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Understanding (Eco) Neuro-aesthetics and Affect Ingrained in Mary Oliver's "Spring"

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Abstract

Literature offers human beings delightful instruction. Even if the sole purpose of literature is viewed as entertainment, it is possible to discern threads of didacticism in every genre of literature. More so is the case of poetry. Poetry offers delight, instruction persuasion and times methods of salvation too. Salavation, in this case is not to be taken in its soteriological sense, but rather as method to overcome the sixth apocalypse. Mary Oliver's poem "Spring" is one such poem which describes the love of a bear and the actions of a bear after its period of hibernation. The poem reveals a kind of earth-love and how on reading the poem, the readers are expected to mirror such actions to the extent possible. The aesthetic quality of the poem should cause changes in attitudes and actions. Or in other words brain neurons should be activated differently. The concept of neuro-aesthetics is applied to find out how poems can alter perceptions.

Key words: Aesthetics, Neuro-aesthetics, Eco-neuro-aesthetics, Environment, Grounding, Fluidifying, Grounding, Emergence

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Aesthetics is usaully defined as the ability to receive stimulation from the five senses. Primary emotions experienced by man namely love, desire, and beauty are stimulated by sensory inputs. These input triggered feelings, primarily due to exposure to art and beauty can cause changes in the brain and personality and the affect that these create in human beings can be studied under the broad branch of neuro-aesthetics. Neuro-aesthetics can be referred to as the study of aesthetics and related brain changes which stem from observation or any of the related activities which takes into its ambit the five senses or any one of them.. Semir Zeki , a neurobiologist of the University of London is credited with the coining of the term neuro-aesthetics which links the brain and beauty or aesthetics. It can include the affect of aesthetics on the brain or the effect induced in the brain by any form of aesthetic experience. Like neuro-aesthetics, the literary branch of neuro-aesthetics deals with the pattern changes that can arise a result of the brain's concurrence with a literary text through means of reading- silent or loud , observation or listening to a text being read. The cerebral changes induced can manifest itself in different forms. Poetry takes pride in it that it often motivates human beings to think positively, as much loved poems often put forth a message even when they might be those that are colloquy with the worst. This paper is an attempt to trace how the poet Mary Oliver experiences the beauty of nature and transforms that experience into poetry that is capable of producing an affect on the readers of those poems. Neuro-aesthetics gives way to what may be termed Eco-neuro-aesthetics when the involvement and affect has to do with the environment surrounding man. The poems thus become a text capable of transmuting attitudes and pave the way for a study of literary texts as a way to inculcate planetary stewardship. Mary Oliver's poems exhort the readers to experience environment as animals do and derive from it the pleasure afforded by nature for

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the purpose of what may be termed "fludifying." Fludifying, according to theorists, is the momentary transmission of affect

Mary Oliver who is often referred to as "undefatigable guide to the natural world," Mary Oliver, (Kumin19) was one of America's best selling poets and the winner of the National Book Award and Pulitzer Prize. Observation of the natural world underlies all of her major poems that are grounded in the place of her domicile. Just as Thoreau called himself as "the self appointed inspector of snow storms", Oliver was called as "the patroller of wetlands." The intensity with which she wrote about nature demarcates her from the romantic tradition, as in her writing the distinction between man and nature is kept to the minimum. Haptic perceptions that she had while on her walking tours enabled the poet to experience nature in all its intensity. The Greek term haptein which means a close association with nature includes holding onto, clutching onto, clasping and even the sexual embrace. This was the one experience that Oliver had in her connection with nature and this helped her to produce poetry which could have an affect on her readers too. Mary Oliver is thus a poet of wisdom and experience of the world around us who exhorts the readers to experience the aesthetics of the world through the nerves and then to opt for a shift in perspectives regarding salvaging the earth.

