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Paganism, Anthropocentrism, Ecocriticism and Neo-Paganism: A Study of Maugham's "The Lotus Eater"

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Abstract:

Paganism was nature-centred. So Christianity found it a theoretical necessity to maintain an anthropocentric position. Throughout the tribal and agrarian civilization man retained pagan beliefs and lived in close contact with nature. But from onwards the technological civilization man-nature relationship became problematic and politicized. With the tool of technology man changed and re-shaped nature for his own comfort. This exploitation resulted in environmental crisis. When poets like Wordsworth, Shelley and Keats advocated for a return to nature, they were patronizingly labeled as 'romantics'- a group of mad lovers/worshippers of nature. Thus British imperialism denied them of their political identity. Darwin's theory of 'gradual evolution' was a challenge to the unique human moral status propagated by anthropocentric philosophy. Ecocriticism believes anthropocentrism to be the root cause behind environmental exploitation and its consequent environmental disaster. The capitalists, led by personal loss and gain, are constantly polluting nature by the name of industrialization and civilization. In such a context, neo-paganism emerges out. In Somerset Maugham's short story 'The Lotus Eater' Thomas Wilson, who rejected London for Capri, industry for nature, represents this move from anthropocentrism to neo-paganism.

Keywords: *Nature, Paganism, Anthropocentrism, Ecocriticism, Neo-paganism, Environmental Exploitation, Mediocrity Philosophy, Imperialism, Industrialization, Mechanization, Urbanatural roosting.*

"Then God said, 'Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on earth.'"

Man-made God has expressed the anthropocentric philosophy which offers man a higher moral status and allows him to exploit the rest of the nature. Thus man-nature politics begins and its result is the present environmental crisis. Nature is regarded as a big resource to be exploited by the human being.

I intend to argue that W. Somerset Maugham's short story, "The Lotus Eater", reveals an anti-anthropocentric attitude. He criticizes the environmental exploitation and calls us back to the primitive, pagan naturalness.

In the very beginning I want to make it clear that I find the four terms –paganism, anthropocentrism, ecocriticism and neo-paganism-related to each other. Paul de Man had written that one's denial of any theory justifies his/her theoretical position. So it was necessary for Christianity to maintain an anthropocentric stand point because paganism was nature-centred. Interestingly, this is one form of anxiety of influence. Ecocriticism, on the other hand, tries to provide solutions for the contemporary environmental situation. Its result is neo-paganism which advocates a return to nature.

The term 'anthropocentrism' derives from the Greek 'anthropos' ('human being') and 'kentron' ('center'). This is a philosophical belief in the supremacy of human beings over the non-human – both animate and inanimate. Anthropocentrism is "considering humans and their existence as the most important and central act in the universe". The environmentalists believe it to be the root cause behind environmental degradation and its consequence environmental disaster. In the tribal and agrarian civilization, man lived in response to nature. They had retained some faith in the old gods who represent various forces of nature. Interestingly, with the advent of technological civilization, these gods had lost their prominence and they are termed as 'pagan' or 'heathen'. They are replaced by new God who propagated anthropocentric views. The man-nature relationship gets problematic and politicized. When the poets like Wordsworth, Shelley and Keats call for a return to nature, they are patronizingly and loosely labeled as Romantics. They are treated as mad lovers or worshippers of nature by British imperialism. Thus, they are denied of their political identity. Their search for pagan simplicity and criticism of anthropocentric exploitation of nature are treated as escapism. Their escapism is a challenge to the atrocity of the Reign of Terror and ugliness of British imperialism. So imperialism never gives it proper recognition. It was politically suppressed. The arrival of Darwin shook the very base of anthropocentric religion when he denied man any special status in his "Origin of Species" and said that man, like other animals, was created through a gradual evolution. The resultant angst, in turn, results into a conflict between old and new social order. Tennyson's victorianisation of Greek myths is originally a study in the clash of

opposites: paganism, represented by Ulysses and Victorian technological civilization, impersonated by Telemachus. Maugham's "The Lotus Eater" should be interpreted in this context. Here, Thomas Wilson is the primitive man, a pagan who re-discovers nature and denounces the machine-civilization for it because nature is the final measure to judge human action.

