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GARY SNYDER'S ZEN BUDDHIST ATTITUDE TOWARDS NATURE AS REFLECTED IN HIS POETRY: AN ANALYSIS

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Abstract

This article, at the outset introduces the most admired American poet Gary Snyder who has led a simple contemplative life, far from cities and close to his beloved mountains. As a lover of nature, almost all his poems gives picture of nature and mind, filled with silence, tranquillity and enlightenment. Snyder loved nature with all the glow of a lover because his attachment to the soil is born out of his longing for a meaningful relation to it. Snyder is a man who is fully submerged with natural and religious surroundings physically, emotionally imaginatively and also spiritually and his poems describe nature as a vehicle for his Zen Buddhist principle which believes in a friendly relationship between man and nature. This article also throws light on his discovery of the deeper dimension of life, nature and all related objects of life for attaining mental peace and spiritual illumination.

Key-Words

American poetry, Gary Snyder, Buddhist attitude, Nature.

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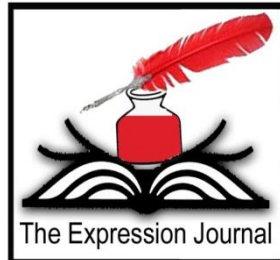
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Gary Snyder, one of the most admired American poets of today, has a lot to do with Nature in his poetry, for Nature has been the cradle of this poet right from his birth. The reason why he has keen interest in, deep compassion for the world of Nature and speaks always in support of her well-being is convincingly traceable to his birth and living. A probe into the personal life of the poet would reveal that he was born in 1930 on a farm in the backwoods and grew up in the Pacific Northwest where his father had a dairy farm, two acres in pasture surrounded by woods. He has had the privilege of living very close to Nature in the foothills of the Sierra Mountains, 150 miles away from San Francisco. From his early days, he cultivated a close communion with Nature and sang in glory of her benign influence as an inseparable part of his life. "From a very early age", says Snyder, "I found myself standing in an undefinable awe before the natural world" (Perkins 583).

Living in such a rural atmosphere has largely determined his mental outlook. The philosophical bent of the mind of a man is generally influenced by the area in which he lives. For example, all Romantic Poets lived in the Lake District very much nourished by inspiring natural surroundings. This shows that rural surroundings leave a healthy impact on the mind of a man. Snyder has lived amidst mountains and seen the value of life in terms of his experiences of wanderings around mountains and forests. His primal interest was in 'exploring the forests around Portland and Oregon where he developed his attachment to nature and learned "self-reliance, discipline and the rugged ways of the American West,

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which sustain him to this days and which frequently appear as the subject matter of his poetry” (Steuding 583).

Snyder wants to participate in the mystery of Nature physically, emotionally, imaginatively and also spiritually. It is said that he draws the best values from the Romantic poetry and goes beyond it to make his scheme of life more comprehensive. He has, no doubt, a Zen Buddhist attitude to Nature, which means a non-logical, in intuitive, imaginative and unified understanding of all things. “In Gary Snyder, says R.K. Sharma, Nature emerged as a major theme. It is his single-minded quest for values expressed in lyrical terms, especially in the context of nature that gives him relevance” (Sharma 44). In the words of Robert Kern, “Snyder’s poems teach us to see nature and how to see ourselves in nature, not through discursive or didactic argument but by dramatizing states of mind that pose an alternative to the culture and ego-driven attitudes by which we normally live” (Kern 158).

Snyder is often linked with some Western writers like John Muir, Robinson Jeffers and Frank Waters. These men with Snyder share a certain feeling for western nature that shapes their ultimate philosophical view of reality and also importantly, their value judgements on civilization, American Technological Civilization to be more exact. Their starting point is ‘nature’ (Lyon 212). Gary Snyder himself said:

“My poems, on one level, call the society’s attention to its ecological relationship in nature, and to its relationship in the individual consciousness. Some of the poems show how society does not see its position in nature. What are we going to do with this planet? It is a problem of love: not the humanistic love of the West-but a love that extends to animals, rocks, dirt, all of it. Without this love, we can end, even without war, with an uninhabitable place” (Real Work 4).

