

THE SPIRITUAL SIDE OF NATURE IN SELECTED POEMS BY MARY OLIVER

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Abstract:-

Nature has always played an important role not only in providing life but also in shaping literature and impacting man's frame of mind. Different poets of different cultures have employed nature and tackled many natural aspects for different purposes, thus it results in various presentations and ideas. Today, issues of nature and environment become a matter of concern for many poets, individuals, societies and organizations. It has become a global issue that needs to be taken care of. Many poets, like the Romantic poet William Wordsworth who is well known as being a pantheist, believe in the close connection between God and nature, and this connection would lead eventually to spirituality, or the Over Soul just like in Transcendentalism.

Keywords: Mary Oliver, Nature, Spirituality, American poet, Swan, One or Two things, The Turtle, Some Questions You Might Ask, the soul, the spiritual side.

المخلص:-

لطالما لعبت الطبيعة دوراً مهماً، ليس فقط كأساس للحياة، بل دورها في صقل الأدب وتأثيرها الجلي على الفكر العقلي. لقد قام عدة شعراء بتوظيف عنصر الطبيعة في شعرهم وذلك لأهداف متعددة، وبذلك تعددت اسباب توظيف الطبيعة وما تمثله لكل فرد حسب أفكاره وبيئته. في وقتنا الحالي استحوذت الطبيعة على اهتمام الأفراد والمجتمعات بالإضافة إلى المنظمات العالمية وليس فقط الشعراء وذلك لأهميتها وأهمية القضايا المتعلقة بالطبيعة وتأثيرها الجوهري على الحياة بشكل عام. تصور الشاعرة الأمريكية ماري أوليفر الطبيعة كنسق للتجديد الروحي متمثلة بالقصائد الشعرية لأوليفر والتي تمثل خير مثال على الارتباط الوثيق بالطبيعة كونها عامل أساسي ومهم للتجديد الروحي، وذلك من خلال تقصي العلاقة المتبادلة بين عالم الطبيعة والعالم الروحي ومدى ارتباط أوليفر الوطيد بالعالم الطبيعي وكيفية توظيفها صور الطبيعة المتعددة لغرض التأمل الروحي والديني.

الكلمات المفتاحية: ماري أوليفر، الطبيعة، الروحانية، شاعرة أمريكية، البجعة، شيء أو شيئين، السلحفاة، بعض الاسئلة التي قد تطرحها، الروح، الجانب الروحي.

The variety of the employment of nature for different purposes, with special focus on nature as leading to spiritual regeneration in the poetry of the American Mary Oliver (1935-2019), and how she employs nature to reach a state of spiritual regeneration. In addition, the poetic transition from engaging the natural world to engaging more personal realms which is evident in her volume *New and Selected Poems* (1992). A close investigation of Oliver's poetry reveals the relationship between religious belief and nature by analyzing her poems from different collections like: *Twelve Moons*, *American Primitive*, *House of the Light*, *Winter Hours*, *Blue Iris*, *Thirst*, *Wild Geese*, *Swan*, *Why Do I Wake Early*. And poems like: *Some Questions You Might Ask*, *Sleeping in the Forest*, *Aunt Leaf*, *At Blackwater Pond*, *Work*, *Flare*, *The Fish*, *The Hong Tree*, *Kingfisher*, *The Turtle*, *The Swan*, *Five A.M in the Pinewood*, *Bone Poem* and other poems.

