

The Journey of Self-Realization through Bioregionalism in the Poetry of Mary Oliver

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Abstract

The study explores self-realisation as a spiritual and religious concept in Mary Oliver's poetry (1935-2019). Oliver is an American poetess, well recognized and award-winning. Her poetry is characterized by the elements of nature, spirituality, and transcendence. The present study is an attempt to uncover the mystical and spiritual veils of Oliver's poetry that lead to self-realization. Self-realization is a spiritual, mystic and religious concept that is present as a tradition in nearly all the religions in the world. The study traces several stations and stages of it, such as the awakening of the self, purification of the self, and the self's illumination. Moreover, the study also explores the higher stations of the sufi journey that are love and Oneness of Being. She is not only a mystic but also a nature poet. Hence, the study makes use of nature as a backdrop in her poetry and its role in the journey to self-realization. The theoretical framework for this study is taken from the philosophy and mysticism of Ibn-e-Arabi (1165 – 1240). He is one of the most renowned sufis. He is also an Andalusian Muslim scholar, mystic, poet, and philosopher, extremely influential within Islamic thought. The study interprets Oliver's selected poetry in the light of Ibn-e-Arabi's spiritual ideas; self-realization, love, and the Oneness of Being.

Keyword: Self, self-realization, mysticism, Sufism, love, Oneness of Being, nature.

1. INTRODUCTION

The study is an Islamic theologically critical study of Oliver's poetry. Her poetry has been interpreted in the light of Christian theology and mysticism; there is also extensive Buddhist mystical research on her poetry but her poetry has not so far been interpreted in the light of the Islamic tradition of mysticism with the background of Nature. Therefore, in this study, her nature poetry is viewed as experienced by her in the natural world. It is the way of the mystics to start their journey of self-realization from Nature. Arberry (1991) argues that it has been a common practice

among the *sufis* and mystics that they abandon the material world and its affairs at regular intervals and take refuge in the arms of nature. They ponder, question and search for higher Truth. Chittick (1998) asserts that the mystical poets are seekers that are in search of reality. Their search begins with the existential crisis. Ibn-e-Arabi (2007) puts that this existential crisis leads to the path of self and ultimately they reach self-actualization covering an arduous journey. In the Islamic tradition of mysticism, the *sufis* set on the holy journey from the starting point of existential crisis. They want to know, 'who am I?' this is also the ways of

the prophets. According to the scriptures; the Old Testaments, the New Testament and the Qur'an, the prophets frequently abandoned the world only to find Reality.

Self in spiritual sciences such as mysticism and Sufism is the inner consciousness. Besides, in Sufism which is the Islamic tradition of mysticism self stands for ego, the inner reality of man, the true being of man. In other words, man is a combination of material/earthly/physical body and soul. Besides, Ibn-e-Arabi, in *The Meccan Revelations* (2002), explains that the inner self of man is also attached to the powers of evil and good. The evil that attracts man is the base-self (*nafs*) of man and the inner self that contends the base-self is the noble self of man. However, these are the two forces that pull the true self of man that is in fact the breath of God inside the children of Adam. God created Adam out of clay and blew His breath in him. Hence, the divine breath present in man is the self of man or the true being of man. Chittick (1998) asserts that it is the quest of the *sufi* to reach and live with that true being. Sufis also call this true being (self) as soul because it is light. Light is also one of the attributes of God. Thus, the soul of man is the divine part of man and self-realization is to unveil the earthly and base curtains to reach it, know it and consequently to know God, the Creator. Nevertheless, without knowing one's self one cannot know the Real. This study explores the journey of Oliver as a *sufi* poet and traces different stages and stations of self-realization in her poetry. Lastly, the study focuses on the *sufi* ideas of love and Oneness of Being in her poetry and interprets her poetry in

their light. Self-realization has several dimensions but for this study, the religious dimension of self-realization is explored. The theoretical framework is philosophical in nature and subject. Therefore, the key ideas of 'Oneness of Being', 'Love', and their role in the poet's journey of self-realization is explored as given and propounded by one of the greatest and most controversial Muslim mystics and philosophers Ibn-e-Arabi. Hence, Ibn-e-Arabi's doctrines are taken for insight to interpret the poetry of Oliver in the scope of the Islamic tradition of mysticism. For the said objective the theme of Nature is also exploited as a backdrop to reinforce the theoretical framework to interpret the poetry of Oliver and to answer the research questions. Hence, Nature coupled with the mysticism of Ibn-e-Arabi is used as a setting and backdrop in the selected poetry of Oliver.