In the poetic realm of Gary Snyder, ‘Nature’ has a vital role to play. Before getting into the details of his love of nature, it will be interesting to examine whether Snyder can be called nature poet with a sense of religious and mystical involvement like that of Wordsworth or merely a poet whose poems describe nature as a vehicle for his poetic treatment First, let us review some of the varying opinions expressed by critics regarding Snyder as a nature poet. Bob Steuding who has made a significant contribution to Snyder criticism remarks as; “Early in his career, Snyder speculated about the possibility of writing poetry which would capture nature truly ... Snyder like Pound sought the “real” in his poetry of nature” (P40). In the words of Robert Kern, “Snyder emerges as the ecological poet par excellence, the writer who not only wants to recall us to nature “the ultimate ground of human affairs but who has developed a poetic style embodying and promoting a

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mode of consciousness with which to do it, a mode that eliminates the problem of relationship between man and nature, by assuming their unity a prior or supporting it with the evidence of ecology itself" (P158).

Critical claims for the value and significance of Gary Snyder's poetry generally direct attention to the achievements of his perfected ecological style-those poems of his that most notably in the collection *The Back Country* (1968) successfully present and embody assumptions of unity, balance and interrelationship between man and the natural environment. R.K. Sharma maintains: "Snyder sees nature, the wilderness, as a corrective to the influence of a predominantly urban and highly mechanised civilization" (P50). Snyder himself stated in an interview as; "man's life is totally dependent on an interpenetrating network of wild systems" (P49). With his clear and incisive grasp of basic issues, Snyder shares with such native American Writers as Emerson and Thoreau, or with poets like Whitman and Frost, in whom 'poetry begins in delight and ends in wisdom'. He has led a simple contemplative life, far from cities and close to his beloved mountains" (P50).

"The poet as healer is asserting several layers of larger realms of wholeness. The first larger realm is identity with the natural world demonstrating that the social system, a little human enclave, does not stand by itself apart from the plants and the animals and winds and rains and rivers that surround it. Here the poet is a voice for the non-human, for the natural world...that the humans are indeed children of, sons and daughters of, and eternally in relationship with the earth" (Real Work 171-172).

He further says,

"We can reach beyond our social nature and see our relationship in nature or reach inward and see the relationship that hold there" (P4).

The very purpose of Snyder in writing nature poems is to visualise life and nature directly and concretely. His cry is that nature should be seen and studied as far as possible in realistic and objective terms. Pound helped Snyder to achieve this goal of presenting a direct experience of reality in nature poetry. Life to be viewed from a close angle and in fresh communion with nature forms to be the subject matter of his nature poetry. The human observer and external nature form a harmonious link with each other. It is this link which gives depth and objectivity to poetic response.

Life lived in close communion with nature does introduce a spontaneous impulse of discipline and self-restraint. It is this link between man and nature that preserves the harmony between freedom and self-restraint. All nature poems present a picture of mind filled with silence, tranquillity and enlightenment. There are moments of illumination and enlightenment and man is found to be free from the clutches of ego. One such example can be cited in the poem "Towards Climax" in *Turtle Island* quoted below:

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“Squash blossom in the garbage heap
start farming
cows won't stay away, start
herding.
weaving throwing clay
get better off, get class
make lists, start writing down
forger wild plants
lose dream-time
lose largest size of brain-
get safer, lighter, wrapped in
winding smaller, spreading wider,
lay towns out in streets in rows
and build a wall” (P83).

Snyder builds up a new educational psychology in his poem “Towards Climax”. Love of birds, animals and flowers must become a major part of the consciousness of all moderns. While the philosophy of progress does indicate disrespect for birds, animals and flowers, Snyder advocates a compassionate view of things. Young children should learn to love flowers and birds because Snyder considers ‘love’ to be a positive quality while modern civilization advocates hatred and ill-will which is nothing but a negative quality. Snyder expects man to become more and more positive in his attitude towards all objects of nature.

