

Pantheism, Status of Religion and the Picture of Nature in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*

Muhammad Ehsan^{[a],*}; Atta-ul-Mustafa^[b]

^[a]PhM Scholar, Department of English Language & Literature, The University of Lahore, Lahore-Pakistan.

^[b]Assistant Professor, Department of Humanities and Linguistics, University of Agriculture, Faisalabad, Pakistan.

*Corresponding author.

Received 16 June 2016; accepted 20 August 2016

Published online 26 September 2016

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 famous novel *Surfacing*. The research will express 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 the narrator finally succeeds in identifying herself by having a direct association with the nature which serves as a source of spiritual guide for her.

Key words: Religious deity; Nature; Pantheism; Non theistic deity and self realization; Atwood's *Surfacing*

Ehsan, M., & Mustafa, A. (2016). Pantheism, Status of Religion and the Picture of Nature in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 13(3), 17-21. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sll/article/view/8811>
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/8811>

INTRODUCTION

Margaret Atwood a feminist, humanist, speculative critic, fiction writer, short and children story writer, novelist and poet were born on November 18, 1939 in 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, along with her family, she moved to Toronto. 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's Tale* (1985), *The Circle Game* (1996), *The Tent* (2006), her latest works *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. On the pretext of this journey, she actually reminisces about 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 the relationship between nature and technology. Religious decline, abuse of nature and woman go side-by-side in the novel. This novel was written when the author's native land was hoping to become an independent French speaking nation.

Pantheism states that Nature and God are one and the same. Hence the pantheists don't believe in a personal and anthropomorphic God. Intrinsically, pantheism refers to the thought that "God" is best seen as a provident related to the Cosmos. (Mander 2012). From the traditional and old to moder periods, it has been used in influential literature by many fictitious assimilators. It is delineated as the philosophy that God and nature are the same and, so according to one researcher, God, "is everything, and everything is God" (Eagle, 1970 p.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 common fabricated art in extolling nature. The notion of pantheism comes out in various words and expressions by philosophers, writers and poets of different regions and stages.

1. 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 asserts "God does make individual beings, Souls, Identical Souls of the sparks of his own essence". Leconte de Lisle (1818-1894) insists that 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) suggests 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 circularized all over and aeonian love is alive everywhere (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 *Elements of pantheism* there emerges another characteristic of pantheism. In this book, Harrison says "Pantheism does not coexist uncomfortable with science it fully embraces it as a part of human exploration of divine universe" (Harrison, 1999, p.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, 2012, p.26).

The novel *Surfacing* has been evaluated by the critics in eco-critical, eco-feminist, and postmodern perspective. It has also been viewed as Atwood's search for political identity, a deep glance into the human mind and self realization.

Janice Flamengo, in his article "Postcolonial Guilt in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*", wrote "Canadian bush is a pristine, The green world of escape and self revelation period". The novel is also frequently reviewed as the subjugation of woman and nature by the male dominant patriarchal society. The abortion of the narrator, the frequently insulted Anna by her husband clearly supports the idea of feminism. Onid Amani 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, 1988, p.21).

The novel has also been looked upon as "*The role of religion in Margaret Atwood's Surfacing*" in which Kristina Izeraerlova describes that religion plays a great role in the narrator's life. The author of this article asserts three types of religion play their role in making the 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 Margaret Atwood when he declares an aspect of the novel which reflects particularly female quest and vision (Christ, p.316).

2. METHODOLOGY

This research follows the qualitative research paradigms as it keeps in touch pantheism and love in Atwood's *Surfacing*. Paul Harrison, gives following elements of pantheism in his book *Elements of Pantheism*, 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 the body. (Harrison, 1999, p.6)

For the analysis of various incidents occurred in the novel under discussion, I have used a collection of inductive-subjective experiences based purely upon my perception.

