



The Concept of Altruism in Modern English Poetry

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ABSTRACT

The present paper portrays the necessity of the concept of altruism in modern English poetry. The word "modern", generally, studies the rapid changes of technology and media. However, the attempts to understand the inner structure of the modern time determine the universal need for a concept that emphasizes the significance of the other. This concept is "Altruism" which denotes the act of giving more priority to the other's needs. This study, thus, aims to focus on the meaning of Altruism as a universal topic which constitutes the center of many literary and philosophical works. In literature, more specifically, the term "Altruism" has been a subject of various interpretations. Many genres of literature dealt with the subject of Altruism in terms of preference for morals. Writers and poets, therefore, were conscious to present the altruistic subjects in their works and decide to write about the unselfish behaviors as an attempt to reduce the wide effect of egoism. This paper illustrates the concept of Altruism in some modern English poems as examples. It is divided into two sections, the first one is an introduction which includes sub-sections about types of Altruism and the relationship between literature and Altruism. The second section deals with the concept of Altruism in Molly Peacock's poem "Altruism" (1989) and Jimmy Santiago Baca's poem "I Am Offering This Poem" (1990). The paper ends with a conclusion which sums up the main points of the research.

Keywords:

Altruism, Molly Peacock, Santiago Baca.

مبدأ الايثار في الشعر الانكليزي الحديث

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الملخص

تصور الدراسة الحالية ضرورة مبدأ الايثار في الشعر الانكليزي الحديث إذ ان كلمة "الحديث" ترتبط بصورة عامة بالتغيرات السريعة في مجال التكنولوجيا والاعلام. على اية حال، فإن المحاولات لفهم التركيب الداخلي للعصر الحديث تحدد الحاجة العالمية للمبدأ الذي ينادي بأهمية المنفعة للآخر فضلاً عن المنفعة الشخصية. وهذا المبدأ هو "الايثار" الذي يشير الى اعطاء الاولوية الى حاجات الآخر. لذا، وتهدف هذه الدراسة للتركيز على معنى الايثار بوصفه موضوعاً عالمياً يحتل مركزية في العديد من الاعمال الفلسفية والادبية. وفي الادب، على وجه الخصوص، وقد كان مبدأ الايثار موضوعاً له تقاسير مختلفة. وقد تناولت مختلف الاصناف الادبية موضوع الايثار من حيث تفضيله للأخلاق. وبذلك كان الكتاب والشعراء على وعي واصرار للكتابة على السلوكيات غير الانانية كمحاولة لتقليل التأثير الواسع للانانية او (الانا). وتتناول الدراسة الحالية أمثلة على مبدأ



الايثار في قصائد مختارة من الشعر الانكليزي الحديث, فهي تقسم الى فصلين الاول عبارة عن مقدمة عن الايثار بصورة عامة وبعض انواعه وعلاقته بالادب الانكليزي. اما الفصل الثاني فيتناول شرح مبدأ الايثار في قصيدتي " الايثار " ل مولي بيكوك. عام (1989) و " انا اعرض هذه القصيدة " ل جيمي سننياكو باكا عام (1990). تنتهي الدراسة الى خلاصة تحتوي بعض نقاط الموضوع.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الايثار, مولي بيكوك, سننياكو باكا.

Section one: Introduction

1.1 Altruism in general

The attention towards the benefits of the other seems to be the essence of altruistic subjects. The term "altruism" denotes the act of prioritizing the value of the other. The term was basically presented in Britain by George H. Lewes in 1853, as a continual concept of the French altruism previously used by Auguste Comte in his *Systeme De Politique Positive*. Literally, The term means the combination of "alter" and "ui" to mean "to this other". (Scott and Seglow, 2007, p. 2). Traditionally, the term "altruism" relates to religious or moral ethics putting the value of the other at the center. Whether in the Aristotelian or the medieval concepts of morality, altruism gives more value to friendship and other-self. In his *The Groundwork to the Metaphysics of Morals*, Immanuel Kant justifies the concept of altruism in terms of basically universal concept for morality. For Kant, humans all have a principal role in benefiting others and should all participate in this mission whenever the ability for assistance is available. (Scott and Seglow, p. 11)

Generally, the term "altruism" covers the opposite of "selfishness" (Suri, 2019 , p 7). It is the meaning of giving a more preference to other's self –concerns. The main point is that whether it is possible to react against the global issues of self-interest and egotism. Then, the notion of accepting the altruistic subjects in the modern time becomes a matter of uncertainty. In a wide scope, the reference to altruistic subject needs a vital intention from its adopters to pave the way for future consideration and acceptance.