In Ohio the USA, Oliver was born in the year 1935. She was a good player of truant at school that familiarized her with her life-long passions, poetry and nature. Burton-Christie (1996), highlights that she turned to poetry at a very young age and was a great lover of Walt Whitman. As a high school delinquent student, she had developed a clinging interest in poetry. Christensen (2002) observes that throughout her later life, she regarded her school days as a blessing of God. Her experiences in the natural world side by side with poetry awakened and polished the poet inside her. In the streams and rivers of her place she dwelled and roamed through the pastures.

In the tradition of American nature poetry, Graham (1994) argues, Oliver is a

“prolific and well-recognized poet of the twentieth and the twenty-first century” (352). In her long career, she earned many titles and awards. The title poem from her first collection *No Voyage* won the first prize. It was awarded by the Poetry Society of America in 1963. From her long list of prizes, there are Shelley Memorial Award (1970), The Ohio Book Award (1973), Guggenheim Fellowship Award (1980), Pulitzer Prize (1984), LL Winsip Award (1990), National Book Award (1992), Lannan Literary Award (1998), among all of these awards her greater achievements are the Pulitzer Prize that she won for her wonderful collection of poetry, *American Primitive* (1983) and The National Book award for her book *Selected Poems Volume One* (1992). Apart from this, she was also awarded many honorary doctorates from several universities such as Tufts University, The Art Institute of Boston, and Dartmouth College.

Leaving aside other collections of her poetry, there is *Devotions* (2017). It is her latest collection of poems based on her life-long choice. She carefully selects poems of her choice that are favourite to her and compiles them in this final collection. It has poems that come nearly from all her favourite books. However, one point common among all collections is her treatment of Nature in the manner of a *sufi*, that is, she makes use of Nature as a storehouse of God’s beauty in different manifestations. Her quest and realization of the Real is the hallmark of her poems. Hence, her *sufi* quest is examined in light of Ibn-e-Arabi’s philosophical doctrines and concepts. Muhammad Ali Ibn-e-Arabi was

born in the year 1165 in Muslim Spain. He was an Andalusian, a western Muslim. He is regarded in the Muslim as well as in the other creeds as one of the greatest mystics, spiritual teachers, philosophers, sages and poets.

1.2 Rationale

The birth of literary theory and criticism is from hermeneutics that is the science to interpret religious texts, particularly of the Bible. The word of God has always been a centre of attention and open for interpretation. The contemporary literary theory is dominated by philosophy and cultural studies. Hence, the theological paradigm is on the back foot. However, the present study is directed towards mysticism and spirituality hence the best possible literary theory has to be hermeneutic in some sense. That is why, for the interpretation of Oliver’s poetry the religious cum philosophical ideas of a great western Muslim thinker and philosopher, Ibn-e-Arabi are taken for this study. His philosophy is derived from the word of God, The Qur’an. Mary’s poetry has been analyzed and interpreted in several hermeneutic and theological studies such as Christian mysticism and Buddhism but the perspective of the Islamic tradition of mysticism has not yet been attempted. This study aims to interpret her poetry in light of the Islamic tradition of mysticism.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study is qualitative, descriptive, and analytical as it explores the concepts of mysticism in the poetry of Oliver. For the said purpose the Islamic tradition is selected to interpret the data. Moreover, from the

Islamic tradition of mysticism, the concepts of Ibn-e-Arabi such as *Wahdat-ul-Wujud* (The Oneness of Being), Life, Death, Love, Self, Self-realization are used to take insight for the interpretation of Oliver's poetry. Thus the philosophy of Ibn-e-Arabi is used side by side with Bioregionalism to interpret Oliver's poetry. In terms of approach, the study employs a qualitative approach. This approach refers to findings that are non-statistical and this method is usually useful for exploring the full nature of a phenomenon. To explore the journey of the poet towards self and realization of the self, the selected poems from her last and personal collection *Devotions* (2017) are taken for interpretation in the light of Ibn-e-Arabi's mysticism.

