

MYSTIC ELEMENTS IN TIM WINTON'S FICTION

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Abstract

The present research paper throws light on mystic quality of Tim Winton's Writing. The mystic elements viz. love and beauty, nature and religious mystic elements are explored in the present paper. The author describes his mysterious world of love and beauty with kaleidoscopic point of view. His spiritual views of uncertain denomination match a very concrete, straightforward vision of constructive existential responsibility. The boundaries between natural and spiritual worlds are always blurred for them. Nature plays an active and vital role as it represents the spiritual and mystical forces in Winton's novels. The sea, the river, the landscape, the deep dark forest and the blue sky are few drops from Winton's nature's downpour. His religious mysticism is presented through his people and, particularly, the landscape of Western Australia.

Keywords: Mysticism, mystic elements, nature, religion, love and beauty,

The origin and existence of man is mysterious. From the early period of civilization, the man is investigating about himself, about his existence and the origin of the universe. For thousands of years, probably longer, something very strange and mystical has happened to certain people on this earth. It happens in all cultures, everywhere and this is reflected through literature of the time. Indian literature is immensely rich in mysticism. Ancient Greek and Roman literature also had glorious tradition of mysticism. Nearly every tradition of literature throughout the world is immensely influenced by mysticism. The Australian literature is no exception for this. Strictly speaking, the reflection of mysticism in Australian poetry is dominant. The present research article deals with the select novels of Australian novelist, Tim Winton. Mysticism is one of the prominent themes that is prevailed in every tradition of literature throughout the world.

Timothy John Winton is Australia's one of the most esteemed and multi-award winning novelists. National Trust of Australia labeled him as a Living Treasure. Winton's characters are trapped between the familiar and unfamiliar surroundings. They are displaced from their familiar surroundings and have to face challenges and crisis aroused out of unfamiliarity. His work is marked with a deep interest in spirituality and mysticism. Spirituality is presented in the form of environment in his novels. The blue sky and ocean play important role as living characters and provide the context for mysticism in his work. According to Winton, environment has its own spiritual aura. It has its own spiritual life. For Winton, the sky and the ocean are not merely literary devices, but they are prudent with spiritual life. They create spiritual environment in which Winton's other characters grow and develop. The following elements are found as mystic elements in his novels.

1. Love and Beauty as mystic elements
2. Nature as mystic element
3. Religious mystic elements

Winton's Christianity is reflected through his handling of themes like mysticism and spirituality. Winton believes in religion, and goes to church regularly but his religious views are different from traditional views of Christianity. His religious mystic elements are reflected through his work which contains somewhat strange mysticism that is different from traditional sense of religious mysticism. His religious imagery is highly subjective. In fact, it is his finest contribution to the Australian literature. The mysticism in literature is mainly related to the principle of contemplation as it investigates and analyses the transcendental reality and the relation between man and the cosmos i.e. the supreme power. It is a temper rather than a doctrine. It can't be called as system of philosophy but an atmosphere. Many mystics experienced the Truth from its various angels and put forward their respective views.

In English literature, in the case of Romantics, for example, Wordsworth experienced the Reality through 'Nature', but for William Blake, 'Nature was hindrance' and 'imagination' is the only reality for him. This diversity underlines unity in the experience of the ultimate. This unity in diversity irrespective of mystical thoughts, the mystics, age or country is best expressed in the words of Lord Krishna. He says that the true knowledge lies in the knowing the almighty. Seeing changeless life in all the lives is the essence of knowledge. Seeing inseparable in the separate forms is the ultimate reality. Experiencing this is the end of all knowledge.

In *Mysticism and English Literature*, Caroline Spurgeon talks about mysticism in literature, especially about English literature. She uses four headings viz., Love and Beauty Mysticism, Nature Mysticism, Philosophical Mysticism, Religious Mysticism and Devotional Mysticism etc. There are various paths of vision which mystics follow for the mystical experiences. In literature, in particular, these pathways can be classified as Love, Beauty, Nature, Wisdom, Philosophy and Devotion. Any one of them or more can be followed by mystics. For instance, in case of English literature, Shelley and Browning are called as love

mystics. Their pathway is of love. For them, the love is a solution for the mystery of life. To Shelley, an English Romantic poet, it is glorious intuition which reaches him through his imagination. He experiences the life in the form of wild revolt, mad indignation and passionate protest. In case Browning, it is knowledge which brings him the realization of life, more precisely, the realization of the Self. To him, it is the clear proof of the great destiny of the race.