3. 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” (p.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. (p.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*” (p.67). Again she confronts us enjoying cool breeze “*There is a breeze filtering through the screened windows it is better here than in the city.*” (Ibid.). 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. Anything 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, and 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. (p.98)

The narrator expresses deep reverence towards nature and shows complete disgust towards its abuses. She expresses her anger at 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 by the 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*” (p.40).

The narrator thus wants a complete harmony between marriage and sex and against the notion that marriage only means rearing a child when she says “Child was imposed upon her period” 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 Joe's 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*” (p.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 represent modern “wastelanders” 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 narrator takes pains in the search of her father this very thing 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*” (p.11).

Pantheism shows the disbelief in established religion and 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*” (p.67). She even 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 what provides this strength to her? It is the pure natural environment which makes people sturdy and helps 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. (p.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*” (p.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*” (p.67).

The killing of Heron can be compared with Christ like crusification 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" (p.134) Here narrator clearly supports the idea that that anything 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" (p.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" (p.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" (p.54). When in the modern world human beings are fed up with the conventionality of the catholic and 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" (p.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 grandfather of the narrator of *Buying a Fishing Rod for My Grandfather* perhaps he thinks "Bad people scared him not tigers" (Gao, 2004, p.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 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 preaching it openly.

CONCLUSION

Dissatisfaction with the established religion drives people towards the long spiritual journey. The narrator's search for her 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" (p.67). The above mentioned lines show that she is well aware of the process of reproduction even in a small insect like mosquito and at last, she gets ready for motherhood and realizes that he process of being born is as natural as the process of being die and whosoever goes against 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 that finally lead her into a complete harmony with the human beings, nature and society. In the end, she gains nature-based 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.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There are a number of people without whom this form of knowledge might not have been written, and to whom I am greatly beholden. To My Parents who taught me beyond the darkness there is always light and hope. To My Father Ghulam Mustafah Rajput, to whom I harbor love and appreciation throughout all my life, for he incites me to always chase my dreams and to always set my goals, and teaches me to fulfill my dreams. To My Mother Sughara Mustafah, whom I am indebted to her persistence and constant support and caring, and for her love and continuous efforts. To My Brothers whom I always indebted to their sport at every stance. To My Grandparents who are always there in paintings encouraging me to pursue My Greatness. To My Beloved whom I am grateful to her existence in my life to make me poet as Plato said, "Every one becomes a poet at the touch of love" and being there to motivate me to make me mature. I also acknowledge to my colleague Asst. Prof. Atta ul Mustafa who helped me while writing this article.

REFERENCES

- Atwood, M. (1979). *Surfacing*. New York: Virago press.
- Atwood, M. (1969). *Edible woman*. McClelland and Stewart. Media Type Print.
- Atwood, M. (1998). *The circle game*. The City Planners, House of Anansi Press Anansi.
- Atwood, M. (2007). *The door*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- Atwood, M. (1985). *The Handmaid's tale*. McClelland and Stewart. Media Type Print.
- Atwood, M. (2015). *The heart goes last*. Gollancz: McClelland & Stewart.
- Atwood, M. (2006). *The tent*. Anchor.
- Blake, W. (1994). *The marriage of heaven and hell*. Dover Publications.

- Eagle, D. (1970). *The Oxford concise dictionary of English literature* (p.435). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Fiamengo, J. (1999). Postcolonial guilt in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*. *American Review of Canadian Studies*, 29(1), 141-163.
- Gao, X. J. (2004). *Buying a fishing rod for my grandfather* (p.80). New York: Harper Perennial.
- Hardack, R. (2012). *Not altogether human, pantheism and the dark nature of American renaissance*. United States of America: University of Massachusetts Press.
- Harrison, P. (1999). *Elements of pantheism*. United States: Llumina Press.
- Mander, W. (2012). Pantheism. In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), *Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy*. Stanford: Stanford University.
- Smith, T. W. (2011). *Religious change around the world*. GSS Cross-National Report No.30. Chicago.
- Smith. (1988). *Teilhardism and the new religion* (p.21). Rockford, Illinois: Tan Books and Publishers.
- Virgil. (1983). *Aeneid*. Random House.