2.1 Theoretical framework

This study is a literary, analytical, and critical interpretation of Mary Oliver's Poetry in the light of Ibn-e-Arabi's mysticism. For the said purpose the insight is taken from the mysticism of Ibn-e-Arabi and the ideas related to self-realization, spirituality, transcendence, love of God and love of humanity. The doctrine of *Wahdat-ul-Wajud* (the Oneness of Being) as given by Ibn-e-Arabi is the central point of investigation in this study. This philosophical doctrine of Ibn-e-Arabi is the pivot of the theoretical framework for this study. As far as, the approach of investigation is concerned this study is qualitative. The theoretical framework is derived from the doctrines and ideas of Ibn-e-Arabi. *Futuhat-al-Makkiyya* (The Meccan Revelations, 2002) and *Fusus-ul-Hikma* (The Bezels of Wisdom, 2015) by Ibn-e-Arabi

have detailed accounts of his philosophy, metaphysics, and mysticism.

3. DISCUSSIONS

Mary Oliver is a comprehensive and indefatigable guide to the phenomenal world. The natural world with all its outwardness and inwardness is the subject matter of her poetry. She brings into light the lesser-known aspects of nature that even a sensitive eye may miss. Such a visionary poet as she is the mystic muse of the woods, mountains and springs. The quiet occurrences of nature are the focus of her poetry where one can find egrets, hummingbirds, lean owls, motionless ponds and flying insects. She is among the finest poets of America and not less visionary than Emerson.

She is not a drawing-room artist that lets loose the horse of her imagination to compose poetry rather her poetry is a direct reflection of her first-hand spiritual contact with nature. The process of self-realization takes place in stages. The first stage of course is her thirst to know the truth, knowing the truth requires wandering and searching for the truth that she searches in the natural world, third she finds nature as a medium of truth with which she comes into contact and corresponds. Moreover, she meditates, corresponds, prays and realizes that there is the Oneness of God all around. In her poem *When I am Among the Trees* she says about the natural objects in connection to the search for truth:

When I am among the trees,

especially the willows and the honey locust,

equally the beech, the oaks and the pines,

they give off such hints of gladness.

I would almost say that they save me, and daily. (Oliver, 2017, p. 120)

The hints of gladness she finds among the natural objects. A seeker is glad only when he finds tides and sights of the beloved. The beloved is manifest in the natural world rather the reflection of the beloved is in every leaf and branch of the tree. The manifestations of the attributes of the beloved are in every grain of sand. Thus, willows and honey locusts, oaks and pines are the hints of the Real. They are just hints of the Real and not the Real in themselves which is the negation of pantheism. In other words, according to the scheme of expression reality does not absorb into the Real or the Real remains detached from external reality in the natural world. For her it is a daily occurrence, as a seeker/lover she remains immersed in reality. Hence, self-realization through the natural world is a daily occurrence on the part of the speaker of her poems that is certainly the seeker or the lover of God.

The entire poem is a gradual and systematic explanation of self-awakening, self-purification and self-illumination that consequently results in self-realization that also runs through all her verse. As a true *sufi* she finds the signs of the Beloved, meditates on them, prays to God for

enlightenment, sets her heart on the fire of love for God and His creatures, comes to know them, and thus recognizes herself. It is possible only when one has the *Seeing Eye* or the other eye or the eye of the heart (soul). She further says in the same poem:

I am so distant from the hope of myself,

in which I have goodness, and discernment,

and never hurry through the world

but walk slowly, and bow often.
(120)

What hope of one's self the persona is talking about? It is the base-self or *nafs* of the seeker that is the biggest hurdle on the path of self-realization. It tempts the seeker to eat, drink and be merry and not to think about the final outcome. Therefore, for a seeker, the toughest of all ordeals is to subdue the *nafs* that shuts the eye of the heart. The biggest enemy of one's soul is one's *nafs*. It is the prime cause of coverings and veils. As long as the base-self remains powerful the seeker is weaker, confused and under material covers that block the divine light. She says that she is so distanced from her 'Self', not only from herself but from the hope of finding herself. Her base self in this ways is history at the time of speaking. It means that she does not have any idea of her base self or her worldly self that is actually one's worldly personality or being.