Love and Beauty as Mystic Elements

Tim Winton's fiction deals with variety of themes as love, death, passion, spirituality, creation, destruction and mysticism etc. The love depicted through Winton's novels has various threads, but what binds them together is their mystic quality. Love is often linked with the feeling of incompleteness. The separation and disruption are the some of the steps which are innate in order to achieve the true and ultimate love. There is always searching for fulfillment and completeness that is ultimately an indication of Quest for a Holy Grail. Winton's characters dream of art of love that is core part of their art of living. Their intensity of love comprises both the desire to merge with and respect for separation.

Winton's oldest memories are deeply rooted in the physical and spiritual worlds. His idea of golden age, which is celebrated repeatedly in his novels dates back to pre-suburbia era. It is symbol of unconditional love and innocence of beauty of nature. It shows connectedness of human being to this cosmos and religious affiliation of humans to the supernatural power. Through childhood memories, the author expresses the quality of love and emergence of religiosity within him. His childhood innocence was shattered when his father had a near-death road accident but when a man of a local church came out for help of his family which led him to re-belief in cosmic powers.

Winton's themes illustrate his characters quest for self-identity and search for the unknown. All characters belong to essential physical and geographical space. Their quest for unity and search for meaning of life is uniquely presented by the author in his novels. Some characters cross the borders of individual works of fiction in order to reappear in another story. They intervene in the life of the new characters and stories. The protagonist of *An Open Swimmer* is Jerra Nilsam who reappears in some stories of in *Minimum of Two* and *Scission* and the same case in Queenie cookson in *Shallows*. Such characters return in some way and illustrate an unknown aspect of their personal life and their inner development through love they receive.

Winton describes his own childhood as innocence. His childhood memories were pleasant as sheltered in a secure and loving family circle. His childhood was far away from harsher realities of the world. He could hear shameful deeds done by his father when he was on duty as a policeman. He was also recipient of memories of evil, and tragedies. As the beach wasn't too far from his house, it started his innate intimacy with sea and Western Australian environment. He found heavenly beauty and love in the environment and in his

childhood memories. His innocence was shattered by his father's fatal accident but in a short span of time, it was recovered when a local churchman offered his family a helping hand. This good deed inspired the author's belief in love, beauty and innocence in life. It establishes his firm faith in the superpower and the ultimate. His father received a new professional posting, the author experienced intellectual and spiritual phenomenon that is reflected through his early writing. Love and beauty mystic elements play major role in his writing. His emotional attachment to the environment, especially Western Australian environment, is seen through his early writings.

Winton writes about the working class people who generally are often alienated and powerless. You can write with authority only when you know. The people are exploited and oppressed by the rich and industrialists. It is a saying that a camel can go through the eye of the needle, but for a rich man, it is very difficult to enter into the kingdom of the God. Winton's novels are indeed inhabited by ordinary west Australians of all ages, striving to overcome confusion and to find harmony with people and their natural environment around them. These people are really innocent, lovely and somehow poor in spirit. There is a higher sense of inner peace and beauty that all partake in some idiosyncratic way. Yvonne Milieu says in *Singing the Great Creator: The Spiritual in Tim Winton's Novels* –

Tim Winton's characters, in working through a variety of human events, are searching for significant certainties. For those who are open to the power of love and in touch with the closeness of the 'other world' there come moments of grace which regenerate and strengthen them. Such moments pivot on innocent acceptance.

[...] In his novels, ordinary people celebrate the tough realities of life whilst recognizing other imminences; for some of them it is a world where God's presence is sensed instinctively as the divine within the ordinary. (p.31, 37)

Thus, Winton's characters fall from grace, crawl and stumble on the way to experience and atonement. They put themselves at the risk in the often unforgiving natural environment. Once, they learn to live with their fallible nature and the awareness of morality, they find solace on the plane of existence. Winton's writing reconciles pragmatic views of experience and mystical intimation of love and beauty and cathartic renewal. His spiritual views of uncertain denomination match a very concrete, straightforward vision of constructive existential responsibility.