In the poem "Spring," Oliver presents a bear who after a period of hibernation experiences a direct communion with nature.

her four black fists

flicking the gravel,

her tongue

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like a red fire

touching the grass,

the cold water. (“Spring” n.pag)

The lines convey an aesthetic affect pertaining to the senses. The bear like all other animals experiences what is called sensuous geography as the senses of touch, taste, and sight are put to use to commune with the earth after a period of hibernation. The affect that the lines should have on the reader is clear. It is a call to experience the environment through the senses. The affect provided by such a communion has its positive results. Earthing or grounding as this process maybe called according to research has the ability to conduct electrical impulses from our body to the earth. This is capable of preventing cell damage due to the activity or free radicals too. “When your body doesn’t interact with the electromagnetic force of the earth through grounding and earthing, it’s thrown off balance. You give off and receive energy every second of every day. The misuse and misunderstanding of your body’s electrical system is a catalyst for chronic health problems” (Stevenson n.pag). The call to have intimate experience of one’s environment is quite clear here. Just as the bear experiences nature through all sense human beings too should savour the experience of the environment.

When people see paintings pertaining to actions, the motor ability of the viewers can be stimulated. This is the result of mirror neurons identified in human beings. Mirror neurons have the ability to resonate which can persuade the readers to mirror in action what they are reading, seeing, hearing listening or whatever they are engaged in. The intent of the author can further add to the mirroring of action.

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Vol-22-Issue-4-October-December-2019

Mirroring of actions is the result of affect in the nervous system caused due to an experience which may be aesthetic or experiential and our empathy to the form of art encountered. These:

> ……..moments when the self and the sensory world, or the conscious and the unconscious self, or the self and another person, fall in step with each other in a way that seems momentarily to make a sliver of experience more vivid and more richly patterned than willful analysis could ever have made it seem. (Figlerowicz 4)

The question that needs to be examined is how this will have a positive effect in man's relation to ecology and how this can be termed Eco- neuro-aesthetics?

> The concept of 'affect', a body's capacity to affect and be affected, is similar to that of 'emergence' in the ecological sciences; it inspires thinking about the world in terms of rhizomatic interconnections, assemblages, or a complex 'coming together' of things and beings. (Singh 3)

That is to say the affect created by the lines on a reader can have the ability to reconfigure perceptions of the reader related to his surrounding environment. The brain reward circuitry registers this sort of emergence as a method of planetary salvation which can prompt the reader to mirror the action imprinted through the lines. Research has found that poetry activates brain areas like the posterior cingulate cortex and medial temporal cortex (*Science Daily* n.pag). These areas have been linked to introspection. Therefore this necessitates in the readers of the lines, an introspection of their connection to the environment and their treatment of the environment.

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In the context in which Mary Oliver describes the bear "as sharpening her claws against / the silence / of the trees" it is possible to discern what neuro-aestheticians call as "peak shift features". This drawing up what is distinctive in the object described or featured aims to secure attention to supernormal features. The pleasurable element involved in reading the poem should result in a super stimuli aimed at working for experiencing the environment which can further lead to emergence of truths related to the planet. As neuro-aestheticist V.S. Ramachandran suggests, art doesn't aim at realistic representation; it employs "deliberate hyperbole, exaggeration, even distortion, in order to create pleasing effects in the brain"(*Peak Shift in Art* n. pag). Whether this is a pleasing effect can be contested, but at any rate this creates an effect capable of producing an emergence.

Oliver thinks about the bear and that has caused in her a change of perceptions, to dwell on the love of the bear, its love for its environment. This is not the kind of love that human beings have. It is gratitude for the environment which sustains its life.

all day I think of her—

her white teeth,

her wordlessness,

her perfect love. ("Spring" n.pag)

It is a love that enables the poet to meditate on the kind of relationship that she should have with the planet. It is a persuasion to meditate on the kind of love the readers should have to the earth. It is an exhortation to mirror the love of the animal. It is neuro- aesthetic . It is eco-neuro-aesthetic.

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