Mary Oliver is one of the American poets, who has been fascinated by the natural world since she was a child and this world occupies a good space in her poetry if it is not the whole of it. She was born in Ohio 1935, and she was fond of poetry even in such a young age. Oliver reveals the reason behind choosing poetry by saying that "I decided very early that I wanted to write," and "It was the most exciting thing, the most powerful thing, the most wonderful thing to do with my life." She believes that play and work are combined in writing and this is one of the reasons she chooses to write (Oliver, 861). She believes that she is blessed with two things: "the natural world, and the world of writing: literature" (*Blue Pastures*,64) as means to overcome her difficult circumstances. Therefore, she focused on developing her writing skills by writing children plays for the Unicorn Theatre in London, instead of finishing school and getting a degree. *No Voyage and Other Poems* was published in 1963 to be her first published volume which is definitely deals with nature (Ulliyatt,2). Oliver's work is appreciated by winning many awards which are, the Poetry Society of America, the Shelley Memorial Award, the Ohioana Book Award, a Guggenheim Fellowship, the Pulitzer Prize for her *American Primitive* in 1984, the PEN New England Award, a National Book Award for her work *New and Selected Poems* in 1992, and the Lannan Literary Award for Poetry, not to mention The Art Institute of Boston, Dartmouth College

and Tufts University from which she got honorary doctorates (Ulliyatt,2). Despite all these honors, Oliver believes that she has not done it right because “this is the marvelous thing about language. It can always be done better” (Altman,1).

Oliver’s bond with nature goes back ever since she was a child, as she used to wander in the woods. This early connection with nature as she was a child has a huge imprint in her life as a human and as a poet, because those early experience are very important, as she clarifies:

for whatever reasons, I felt those first important connections, those first experiences being made with the natural world rather than with the social world. I think the first way you do it, the first way you take meaning from the physicality of the world, from your environment, probably never leaves you. (Oliver,3)

Oliver’s poetry is not just lines, but it is a transformation in which she observes the natural world; because after all “to pay attention, this is our endless and proper work” (Winter Pine,8), by inviting her readers to experience what she experiences and then have their own perspective by enjoying the simplest details of the natural world “for the wisdom embedded in beauty and for the mysteries hovering just beneath the glittering surfaces” (Ratiner,2). She believes that in order to be spiritual, one should not confuse his mind with material things of life (Ratiner,6).

Kati Shi would summarize what Mary Oliver has that makes her a remarkable poet:

I don’t know how, but she seems to respond perfectly to how I’m feeling — no matter where I am — through her writing about the natural world. With Oliver’s poetry, understanding comes from the gut. She taught me how to find beauty in the mundane, to find love in simplicity. Every poem reads like a revelation. It seems this quality should be inherent in all poetry, but it holds particularly true for Oliver’s. By writing so strictly and unabashedly about her personal relationship with nature without trying to be universal, Oliver manages to do just that. She connects her readers through a shared intimacy, freely given yet precious all the same (np).

Throughout her poetry, Mary Oliver has discussed many issues especially the spiritual ones with nature as the constant background.

She provides her readers with a new perspective of things that normally are ignored. In this chapter there will be an analysis of various poems from different collections to recognize the differences and similarities between them from the lens of ecocriticism. Showing multiple relationships like the poet as a human and nature, the poet as a woman and how she applies the surrounded environment to enforce humanity and feminism. The result of this interdisciplinary relationship that achieves spiritual guidance at the end. By trying to prove what Oliver's work is famous for, as it is "articulating a sophisticated mystical spirituality through her embrace of the natural world" (Keegan,149).

The first poem to be analyzed is Swan:

**Did you see it, drifting, all night on the black river?
Did you see it in the morning, rising into the silvery air,
an armful of white blossoms,
a perfect commotion of silk and linen as it leaned
into the bondage of its wings: a snowbank, a bank of lilies,
biting the air with its black beak?
Did you hear it, fluting and whistling
a shrill dark music, like the rain pelting the trees,
like a waterfall
knifing down the black ledges?
And did you see it, finally, just under the clouds –
a white cross streaming across the sky, its feet
like black leaves, its wings like the stretching light
of the river?
And did you feel it, in your heart, how it pertained to
everything?
And have you too finally figured out what beauty is for?
And have you changed your life? (The Swan,1-17).**