The point is that there should be an appreciation or respect to each person's attempt to prefer the other's purpose to his or her own. Because this act will probably increase the level of happiness between people. One theory that is attached to analyzing the human nature or soul is that of the Austrian psychologist Sigmund Freud (1856-1939). Freud's theory assumes the three components of the self which determine the human inner nature, these components include the id, the ego and superego. According to the theory of Freud, altruism comes against egoism to denote human self-restraint or self-sacrifice. The theory explains human behavior in connection to literature studies and

defines the meaning of altruism as a perfect way of getting better feeling of happiness and self-satisfaction. (Suri, p 9-10)

The modern direction to altruistic issues could not rule out the definition of the term "altruism", but in a wider space it could be identified by any endeavor to help others or put other's needs over one's needs. In other words, the rapid reformations of modern life explain the need for living quietly and healing each other. (Mandal & Mehera, 2016)

Altruistic subjects need more attention in modern time in order not to be considered or interpreted in other ways. The starting shift of the meaning of altruism comes from the Victorian literature, when writers, critics and artists searched for virtuous meanings in their materialistic world. This shift carried moral and humanistic values for the literary works making them the primary source for achieving moral and social justice in the Victorian society.

In the Romantic era, however, literature searched for the concept of altruism in terms of adopting the aesthetic and noble values of life. The romantic poet Lord Byron (1788- 1824), for example, indicated how the whole world's nobility turned to search idealistic purposes. In his letter to Douglas Kinnaird, Byron stated the main purpose of altruism when he wrote, " I have no violent expenses – but I want to get a sum together to go amongst the Greeks or Americans- and do some good" (cited in Beaton and Jones, 2017, p. 240). The idea of altruism in Byron's letter reflected his noble or ideal intentions to others.

Moreover, in modern time, writers restrict the term "Altruism" to the subjects of humanity and virtue. They use the altruistic concepts to express how the whole world focuses on the spiritual meanings or actions. Literature offers many examples which elucidate the meaning of altruistic behaviors with the diverse society levels. Poets, writers and scholars shed the light on the importance of noble behaviors of people all over the world. Nissim Ezekiel's poem *Night of the Scorpion* (1965) and Sujata Bhatt's poem *The Voice of an Unwanted Girl* (1996) present themes of altruism versus egotism. (Giri, 2021) These poems, although written by Indian poets and spoken to Indian communities, serve to show two opposite examples of motherhood. Ezekiel's poem portrayed the picture of the virtuous mother who was ready to sacrifice herself for the sake of her children. The mother in the poem was about to die because of a scorpion sting. But she preferred her pain and suffering so that her children could remain safe, while the other woman in the second poem represented the opposite picture. In Bhatt's poem, the mother got rid of her unborn child only because this baby might be a girl. That mother, in contrast to the one in the first poem, resembled the egotistic mother who behaved in a selfish and pitiless way only to satisfy her egotism.

In the current time, altruism centers on the psychological part of life. It represents a healing power that forms an essential need of goodness. In the introduction to his book, Matthieu Ricard (2013) mentions how the altruistic acts shape humans' lives and encourage them to be more responsible in the future time. In his opinion, altruism comes as a unique concept that represents virtue and morality in the present industrial time. In addition, Ricard examines the possibility to achieve the altruistic meaning due to the various challenges of the modern world. In the current economically and socially determined society, however, the use of the altruistic subjects has been a challenge for measuring the real endeavors of humans to accept the basic principles of selflessness.