In the Winter Dark seems to be a terrible story of parents and their love. There are many images which evoke terror and underlined mysterious beauty beneath it –

My palm was hot with blood. In my hand was the severed head of Ida's silky terrier, still with nerves enough to flex its jaws foully in my grip. That was how I found it, the head left in the collar, the chain snapped, blood pushing out hot. (15)

The images and scenes are indicative of disintegration of bodies. The concept of love and motherhood is diverged in a mystical way in this novel. It exposes the other side of life-givers when they turn dangerous. The femininity in the fiction is closely associated with death and maternity.

In the Winter Dark presents separation between men and women on love basis – inside and outside, the nature and civilization, the city and country. On the basis of love, Ida is old, farmer and responsible woman while Ronnie is young, city-bred, and irresponsible; but what binds them together is love. Their intense and deep love separates them from male protagonists. Women are unconsciously blamed for misfortunes, though it is done by mysterious cats. Here, mysticism is closely connected to women; their mystic beauty and their love for others.

Nature as Mystic Element

The spiritual and mystical forces in Winton's work are often represented in the form of Nature. It is often represented in the images of sky and the ocean. For Winton, the environment has a spiritual life its own. It has its own force. The author describes the interplay between the human being and the nature forces in his works. He presents a picturesque scene of nature within or beyond human experience.

Nature plays an active and vital role in Winton's novels. The water- Sea and river; the landscape, the deep dark forest, and the blue sky are few drops from Winton's nature's downpour. The water, rain, darkness, light, thunder, clouds, and blue sky are the innate parts of existence. Winton experiences supernatural and spiritual powers as all immanent and pervasive in nature. The versatile and multi-colored beauty of Nature in the form of metaphysical symbolism is striking feature of Winton's narratives. He has firm belief that there is regular commerce between men and the nature.

The supreme power, that is, God and Nature, according to ancient Vedantic terminology, is *Purusha* and *Prakriti* respectively. These are the two aspects of the absolute Reality that leads into the realization of God. Nature is the outer manifestation of supreme power. For Winton, there is kinship among God, man and nature. The nature is a source of affection universal warmth and spiritual love. Like man, the nature is one of the manifestations of God. It is ultimate source of joy. It imparts love for mankind. The river, the sea, sun, moon, stars, sky are all the symbols of love for human being.

The natural landscape plays significant role in Winton's fiction. He has keen eyes for nature. Nature becomes inspirational source for his writing. The natural landscapes not only act as background or context of the text, but play the role of protagonist in its own way. He personifies nature in order to bring forth human concerns and to put forth its own existence and power. The land has its own spiritual and powerful experience. There is an important link between Winton's characters and their physical scenario. Winton himself admits that it is natural landscape that fuels his fiction –

I use a lot of it; I always start a novel thinking about the landscape first. A place I've seen and that struck me. Then I move on to the story and characters. (103)

Australian literature has special feature which foregrounds the landscape and places it at the centre around which other characters revolve. Nature doesn't have only physical existence but it has human imagination. It acts like mirror in which other characters reflect themselves into it. His fiction transcends physical, cultural and social boundaries and has become universal. His novel *The Riders* (1994) provides rural context for its characters and develops relationship between them which is intrinsic and symbolic. The land has become central part of human existence.

Water plays very important role in Winton's fiction. In *Dirt Music*, before a car crash, Luther Fox remembers Bird's question which is fundamentally existential. He asks how water lets him through. Bird can see God and feel the supernatural powers. Anyone who experiences the presence of god, it would likely be her. Bird experiences the divine feeling. It is an indication of how water element works in Winton's novels. Water is a home of Winton's characters as they sail on it, live on its edge, dive in it and so on. Water in the form of sea and the river are the two vital aspects of Winton's life experience. Winton has experienced 'water' since his childhood and it has become passion and life force for him. The presence of water is everywhere in his writing. For Winton, water is not only omnipresent mystical force but a medium for inner transformation. Water lets you through and letting through is kind of meditative experience. One, who experiences this, escapes to different world. In other words, the world is experienced in a new way which leads to discovery of holiness of the earth. Indeed, it is an opening to a world of silence communication.

