

The Dance of Shiva & Negotiating with the Dead: An Analysis of Indo-Canadian Art

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Abstract

Artistic creativity is as mysterious as the creation of the universe. Great sculptors, painters, musicians and writers have captivated the world with their masterpieces. Over the ages, it is not just the master pieces; the lives of these artists have also attracted the imagination of common folk from time immemorial. Margaret Atwood's non-fiction *Negotiating with the Dead*, interrogates the myth which surrounds art and artists. The contemporary Canadian perspective of the booker prize winning Canadian author, examines the dichotomy of creativity with awesome objectivity. The non-fiction of Atwood, interrogates the ontological status of writers' lives and their works. Atwood attempts to trace the history of western creative writing and art in her work. On the other hand, Ananda Coomaraswamy in his *The Dance of Shiva* contemplates the Indian artistic tradition with all its dynamism. On analysis one can certainly read some similarities and at the same time understand the vast contrastive features that exist, between the two great artistic traditions; the east and the west. Indian artistic tradition has a very ancient past whereas the newly found North American state, Canada's literary and artistic tradition, is relatively young. Inspite of the historical and ideological differences, certain aspects of Indian art is reflected in Canadian literary tradition. The objective of the paper is to analyse Atwood's *Negotiating with the Dead*, with Indian artistic legendaries, which Ananda Coomaraswamy explores in *The Dance of Shiva*.

KEYWORDS: Indian art, tradition, Canada, creativity.

Introduction

Canada, a North American country is the neighbour nation of the United States of America. English and French are the two dominant early European settlers of Canada. Until the middle of the twentieth century, the nation's literature, almost imitated the literature of their mother country; England and France. But the centennial celebration of its freedom, from England can be called as the mark of diversion of its literary history. Canada celebrated its hundredth year of independence in 1967. The centennial celebration of the country has revived Canada's search for a distinctive literary identity and many writers have attempted to draft the outline of Canadian literary tradition. Atwood is a pioneer writer, who has immensely contributed to the world of Canadian writings. Atwood has surveyed her nation's literary history in her famous non-fictional work, *Survival*. According to Atwood, Canadian coastal and forest landscape plays vital part in the life of the Canadians. The wild natural ecological environment triggers creativity in Canadian writers. Canadian nature totally contrasts the serene pastoral nature of England. Atwood comments that Canadian literature identified the nation's geographic features and adverse climatic conditions, as their nation's distinctive identity and was often drawn towards wild

wilderness for inspiration. Secondly Canadian literature recurrently exploited the world of art and artists as the theme for their literary writings. *Buildungsroman* and *Kunstlerroman* are the two popular fictional genres of the Canadian writers. *Buildungsroman* is a genre which traces the life of a protagonist from childhood to adulthood. And *Kunsterroman* is a subgenre of *Buildungsroman* which traces the life of artist protagonists from childhood. Atwood's *Negotiating with the Dead* explores the writer's 'real self' with the writer's 'writing self'.

Ananda Coomaraswamy on the other hand, has traced the artistic history of Indian art in his *Dance of Shiva and Fourteen Essays*. According to Coomaraswamy Indian art is dominated by 'Bakthi Movement' from Vedic times. The root of Indian art is traced back to Rig Vedic period which falls between 1800 B.C to 600 B.C. His fourteen essays elaborately discuss the history of the Hindu view of art. The primary objective of the paper is to examine the Western and Eastern concept of art in the works of Ananda Coomaraswamy's essays *The Dance of Shiva* and Margaret Atwood's non-fiction, *Negotiating with the Dead*.

The writers of India and Canada have very often explored the world of artistic creation. The tendency to unravel the mystery which surrounds art and artists is one of the predominant themes of both the nation. Canadian writers recurrently have exploited the world of writers and artists as their central theme in many of their works. Robert Kroetsch in his article *Disunity as Unity: A Canadian Strategy*, comments that "It is no accident that the hero of the Canadian story, often, is artist." (31) And in India, the myth which surrounds 'Lord Brahma' and 'Lord shiva' are the symbol of Indian artistic and literary tradition. *Matsya Purana*, which is one of the oldest Puranas of Hindu scriptures serves as a great link between Indo-Canadian artistic traditions.