Snyder is a lover of nature, animals, birds, flowers and in general life itself. In “The Hudsonian Curview” and “In Two Fawn that didn't see Light this spring”, Snyder melts into pity when he sees small animals killed and is pained to see and note how the two fawns are shot dead by a friend. Killing birds and animals is an inhuman activity going against the Zen Buddhist principle of compassion. Zen Buddhism deepens the significance of life by advocating the adoption of proper perspective in regard to things. Snyder's lover of simplicity, his respect for nature and a tendency to lead an affected life and a certain willingness to give a new dimension to the function of mind do all agree with the Zen Oxians and so he undertook a deep study of Zen Buddhism.

Snyder feels and says that flowers must be loved and handled with great care and sympathy. But the present civilization attaches no values to these flowers and animals. The main reason is that there is a belief in the usefulness of things. Flowers have poetic value. A mere look at flowers refines the feelings of men and inspires noble idealism in him. People who believe in secular progress remain insensitive to the beauty of flowers. No doubt, greed and ambition started with the advent of materialism. Man's attitude to life was shaped by his ability to procure the external goods of life. Man lost his sense of sharing and

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came to develop a strong possessive instinct which destroyed the rhythm of life. The poem "Glamour" by Snyder makes a reference to the external charm that material things can bring. It is worth remembering the entire poem as it represents the key perspective of Snyder. The entire poem given below shows the anti-materialistic outlook of Snyder:

"A man who failed to master all Ally Correctly when young and was out seeking power, so heard there were "white people" and left his own to go there, and became infected with greed, went home with trade goods, they saw he was crazy. Greedy and Crazy, the relatives should kill such a man but this time no one did. Crazy and greedy, he lives on. To the damage of his people civilization spreads; among people who are generous, who know nothing of "ownership", like a disease Like taking poison a glamorous disease a dazzling poison "overkill".

The poet here emphasizes the point that ownership is the by-product of 'greed'. Greed does not enable a person to manifest a joyful spirit in life and harmonious relationship in nature. Snyder insists on civilization's sharing spirit and not it's greedy instinct for which a Zen Buddhist perspective towards man and nature should be manifested at all levels.

Like all Romantic poets, Snyder is a lover of earth. His attachment to the soil is born out of his longing for a meaningful relation to it. Earth is regarded by Snyder as a mother. He does attribute human dimension to the earth and goes one step further in endowing it with femininity. When Snyder says that he pledges allegiance to the soil, he means that without the realization of the link between man and earth, there is no possibility for a higher understanding of life. Man's sensitivity, according to Snyder, is rooted in nature and is closely related to the soil. Man is significantly aware of things when he deeply communes with Earth, soil and other related things. The following lines are quoted from the poem "For All" to make this point clear:

I pledge allegiance to the soil of Turtle Island
and to the beings who thereon dwell
one ecosystem in diversity under the sun
with joyful interpretation for all (Axehandles 113).

Snyder went very deep into the roots of all ancient civilization and discovered that a rich view of life was expressed whenever the need for a link between man and nature was felt. "Human sensibility grows only in relation to one's understanding of nature and his capacity for communion with it" says Snyder. The materialistic civilization broke this link between man and Nature and made man an independent being. This led to a total emptiness in life and human sensibility remained undeveloped. Nature bristles with variety and multiplicity but at the same time, there is some force that connects all these multifarious things. Nature is one ecosystem according to Snyder in which diversity and unity get nicely balanced. The word 'ecosystem' indicates for Snyder a special

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environmental awareness which creates an urge in man to protect the life and purity of all things. His aesthetic perception shows that all things shine with beauty. His Zen Buddhist perceptive indicates that all things are filled with the Buddha nature. His eco-mystical consciousness creates a necessity to treat all things with loving compassion. All things must be loved and respected. This seems to be the poetic vision of Gary Snyder.

The poem "Wave" from *Regarding Wave* reflects a particular element of Shelley who spoke of surroundings himself to the influence of nature without any active resistance as sung in ode to the West Wind:

"Oh, lift me as a wave, a leap, a cloud!

I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed (Fifteen Poets 341).