The opposite of anthropocentrism is Mediocrity philosophy which takes the position that the evolution of the solar system, the earth, the humans – nothing is exceptional. Everything is quite normal, ordinary and mediocre. The presentation of Thomas Wilson in this story confirms to this notion. Wilson has left his job, gave up his cozy life of London, torn off all the knots only to live amidst nature. This decision seems extra-ordinary to the matter-of-fact, worldly narrator of the story. But Wilson's appearance is extremely ordinary: "I saw an undistinguished back and a small head of grey hair short and rather thin."

Wilson is all the more ordinary in comparison to the beauty of nature:

"The Piazza at Capri, with its clock tower over the footpath that leads up from the harbour, with the church up a flight of steps, is a perfect setting for an opera by Donizetti, and you felt that the voluble crowd might at any moment break out into a rattling chorus. It was charming and unreal."

The beauty of nature seems unreal because in the capitalist system the pursuit of material advantage becomes the REALITY for us. The decision of Wilson is not at all extra-ordinary. The basic principle of environmental philosophy is that the human being and the natural world should be given equal importance. Wilson has just given nature the distinction, which is denied to it by the so called civilized world. Environmental philosophy, emerging as a potent social movement in the 1970s, finds a gradual alienation of mankind from nature throughout history. "The unhappiness of man", wrote Baron d'Holbach, "is due to his ignorance of nature." The capitalists, led by personal loss and gain, are constantly polluting nature by the name of industrialization and civilization. The extinction of all life on earth is impending due to man's exploitation of nature, which is fueled by the anthropocentric beliefs. Engels has warned, "...let us not, however, flatter ourselves overmuch on account of our human conquest over nature. For each such conquest takes its revenge on us." Wilson's is a journey back to nature, to the instinct, to the root. When Wilson was in London, he had lost his wife and child, but nature brings happiness as well as meaning to his life.

In "Sea and Sardinia", D.H. Lawrence writes:

"Where ever one is, the place has its conscious genus. Man has lived there and brought forth his consciousness there and in some way that place to consciousness, given it its expression, and, really, finished it."

Lawrence might have developed the ancient concept of 'Genius Loci' which is a kind of deity that governs a particular place and influences, moulds and re-shapes the human characters. Now the exotic Italian setting in Maugham's story is not merely a decorative background. It is a living entity, probably a goddess, that decides the fate of a city-bred man of banking sector. Wilson had gone to Capri like any other tourist. He wanted to enjoy his holidays. However, tourism is a form of exploiting nature. Man invades the tourist spots and changes it for his own comfort. But in the process man pollutes nature. Barry Commoner's first law of ecology is that "Everything is connected to everything else." He has also written: "any major man-made change in a natural system is likely to be detrimental to that system." Thus tourism is a commercial valorization of nature towards human consumption.

But in case of Wilson nature proves to be more powerful. A long war between nature and Wilson ensues:

"All the time I was working I kept thinking of the bathing here and the vineyards and the walks over the hills and the moon and the sea, and the Piazza in the evening when everyone walks about for a bit of chat after the day's work is over."

This Hamlet-condition of Wilson can be best expressed by the term 'urbanatural roosting'. The concept is introduced by the ecocritic Ashton Nichols in a speech in the New York room at Marry Woolley Hall. Nichols believes that, "Nothing can take us out of nature; there is nowhere for us to go." Wilson had nowhere to go. He had lost all his dear ones in his "fully human, cultured home" and found the dearest partner of heart in the "nonhuman house – once called 'nature'."

In the foreword of his novel 'Of Human Bondage' Maugham has written:

"The importance of man to govern, or restrain the emotions I call bondage, for a man who is under their control is not his own master ... so that he is often forced to follow the worse, although he sees the better before him."

In the light of the above statement Wilson's decision to stay at Capri is a choice of the 'worse'. The detached tone of the narrator of 'The Lotus Eater' justifies this view and Maugham is proved to be anthropocentric. But, I think that Maugham has confused here between immediate good and ultimate good. In Wilson's decision to reject London for Capri, I find a shadow of the writer's choice of literature to law or medicine. The writer himself has led me to such a conclusion when in 1938 he wrote; "Fact and fiction are intermingled in my work that now, looking back on it, I can hardly distinguish one from the other."