The self-awakening of Oliver takes place in the natural world with a sense of the

local. It is abrupt in many cases and instances recorded in her poetry. Moreover, there are moments of epiphany that also are indications of self-awakening. The revelation of the self comes from different sources as in the case of Oliver it is chiefly Nature. The sign of self-awakening is that life in all modes and forms starts appearing before the seeker. God opens the heart of the seeker but this opening is not complete from point A to point Z rather it is a gradual one. The wine of realization is given according to the size of the cup of the seeker. The bigger is the container the bigger the amount of liquor of realization is. In her poem *Do Stones Feel* she undergoes the dilemma of realization:

Do stones feel?

Do they love their life?

Or does their patience drown out everything else? (Oliver, 2017, p. 35)

The opening lines of the poem are quite abrupt and direct. A rational scientific mind would mind the question that the speaker of the poem puts right in the first line of it. Small children may think about the life of the nonhuman natural objects in their dream but not the people since it is imperceptible. However, for a seeker who is on the threshold of self-awakening, it seems quite normal. Literally the speaker of the lines is talking about a natural object commonly found on the ground. The feelings and life of the object are under discussion. Logically an object that feels has life and that does not feel does not have life. The third question and reasoning are that it

is the patience of the stones that makes stones imperceptible of feelings and consequently of life. Figuratively the speaker is concerned with the human heart a place that is the dwelling of God. Self-awakening demands feelings and life of the heart of the seeker. If God is there and still it is not feeling what it is meant to feel then it is lifeless. The other case is that self-realization achieved thoroughly to the level of self-annihilation results in silence. The lover is as dead silent as a stone.

The potential of the seeker is far beyond the capacity of a rational mind. Human wisdom is limited to the way human beings have limitations without self-realization. However, when it comes to the *Self* (ego), the inner being, or the soul, or reality of man it is far superior, and divine in origin. Self-awakening is followed by self-purification that is followed by self-illumination that is a higher stage of self-realization of a seeker of God. Gratefully she thanks the Almighty. The cleaner, the purer heart yearns for the sight of the Beloved. The persona in her poems as a seeker is raptured with the countless signs of the Beloved that are offered in the bioregional spaces in the form of Nature and natural objects. She tells in her poem *Gift* about the purifying experiences in the natural world:

Be still, my soul, and steadfast.

Earth and heaven both are still watching

though time is draining from the clock
and your walk, that was confident and quick,

has become slow. (Oliver, 2017, p. 26)

Self-purification is an ongoing process unless the heart is fully cleaned and there is no danger of becoming polluted again. A seeker that attains this station of self-realization comes under the watch of the Beloved. The Beloved protects the lover/seeker from harmful temptations and corruptions. However, the humble gratitude and the intentions of the lover are much more valuable for him. Nevertheless, the *nafs* cannot be left at large because the more the lover purifies his heart the weaker the *nafs* gets.

Illumination of the Self has many dimensions. It is the ecstasy that results from rapturous mystical experiences in Nature; it can be a result of finding the Real on a more permanent basis in all His manifestations. The seeker in every breath and every move remembers the Most Beautiful, the Most Compassionate, and the most Merciful forgetful of his own being. However, Oliver as a *sufi* mystic is not so out mouthed and radical in her expression of self-realization at the stage of illumination of the self rather she expresses it in a quite sophisticated manner that is both subtle and refined. However, the natural world in the phenomenal reality accompanies the seeker. On the ground, he walks on the grass, plains, from springs, mountains and woods to find signs of the Real. Oliver further says in a poem *I don't Want to be Demurred or Respectable*:

How the little stones, even if you can't
hear them,
are singing.

How the river can't wait to get to the
ocean and
the sky, it's been there before.
What traveling is that! (Oliver, 2017,
p. 29)

The small things of life are never neglected by the seekers of God. They see what a normal eye cannot see. The vision of the seeker is far sharper than the vision of an unaware person. Bioregional realities are the signs of the multiplicity of God that are actually the reflection of the attributes of God. God manifests his attributes through his creatures. Little stones are representative of the small objects of nature that collectively formulate Nature that is the part of the macrocosm or the external reality. Her poetry vividly explains this. All the natural objects are entities (*wujuds*) that have a connection with the *Wujud* (The Real). They praise the Almighty and remain in the presence of the Real. Unlike this, man has free will, base-self, and the soul.