Shelley is a rebel in one sense and in another sense he is a lover of calm tranquility. Both these poises are found in Snyder also. Snyder rebelled against the corrupt materialistic civilization and at the same time he wanted to develop a mood of contemplative silence in order to experience things in their depth. A few lines are quoted from the poem "Wave" here to show a particular type of Shellian element:

Catch me and fling me wide

To the dancing grain of things of my mind! (P3).

In these lines, Snyder shows a deep sense of religious surrender in an unconventional sense. He wants to be at the disposal of the Wave. He does not want to act and wants to be acted upon by wave. Surrender is a particular kind of humble posture where ego is completely removed. Snyder is in a passive mood and so he allows himself to be carried away by the wave which takes him like a racing Zebra. All the romantic poets have loved the mood of passivity. Snyder also shows such indication. He does not want to do anything and he wants to become simply an instrument in the hands of other things.

Gary Snyder is of the opinion that all birds and animals are living manifestations of a higher reality. Birds are supposed to be endowed with deeper sensibility and they make responses in a sympathetic way. For Snyder, all existing things have life and spirit. In the Christian theory of creation, animals have no soul. Snyder departs from this Christian tradition and takes shelter in Zen Buddhism. In his opinion, all animals and birds have the "Buddha Nature" which means that everything is alive and it has a living soul. Snyder does not believe in the concept of hierarchy which leads to gradations. This is a classical view and he is not at home with it. He believes in absolute and simultaneous equality among all living things. It is in this spirit that Snyder approaches the kingdom of birds and sees in it a new world of meaning.

The poem "Migration of Birds" begins with a bird hopping over a covered area of trees. This brings Snyder's study to a temporary end. It is at this time that the red-wood tree is seen leaning in the clay ground. The entire area is covered with yellow flowers. The

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poet has to raise his head every time when he enters the bower where the yellow flowers are seen in a bunch. The shadow of the sunshine is seen through the trailing plants of vine. Now the atmosphere created by Snyder appears almost Keatsian. The sunshine, the bunch of yellow flowers, the trailing vine plants, inspire in Snyder a new mood of idealism.

“.....White-Crowned sparrows Snyder wishes to live in harmony with the world of birds. He listens to the humming and singing of birds. Sparrows sing in the trees. Snyder does experience a new state of ecstasy when he heard the singing of the sparrows. Man of technology has no time to listen to such sweet songs of the sparrows. There is emptiness in the material civilization primarily because of man’s failure to relate him to and respond to all living creatures in a spirit of love and sympathy. The cock crows and Jack Kerouac reads the Diamond Sutra. There is a relationship between the Cock crowing and Jack Kerouac reading the Diamond Sutra. It is a Zen principle that every living thing is an embodiment of a superior spirit. According to Snyder, man’s knowledge and understanding of himself becomes complete only with his profound relation to birds and animals.

Birds are sensitive to things. It is said that Saints lived in close relationship with birds. They used to bring fruits for them. Saints live on high plane where birds appear to be symbols of a profound reality. Snyder almost becomes saintly in all respects. It means that he shows love towards all living things. Showing love and compassion to all living things is a sign of Buddha nature. The poem “Kyoto: March” is an excellent description of Nature in all its manifestations:

A few light flakes of snow fall in the feeble sun

It is almost a kind of Hellenic setting (the early Greek Romantic background) where snows are falling in the dim sun in terms of slices. Birds are singing. The plum, a stone like fruit is blooming in chill manner. The moon is seen in a glimmering way. Jupiter, a big planet, is found at a high altitude in the sky. The dove is crying which looks like twanging above. The description of snow falling, birds singing, dove crying, night found in meditation makes his power of observation out and out profound and all are scenes that bring new vitality and hope to any observer like Snyder who sympathetically identifies himself with all objects of Nature.