Religious Mystic Elements

His work is full of strong religious elements though he is not dogmatic and evangelical about religion. He is religious with spiritual vision that is ignited by love, innocence and beauty. To create 'millions of spiritual creatures' and a prophetic echo within the text, he re-uses the language of Bible. Tim Winton's fiction suggests life is a prime interest and advocates for 'inner voice'. About Winton's spiritual view of the world, critic Anne Day observes in *Encounter*, discussion on *Cloudstreet* as -

Being surprised by grace is something that happens to his characters and to his readers. He seems to be asking us to consider this aspect of life. He is a writer who is trying to keep alive the rumour of God and the rumour that there is hope and meaning to be found (1).

The writer is aloof from conventional religious tradition and has given space for his personal quest for spiritual highest values embedded in his work. He goes for searching supreme power which controls it. He is not restricted from shams of Christianity. He is free from institutional beliefs and self-satisfied church goers. *That Eye, the Sky* is fine example

which portrays accurately apocalyptic irrational chanting of a preacher. On the other hand, it describes the simplicity of faith inherent in Ort and his mother. The two opposite scenes indicate reality of religion and the truth that prevails in human existence. Regarding institutional belief and belief in God, the writer himself declares that he is affiliated to any kind of religious institution. He can't commit himself to any religious affiliation. He is non-conformist by nature. He is deeply connected to his Creator. He believes that he has connection with the supreme power and not with any kind of religious institution, belief or tradition.

Winton's novels presented 'beyond the mere physical' religiosity and spirituality. Composition of *Cloudstreet* is derived from author's own experiences of life, his vision for life, his belief of religion, his attachment to family, and nature. It has been developed from mystical point view. His writing is a fine blending of natural and supernatural elements. He has firm belief in universe that is everything is connected and integrated in this universe. The representation of characters in *Cloudstreet* is brought into supernatural arena. Their spiritual journey brought them meaning of life in this meaninglessness and full of chaos world.

In *Cloudstreet*, Winton employs various symbols to trace his mysticism such as the house, the aboriginal Blackfella and the water. The characters of the novel are heavily affected by such symbols. The Lamb family is totally affected by them. They got their apprehension of God. They found their personal realization of the self and got peace of mind. It is a story of which revolves around two families. The setting is at the *Cloudstreet*. The narrative is nothing but central characters' journey of self discovery. The Pickle family and Lamb families unite in their odds. The Lambs faced tragedy as their family member 'Fish' Lamb nearly drowns, but after the incident his existence is crippled. His existence is described as Fish in water. He dwells half in this world and half in another world. He easily moves from this material world into metaphysical world. In another incident, Pickles faced tragedy in which father Sam lost his fingers in a fishing accident. These tragedies cause to grow religious faith of both families as they are in search of meaning in their lives.

Winton's some characters are always in search of themselves. They have a quest for inner exploration. There should be interconnection between inner world and the external world of their actions. They are uneasy with their spiritual search for the ultimate. Some characters from *Cloudstreet* and *Dirt Music* are on the path of spirituality. They adopted certain kind of religious assumption and their search journey is based on their inner assumption of religion. These characters eventually accept the grace offered by God.

There are many characters in *Cloudstreet* which are busy in their day-to-day life activities and pursue their personal revelations till they got accepted. Lester Lamb is one of the characters who dismissed God when Fish Lamb didn't return. His wife Oriel also engages herself into work at shop. Both the characters are such type personality who rejected God

unwillingly. The reason behind their rejection is tragic circumstances. Lester is caught between faith in and dejection of God. He inwardly observes that one stream of his thinking allows him to go along the belief whereas other enforced him not to do so. Though he denounces God, he is able to fulfill the claims of the Eternal.

In *That Eye, the Sky*, Ort Flack believes that the sky is a big eye. It is mysterious and a source of spirituality for him. His spirituality is evoked in the novel through various symbols such as cleansing fire or image of water or the fiery furnace in the book of Daniel and Lazarus' resurrection. Ort's insight to feel the divine is expressed through Biblical symbolism. Winton skillfully produces the messages from Old Testament and the Gospels to explore his mysticism. Ort has primitive religious quality and childlike faith the Jesus himself practiced. He establishes personal relationship with the God.

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