Self-realization is an ascending journey and on its different stations, there are different *hals* (conditions of the seeker). All of these have love in their core. Hence, the path of love of the Real and the reality in Oliver's poetry moves through the bioregional spaces and makes ascensions to the court of Love. Nevertheless, love is an integral and essential part of her poetry. Moreover, love in all aspects and multiplicity leads to the Oneness of the Beloved. In her poem *Wild, Wild* she integrates the divine with human and nonhuman:

This is what love is:

the dry rose bush the gardener, in his
pruning, missed

suddenly bursts into bloom.

A madness of delight; an obsession.

A holy gift, certainly.

But often, alas, improbable. (Oliver,
2017, p. 148)

For Oliver nature is a neighbour and fellow being, she delineates the wondrous work of God in the creation of it. This attitude of the seeker in her poetry intertwines love of nature and God. The persona in her poetry in almost all of her poetry seems to be in love with nature. Nature is loved by God, therefore, loving nature in a way is synonymous with loving God. Love for God and His creation in the heart of the seeker is many things for the seeker; it is a dry rose that can suddenly burst into bloom, an ecstasy, a sacred gift, nevertheless, it is unpredictable and improbable.

The most gracious station of a seeker is to come to the Oneness of God where he asserts that God is one and only in His essence as well as in attributes. It is a station where the difference between existence and nonexistence takes firm roots in the system of beliefs of the seeker. All the multiplicity comes to stop at unity and all realities come to acknowledge one single reality. Oliver adds fresh doctrines to *Wahdat-ul-Wujud* and accomplishes mystical and metaphysical realizations. Further, Oliver, in a dramatic manner, through pathetic fallacy, in her poem *At the River Clarion* traces the

path of self-realization that is accompanied by love and strives to (*Wahdat-ul-Wujud*) Oneness of Being.

Said the river: I am part of holiness.

And I too, said the stone. And I too,
whispered

the moss beneath the water. (Oliver,
2017, p. 89)

The concept of Oneness of Being is projected by Oliver as per the lines of Ibn-e-Arabi with the spirit of a *sufi*. Her immense love for nature and humanity is evidence enough for her underlying philosophy of Oneness of Being. On the one side she puts the cosmos in the form of nature, culture, human and nonhuman and on the other side she puts the spirit of the cosmos, that is, God. Her poetry on the surface level is the reflection of the cosmos and on the deeper level it is the projection of the Real. Moreover, there is a journey like the progression of the speaker/seeker/lover/persona in almost all her poems that ends on a philosophical note of Oneness of Being. Thus she keeps God in the innermost centre of her poetry. As in the poem quoted above, the objects of nature claim that they are part of holiness. This holiness is the spirit of God that is in turn is the source of all existence in the universe.

This is the *sufi* path of Oliver that has self-realization of the utmost level which affirms the unity of Being. Man is annihilated from himself by being joined to Allah, the Real; the seeker's restricted life is overpowered by Allah's absolute existence, so the seeker loses awareness of himself and the development. There, lives only Oneness

of Being. Her testimony of the Oneness of God is much more vibrant in the poem *At the River Clarion*:

Yes, it could be that I am a tiny piece
of God, and
each of you too, or at least
of his intention and his hope. (Oliver,
2017, p. 90)

Oliver reiterates the affirmation of Oneness of Being again and again in *At the River Clarion* which is on earth a beautiful place. The poem has monologues, dialogues which make it quite dramatic. However, located in Ohio watershed region this bioregional space is the ultimate source of inspiration that leads to the expression of the Oneness of Being. The entire cosmos as an illusory reality is forgotten here in the words of Oliver and the reality of Real, the Omnipresent is affirmed. Just His one Breath, which lasts an infinite number of years, is the beginning and end of the universe.

4. CONCLUSION

The poetry of Oliver is the poetry of a *sufi*. She has expressed in many of her interviews that she sees God on earth and her quest for Him is inspired by the *sufis* such as Rumi and others. Thus, her poetry involves Sufism to the maximum level. This study is based on the Islamic tradition of mysticism that is Sufism and it interprets the poems of Oliver in the light of it. In this regard, the journey of the self is explored. The persona embarks on the journey of self-realization that begins from doubt and questioning. It leads to the awakening of the self. Self is the true being of man. It has many dimensions but on the

spiritual level as described by Ibn-e-Arabi it is the real being of man that is hidden from man. As a true *sufi* she achieves the Oneness of Being in her journey of self-realization. It makes her a true *sufi* mystic poet.

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