In this poem Oliver asks many questions to motivate readers to think. She chooses a swan which is a part of the surrounding environment to make a difference in one's life by meditating about this beautiful creature flying in the sky. Other natural elements are not left out; they have their share in the poem to complete the natural picture that she wants to convey in readers' minds. This scene of the swan is taken for granted by people, they never stop to think about it or even to notice it, so Oliver provides an opportunity to stop and take a look around, to contemplate, to observe and to appreciate, thus life would be different and something inside would change. As Oliver focuses on the natural images to convey her message, she emphasizes the sensual senses: "Did you see", and "Did you hear", which somehow would lead to an emotional level by saying "Did you feel". What Oliver is trying to suggest is a whole new way of thinking through the image of the swan which is linked to the mindfulness mentioned in the previous chapter. She is counting on reader's minds to reach the emotional experience that would transform their lives. Oliver asserts the emotional part as she comments in one of her interviews: "The question asked today is: What does it mean? Nobody says, 'How does it feel?'" (Oliver,5).

Another spiritual thought is presented in One or Two Things in which she discusses the concept of loving life without getting over attached to it. She is as always in the lap of nature listening carefully to the voices around her like the voice of the dog, the crow and the frog, and she uses the present time "now" to compel the reader to be engaged in the same experience she is having. In those stanzas she seems unpleasant as there is an iron hoof bothering her and that is "forever". She talks about "forever" the future that worries every human by using present elements that occur "now". The spiritual relief from the "forever burden" mentioned in the poem, comes again from nature as the butterfly introduces a valuable lesson by saying "don't love your life too much,". The key to solve our problem is to live the present time and to let go of worrying about forever, which means to love life without getting too attached to it, only then one can find comfort after all that struggling. She emphasizes the idea of the weightless butterfly that carries no burden at all and it doesn't have to struggle in this world. This weightless creature teaches the speaker a spiritual lesson after all.

The Turtle from New and Selected Poems Volume one conveys the picture of a turtle which comes to the beach to prepare her nest. The poem is clear from any human figures talking about a natural creature only which is the turtle. What the turtle does is out of its instinct, not out of thinking: “she doesn’t consider/ what she was born to do.”, concerning this matter Bryson comments: “that this preconscious, instinctual ‘old blind wish’ is actually what connects the turtle to her world and her home, and that ‘she can’t see / herself apart from the rest of the world”. Adding that: “this is the natural ‘perfection’ to which Oliver repeatedly points: the turtle’s unconsidered, blind awareness that she is ‘part of the pond she lives in’. Where, in the human world, ‘the connections have broken’, here the turtle is tied to her world ‘by an unbreakable string’ (80).

Oliver tries to show the connection between nature and humans because everything is tied by unbreakable string. She brings again the concept of the family, as the turtle considers “the tall trees are her children” and she is attached to everything in the natural world.

Hagen states: “Nature [...] is unintentional. Nature doesn’t try to do anything, produce anything, or accomplish anything. Nevertheless, nature does produce a great deal” (75).

The turtle exemplifies many spiritual qualities: patience, fortitude, determination, as she comes every spring to prepare her nest for her eggs. It is not something she thinks to do to fulfill what she was born to accomplish, on the contrary it is something instinctive. Sometimes we need to act instinctively and trust our feelings not our minds. Once humans are connected to the natural world, they would be able to let go of considerations and act freely and naturally, thus they would be attached to the natural world by “unbreakable string”. The turtle gives humans a lesson about how to be interconnected with nature and to appreciate intuitions over reasonable minds. Eventually one would be able to recognize his place in nature and in addition, to understand mutual relationships between humans themselves: “Learning that lesson leads to a better understanding of one’s relation to other people as well. Over and over again, Oliver’s poems stress the connection and interdependence that people observe in nature offer humans ways to experience their lives fully (Riley,274).

Oliver tackles a highly spiritual subject which is, the soul. She wonders about the nature of the soul has in Some Questions You

Might Ask from House of the Light. Oliver invites readers to ask these questions and to think about the shape of the soul and what it is. Then she argues: "Why should I have it, and not the anteater?", coming to a conclusion that every element and creature of nature has a soul whether, trees, stones, camels, grass, snakes, birds and etc. These questions are spiritual practices one can obtain to arrange his priorities, because "the spiritual life is a gradual growth in faithfulness, not a heroic achievement (Kappelle, 52). Once again the natural world represented by the moose, the swan, the black bear, the camel, roses, leaves and trees would help her understand the spiritual questions she has.