In “Water”, Snyder, inspite of the climate being hot, does not show in any way his disliking for the summer season. Instead, he expresses his optimistic view that he can find joy in the flowing water, for each season has its own value. Whatever be the seasonal change in nature, he finds a sense of adventure in the world of nature, a feeling that spring is not far away:

“And in this hazy day
Of April summer heat
Across the hill the sea birds
Chase spring north along the coast” (Riprap 17)

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The poet is aware of April Summer heat and the day has therefore become hazy. The seabirds are chasing spring north along the coast. Still the poet views this summer heat as experience of thrill and adventure. The most enervating season makes its profound impact on his mind but he never feels exhausted or tired as there is a positive hope that points to the coming of Spring. The poet feels that nature presents moments of joy and tedium. The moment of tedium is viewed by him as a prelude to the coming moment of joy. He is well-balanced in his attitude to nature and therefore he accepts the simultaneous presence of both found in nature.

Snyder is a lover of change in the natural phenomena. In "Magpie's Song", he praises the beauty of nature even when some changes are made in it. Snyder is sympathetic in his understanding of the phenomena of change. He strongly holds the view that if changes have a positive dimension to new way of life, there is no need to fear about it. The bird beautifully sings thus:

"No need to fear

What's ahead" (Turtle Island 69)

Whatever may be the changes in the world of nature, according to Snyder, when man becomes fully submerged with natural surroundings, he can experience intense states of joy and calmness going beyond the human frame of mind and creating unknown modes of being. He could feel the peace and tranquil restoration of his mind only in the lap of nature. One example of such an experience is described here:

"A thick snow

soft falling

the whole house open

snow flakes build upon a

single dark green spray of pine

the sparrow

swung the shrieked" (Regarding Wave 8)

The poet's belief is that man reaches mature moments when he gets completely immersed in the rich surroundings of nature. In the poem, "Thin Ice", Snyder makes man a harmonious part of nature;

- like Thin Ice – the sudden

Feel of an old phrase made real –

Instant of frozen leaf,

Ice water, and staff in hand

"Like Walking on thin ice..."

I yelled back to my friend,

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I broke and dropped.

Eight inches in (Riprap 14)

The speaker establishes an intense contact with thin ice and enjoys an experience of intimacy and complete union with it. This poem strikes almost a typical Wordsworthian note. Just as Wordsworth has describes himself as a cloud wandering lonely in his poem "Daffodils", Snyder describes himself as one walking like Thin Ice in his poem "Thin Ice". Snyder declares that he learns life from nature and shows how his life shines with joy and splendour in coupling with the life of woods, hills and mountains:

"Woods in the dark ravines spitting mist,
Grass is still sprouting at the end of June,
Leaves begin to fall in early August,
And here am I, high on mountains" (Riprap 39).

The poet's life in the woods and mountains is a symbolic withdrawal from an over systematized industrial civilization. In spite of the civilized world he belongs to, it is surprising to note that he loves nature, treats her kindly, goes to her for solace and discovers in her deeper dimensions of life. In the words of Abraham Rothberg, "Like Whitman and Thoreau, though more thoroughly and intensely, Snyder wishes to live in nature and there to confront himself and the essentials" (P29). Though Snyder is a well-read man, he seeks wisdom not in books but in Nature:

"Words and books
Like a small creek off a high ledge
Gone in the dry air" (Piute Creek 6).

As a true Zen Buddhist, Snyder holds high regard for the non-human beings. In Zen life, there is a tendency to be in union with nature. But in the scientific technology, there is a plan to master, control and dominate nature. The poet in a true Zen Buddhist spirit believes in a friendly relationship between man and nature.

Thus, Snyder living ascetically in isolation, loses touch with cities, with the crush of urban affairs by leading a simple contemplative life far from cities and mechanised civilization and very close to his beloved mountains and woods. R.K. Sharma rightly holds that "Snyder sees nature as a corrective to the influences of a predominantly urban and highly mechanised civilization" (P50). In a nutshell, it may be said that Snyder's poetic enterprise is to discover the deeper dimension of life only amidst woods, rocks, valleys, mountains and other such natural objects and find an opportunity, as a true Zen Buddhist, there in high mountains, cloudy mountains, lofty hills, muddy fields, birds, flowers and all such related objects of life for attaining mental peace and spiritual illumination.

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