to have faith in her ability to recover from anything. We cease to take her illness seriously” (29)

Atwood’s search for a spiritual deity finds its vivid and graphic description again and again in the novel “*It was body that was even scarier than God; you could also say Jesus Christ” (39)* again she counter questioned on various aspects of religion, “*They terrified me by telling me there was a dead man in the sky watching everything I did and I retaliated by explaining where babies come from” (67).*

The killing of Heron can be compared with Christ like crucifixion and the narrator declares that nature, plants and animals all are sacrificed for the welfare and service of human beings. thus nearly religious reverence is displayed here in *Surfacing* “*anything that suffers and dies instead of us is Christ”(134)* Here narrator clearly supports the idea that that any thing instead of human being is “Christ” (God) and she also admits that it is nature which gives us life and strength but “*we refuse to worship” (134).*

The narrator declares that “both of her parents were pacifists and makes us think that “*even a botanist can be classified as crucial to the national defense” (53)*

The growing dissatisfaction of the modern world with the established religion can be observed in *Surfacing* too. “*May be I shall be a catholic” I said to my brother, I was afraid to say it to my parents “Catholics are crazy” he said” (54).* When in the modern world human beings are fed up with the conventionality of the catholic an protestant religion and when they are exhausted by solving the riddles of conflicts between the two, they turn to a third source of religious comfort and spirituality i.e. pantheism.

The question whether narrator really stayed on the island in search of her father is also debatable. If it is so why is she afraid of his reappearance?

“I wanted to get them off the island to protect them from him, to protect him from them, save all of them from knowledge” (77). The statement can be justified on the ground that we learn through narrator that her father does not want to enjoy the company of human beings like the grand father of the narrator of *Buying a Fishing Rod for My Grandfather* perhaps he thinks *“Bad people scared him not tigers”* (Xingjian 80) Again if it is the reason then what about “Knowledge” From which kind of knowledge she wants to save her friends? Symbolically we can say that it is the knowledge of spiritual enlightenment which begins to reveal on her and our first feeling after gaining such kind of sudden epiphany is of fear, so the narrator initially does not want to reveal her secret or experience. Moreover pantheism is often considered as semi-atheist belief and we can say that she was afraid of preach it openly.

Conclusion

Dissatisfaction with the established religion drives people towards the long spiritual journey. Narrator’s search for the father and spiritual quest for self, God and religion go side by side in the novel in *Surfacing* she says, *“A mosquito bites on my arm I let it bite me... they need blood before they can lay eggs”* (67). The above mentioned lines shows she is well aware of the process of reproduction even in a small insect like mosquito and at last she gets reedy for motherhood and realizes that he process of being born is as natural as the process of being die and whosoever goes against by the laws of nature is ultimately punished by the nature she ultimately gets this spiritual insight only when she directly comes into contact with the nature. Her mystical attitude towards nature leads him towards self realization and this self realization comes through redemption which she gains by realizing god made or nature made rules which finally leads her to a complete harmony with the human being nature and society and in the end she gains nature base spirituality and is ready to accept marriage, motherhood and laws of nature. The final words of this discussion may directly go to the Atwood, in an interview with Graham Green she says,

“You can define yourself as innocent and get killed or you can define yourself as a killer and kill others. I think there is to be a third thing again, the ideal would be somebody who would neither be a killer nor a victim, who could achieve some kind of HARMONY with the world & nature”

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