In the first lines, Oliver wonders about of the soul, whether it is "solid like the iron" or fragile like the wing. Another questions concerning the owner of the soul, and the shape of it whether it is like "an iceberg" or like "the eye of a hummingbird". She makes the questions even deeper when she asks about the anatomy of the soul if it contains "one lung" like "the snake and the scallop". Why "the camel", "the maple trees", "the little stones", roses and "the grass" do not have a soul?

Oliver intention behind all these questions is to reveal that human's soul and other's soul are the same. This deep analysis resulted in finding herself and renewing her strong relationship with nature because it is holy and spiritual as the soul. Once she gives "the grass" a soul meaning that she is elevating it along with herself due to the strong bond between her and the natural world. Thus humans are empowered in general, and through the lens of ecofeminism, regarding the grass as a humble part of the natural world, women are also empowered by this nature/ female relationship.

Have you ever imagined life without nature? How would it be, without trees, rivers, birds and roses? Nature is an inseparable part of our lives which provides us with shelter, the oxygen, food, work, supplies, medicine and inspiration. It represents the main component without which life would be impossible. We have a valuable treasure that we do not really appreciate as it has been said one does not appreciate what he has, until he loses it. Pollution, climate change, global warming, Ozone layer depletion, and even the recent virus Covid-19, all these threats draw humans' attention towards nature, because the balance of the world would be in danger.

Mary Oliver is a poet who has a strong relationship with nature, as nature forms the essential background of her most poetry. Oliver has a unique skill to compel readers to see, feel, touch, understand and imagine the exact natural scene she observes with the simplest and clearest words and images. She always leaves a space for her readers in her poems so they can add their own experiences and make a general poem their own and this is where the beauty of Oliver's talent lies. In addition, she emphasizes the emotional side of the reader as well as the intellectual one, by shifting between the two to create the required balance. Oliver's relationship with her readers is mutual, it is more like a give-take relationship where the reader has an important role to play not less important than the writer, resulting in creating a critical thinker. In order to achieve this goal, she depends on different effective strategies like, the private rhetorical strategy, Anaphora, and the specific detailed description of the scene.

Oliver's early life has a huge impact upon her attachment to nature, since she grew up in a rustic place, surrounded by nature, and whatever took place in one's childhood, it remains within forever as she says, thus it has shaped her personality. She is connected to nature emotionally and mentally, helping her understand the world and herself as well. Furthermore, nature makes her appreciate the beauty around her, and it represents a source of knowledge and power for her. In other words, nature is her cornerstone on which she depends on to go on with her life in all aspects.

Oliver's poems have touched many lives, as every poem has a beating heart. According to Oliver, the quest of finding answers would be fulfilled only by paying attention and by taking a closer look around. As time goes by. Life becomes harder and humans feel restless with all these rapid changes and their consequences. The spiritual side of every human needs be fed with spirituality. Therefore, the accessible and the easy way to fulfil this side is through nature, as every part of it holds a spiritual message to guide humans through hardships and moments of doubt. Knowing that God is there in each aspect of the natural world to comfort and provide humans with strength.

Oliver empowers her poetry through nature in which she finds strength, wisdom, beauty, faith, and above all, God. She has been attached to the wilderness through her poems for 30 years, gaining

power, visions, and peace. Her style is simple and conventional by which readers transcend from the human world to the natural one.

It is like behind every great poet, there is nature. Nature which stands with humans all the way, and it is not exclusive for certain people, on the contrary, it is available for each one of them. It is the essential part which cannot be cut off from our life, our civilization, our literature and our spirituality, as the natural world represents the source of all these, and even more, the source of inspiration and regeneration. Her work will live on to lighten the darkness and to be a spiritual guidance through the mystery of life.

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