Parallel Elements in the East and the West:
Atwood deals with the classical question about art and artists in *Negotiating with the Dead*. She writes thus about writers in her Introduction to the *Negotiating with the Dead*:

And has the concept of writer qua writers, as expounded by (of course) writers, changed at all over the years? What sort of creature do we have in mind? Is the writer the unacknowledged legislator of the world, as Shelley so grandiosly proclaimed, or is he one of Carlyle's blimp-like Great Men, or is the snivelling neurotic wreck and ineffectual weenie so beloved of his contemporary biographers? (xvii)

Atwood has discussed the four dimensional aspects of an artists in the above quoted passage. Firstly she hints artists and writers as prophets. Secondly she calls artists and writers as great men with immense ability. Thirdly she brands them as neurotic and finally she considers writers as professionals who use the skill of writing to make a livelihood. In other words, she labels writers as prophets, great individuals, neurotic persons and a practical person. Interpretation of Atwood's inference about artists, if read in Indian context, reminds the four headed 'Brahma' the god of creation which is inscribed in Hindu scriptures. The myth about the creation of the 'four headed Lord Brahma', the Hindu God of creation, is found in *Matsya Purana* which is one of the oldest of the eighteen Puranas found in Sanskrit literature. Various commentaries were found in Hindu hymns, about the symbolic signification of four heads of the god

of creation ‘Brahma’. Swami Vivekanda has described the four heads of Brahma as the symbol of four consciousnesses in a human being. Swami Vivekananda remarks that god Brahma’s four heads symbolises the ‘waking state’, ‘dreaming state’, ‘deep sleep state’ and the super conscious state of a human being. (<https://hinduism.stackexchange.com/>). Swami Vivekananda’s interpretation of the ‘four heads of Brahma’, who is the god of creation, runs parallel with Margaret Atwood’s theory about writers.

Atwood has quoted lines of Shelley in *Negotiating with the Dead*, where Shelley claims, that writers are the ‘unacknowledged legislators of the world’. Shelley states that poets are persons who possess incredible intuitive and creative power and often like prophets, have the power to predict the future. A typical example of Shelley’s theory of artists is Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Margaret Atwood with great intuitive inspiration has predicted the present state of American politics, way back in 1985 in her novel *The Handmaid’s Tale*. The novel is set in near future in America. The fundamental religious extremists dethrone the democratic system in the United States of America and capture power. ‘The Republic of Gilead’ in the United States, bans abortion and awards, life term and death punishment for the offenders. Fearing for life, many women flee to Canada to abort their foetus. The novel, *The Handmaid’s Tale* has become a sudden best seller, immediately after the Conservative Party came to power in the United States of America, in 2017. The newly elected conservative government in the United States of America amended the abortion which resulted in sudden increase of immigrants to Canada. Reports say that many young America-woman, prefer to live Canada and completely feel insecure in their own country. The immigrant officers in Canada reported that there is a huge increase in the number of immigrants from Canada to America. The case of Jane Doe, a 17 year old girl, from American has hit the headlines is a typical case predicted by Atwood in the *The Handmaid’s Tale*. BBC news world reports that “ The 17 year old, identified only as Jane Doe, is 15 weeks pregnant. . . . However, a new policy implemented by the Trump administration has denied her access to a Clinic. (<http://www.bbc.com/news/>). The prophetic intuition of Atwood in *The Handmaid’s Tale* coincides with the classical claim of the great romantic poet Shelley. As indicated by Atwood in *Negotiating with the Dead* Shelley famously proclaims in *A Defence of Poetry* to the world thus:

Poets are the hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration; the mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present; the words which express what they understand not; the trumpet which sing to battle, and feel not what they inspire; the influence which is moved not, but moves. Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world. (56)

According to Shelley, a poet naturally inherits the ability to decipher futuristic vision. The intuitive power of a poet, which Shelley defines in his *A Defence of Poetry* refers to Swami Vivekanada’s commentary about ‘Lord Bhrama’ the god of creation. As pointed earlier, Swami Vivekanada in his commentary implies the fourth ‘unseen head’ of Lord Brahma to the ‘super conscious’ state of a human being. On analysis, one can identify the correlation which exists among The Hindu scripture, *Matsya Purana*, Shelley’s *A Defence of Poetry* and Atwood’s *Negotiating with the Dead*. Indian and European artistic traditions’ concept of the ‘super conscious’ state of a writer is almost identical. The ‘super conscious’ state referred is not a common feature and it largely remains unawakened in ordinary men and women. The ‘super

conscious' state of mind or 'the fourth head of Bhrama' is completely awakened and is at work in Prophets, Sages, Artists, and Writers. Ray Bradbury, an American author reinstate the discussion presented in the article in his book *Zen In The Art Of Writing* where he calls writers as 'children of gods'. **Writing as Witchcraft:**