Normally, when a writer deals with some foreign landscape he becomes pseudo-romantic. And it is absolutely probable while dealing with Italy – the place of lemons – as per Goethe's definition. Maugham also takes resort to stereotypical presentation of unchanged, exotic beauty of the place, the relics of ancient civilization and the description of pagan customs. However, his landscape is not only decorative. D.H. Lawrence has written in "The Spirit of Place": "Every continent has its own great spirit of place".

It seems that Maugham also believes in such kind of 'spirit' that re-shapes and re-defines the inhabitants. The detailed description of Wilson shows him in a transitional phase. Two colours associated with him are grey and blue- the one of polluted industrial landscape and the other of pollution-free world of nature. Thus the landscape changes the course of Wilson's life. From a busy office goer, involving in the rat race of life, he becomes a 'lotos eater' whose lethargic question is- "And when you look back now, who were the mugs?" The great book of nature is simple and it offers some simple solutions to the eternal crisis of humanity. It imparts a moral lesson to Wilson who realizes:

“Leisure... If people knew! It’s the most priceless thing a man can have and they’re such fools they don’t even know it’s something to aim at. Work? They work for work’s sake. They haven’t got the brains to realize that the only object of work is to obtain leisure.”

Thus, Wilson’s idea of life is that of a pagan. Now, the term ‘paganism’ is very interesting in the Christian era. Collins English Dictionary defines the word ‘pagan’ as -1. a member of a group professing a polytheistic religion or any religion other than Christianity, Judaism or Islam; 2.a person without any religion; heathen etc. Interestingly, the term ‘pagan’ derives from Late Latin ‘paganus’, which finds its source in Classical Latin ‘pagus’. ‘Pagus’ is a region delimited by markers and ‘paganus’ means –‘of or relating to the countryside’, ‘country dweller’, ‘villager’, ‘rustic’ etc. The Roman Army used ‘pagan’ for civilians. The term ‘paganus’ acquires religious meaning in the mid-4th century, and from the early 5th century onwards the word ‘paganos’ was used by the Christians to refer to a person outside the Christian community. The word ‘pagan’ was later on used as a pejorative term like ‘infidel’ and ‘heretic’. So Thomas Wilson, who preferred country to city, naturalness to artificiality, is a pagan, not in the Christian sense, but in the original sense of the word. The primitive man lived in a close communion with nature. The people of small communities worked for both ends meet. They had recreation, they had leisure. They were unknown to the capitalist goal of individual property. Wilson desperately tried to go back to primitivity. But the city-bred worker of the capitalist system is allowed only for twenty five years which ironically and tragically, reminds me of Faustus’s twenty four years. However, Faustus’s seemingly forward journey was a movement away from nature. Hence, his eternal damnation. Wilson’s apparently backward journey is actually a well calculated move towards paganism. Ultimately, he is united with nature- although at the cost of his life.

That the story is a criticism of industrialization, mechanisation, Christian way of life is apparent from onwards the title itself. The title alludes to a famous incident of the pagan world and it is found in Homer’s epic ‘The Odyssey’. In the Book IX of the epic Odysseus recounts to King Alcinoos that after putting Troy on fire, he and his fellow warriors arrived at a beautiful island where people lived on the fruits of lotus flowers which resulted in lethargic indolence. Thomas Wilson is Maugham’s lotus eater. He has challenged the societal norms and opted for a retired/pagan life. The references to Tiberius, the Roman emperor (42 B.C.- 37 A.D.) and the pagan festival of ‘Aphrodite rising from the sea’ are an appeal to go back to pagan simplicity and naturalness.

In “The Spirit of Place” D.H. Lawrence writes:

“The Nile valley produced not only the corn, but the terrific religions of Egypt. China produces the Chinese, and will go on doing so. The Chinese in San Francisco will in time cease to be Chinese.”

So landscape has a potent influence on a person’s identity. Wilson lived in London- the city of commerce and industry. He had a business training. Hence, he was cautious by nature. A completely worldly man he could exactly count the time between his house and office. But Capri changes him absolutely. He now advocates leisure and pleasure.

Paganism was nature-oriented. It believes in the presence of a supreme deity in nature. Anthropocentrism places man at the centre of the world. Human has the right to exploit the non-human. Ecocriticism warns against this nature-exploitation. Ecocritics suggest the need to preserve nature. It results in the emergence of neo-paganism and paleo-paganism which advocates a back to nature. Thus the circular movement of civilization is complete. Thomas Wilson represents this move from anthropocentrism to neo-paganism.

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