Atwood's *Negotiating with the Dead* contains numerous mythical references. Ironically she compares the 'art of writing' to the 'black art of witchcraft'. The title of the non-fiction, *Negotiating with the Dead* is overtly suggestive and certainly, perceives the act of writing as a performance of a witch craft. The non-fiction has six chapters. A close study of the 'naming' of the chapter titles reveals Atwood's perception about art of writing. The title of the second chapter is 'Duplicity'. The title of the third chapter is 'Apollo vs Mammon'. The title of the fourth chapter is 'Wizard of Oz, Mephisto & Co'. The title of the fifth chapter is *Communion: Nobody to Nobody*. And the six and the final chapter is titled 'Descent: Negotiating with the Dead- who makes the trip to the Underworld, and why?'. The above referred chapter titles, reveal the underlying principles which govern *Negotiating with the Dead*. The words -'dead, nobody, underworld and duplicity refers to 'evil force'. The central word of the title of chapter three is 'Mammon' which according to Old Testament is another name of 'Beelzebub', the prince of demon who leads the revolt against God in Paradise. The core word in the title of chapter three is 'Mephistopheles', who is a demon portrayed in Christopher Marlowe's Dr. Faustus. According to the German legend, the great scholar, Dr. Faustus signs a deadly contract with his own blood with Mephistopheles and sells his soul and after twenty four years, the contract expires and the demon tears Dr. Faustus to pieces. Atwood recurrently uses nefarious allusions and symbols in *The Negotiating with the Dead*. Coral Ann Howells, a famous Canadian critic on Atwood in her book *Margaret Atwood* remarks that "Those lectures, published under the Gothic title *Negotiating with the Dead*, combined personal anecdotes about her own life as a writer with less personal topics like authorship and creativity, fame literary tradition and changing aesthetic fashions, and the writer's social responsibility".(1) She self-consciously but implicitly attempts to define writers as witchcraft practitioners. Atwood certainly does not fall in line with Shelley's claim of artists as visionaries with a mission. She rather prefers to call writers as 'wizards'.

Indian Concept of Art:

Ananda Coomarasamy in his *The Dance of Shiva: Fourteen Indian Essays*, explores the Indian view of art with its dynamism. He remarks thus about the dance of Lord Shiva the supreme God of art:

The Dance, in fact, represents His five activities (pancakritya), viz: Shrishti (overlooking, creation, evolution), Sthiti (preservation, support), Samhara (destruction, evolution), Tirobhava (veiling, embodiment, illusion, and also, giving rest), Anugraha (release, salvation, grace). These, separately considered, are the activities of the deities Brahma, Vishnu, Rudra, Maheshvara and Sadashiva. This cosmic activity is the central motif of the dance. (3)

Ananda Coomaraswamy further states that the Indian artistic tradition blends the heaven and the underworld and is a manifestation of good and evil. In other words Indian artistic tradition juxtaposes life and death with perfect equilibrium. But Atwood's calls western artists as "The Wizard of Oz – soi – disant magician, wielder of power, manipulator, illusionist, and fraud- has a long genealogy. (101) But to

Ananda Coomaraswamy the two dominant motifs in Indian art is devotion (bhakti) and reunion (yoga).

Conclusion:

Ananda K. Coomaraswamy interprets Indian art and terms it as a finest blending of creation and destruction. He further remarks that the mark of a successful Indian art lies in its ability to preserve all five aspects; Shrishti, Sthiti, Samhara, Tirobhava and Anugraha, which Lord Shiva exhibits in his cosmic dance. On the other hand, Atwood who has analysed in detail the European literature tradition, has overtly accepted and acknowledged the role of the ancient and dead writers contribution in the evolution of herself becoming a writer. But Ananda Coomaraswamy evades the question of imitation and sets very high standard for the Indian writers and artists.

Works

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