1.2. Types of Altruism.

This part of the paper aims to clarify the meaning of altruism by presenting its major types. Altruism, in other words, could be subject to various kinds according to its usage and need. Huddy, et al. (2013) suggested that altruism serves as reciprocal function if the two sides of the relation are "cooperative". (p, 209). Thus, the general meaning for the altruistic types circle around benefits for all the participants in the action.

This study, consequently, sheds the light on the usage of certain types of altruism connected with literature. In its general sense, literature has been subject to enormous altruistic topics and types. This section offers some of these kinds of altruism to highlight its meaning.

The first one is *Kin Altruism*. Altruistic actions can be best applied to the blood relations, especially the relationships between family members. In Zwick & Fletcher (2014) the idea of kinship is obviously illustrated, "The parent-child bond, in its various (often gendered) forms, manifests this phenomenon in the strongest way" (p, 3). The family relation among individuals justifies the close connection between the cultural backgrounds and the environment in which they live. Individuals in this sense adopt the altruistic acts to benefit themselves and their relatives.

Secondly, *Group Altruism*. This term expresses the use of altruism in forming a reciprocal relationship between the individuals themselves or with their community. So instead of making the selfish benefits, humans think of working in collectives to support each other and build a new altruistic frame for their society. This meaning could be possibly offered in war times to search nationalistic purposes. The third kind, however, is *Human Species Altruism*, which refers to the global human altruism. This term defines humans' endeavors to be more cooperative. According to this type, altruistic actions give priority to the requirements of others. Finally, *Life Altruism*, that denotes the role of humans to bring life to the whole world. In other words, humans do not need only for searching virtue for themselves but to achieve international benefits. (Zwick & Fletcher, 2014)

1.3. Altruism and Literature

Examples about altruism are various in literature. The call for sending a universal message of benefit is a central topic of literary works. Altruistic themes exist widely in different genres of literature like poems, plays, short-stories and fictional works. In her *Whale Boy* (2013), Nicola Davies demonstrated her theme of environmental altruism. In this children's novel, Davies explained the relationship between nature and the human beings. The novel narrated the story of Michael Fontaine, a young boy who lived in a small village close to the sea. In his journeys in the sea, Michael's enthusiasm took him to an adventure by which he met a big whale in that sea. The whale, which represented the wilderness of nature, did nothing to hurt the little boy. Instead of that, the animal showed no violence and moved away without any reaction. That event remained in Michael's memory for a long time and it represented one of the altruistic examples that nature performed to humans. (Jenner and Jebakumar, 2022)

Another example about altruism could be viewed in Frances Hodgson Burnett's novel *A Little Princess* (1904). The novel presented the story of a little girl named Sara Crewe. This girl was mentioned in the book as a child who came to London to study at Miss Minchin' preparatory school for girls. The novel dealt with the idea of empathy towards the little girl after the news of the death of her father. The story showed the difference in social status as well as the treatment that Sara got from Miss Minchin when she heard that the little girl became poor and lost her wealth. On the contrary, Sara's reactions retained the same noble, high-elegant and respected way of treatment in both cases the poor and the rich. (Fridayati, 2013)

In poetry, the illumination to altruistic topics is highly considered. One example about the concept of altruism is clearly presented in Walt Whitman's poem "Song of the Open Road" (1856). The idea of altruism in the poem reveals the poet's intention of feeling comfortable in doing altruistic acts to others. The subject of altruism springs from his personal life. He surrounded himself with altruistic viewpoints even in his family relations and his career. Due to a family settled life (Al-Ariq, 2020), Whitman's views about people's relations turned to be more realistic. He witnessed the time when America became the country that welcomed the people from different countries from Europe. The idea of behaving in the same level towards all others occupied a central topic in Whitman's life and this is reflected in his poem. The "Open Road" in the poem clarified the notion of openness or liberty in the poet's life. The poem, thus, gives a sense of free-will for one's fate in the coming days.

Section Two: Altruism in Selected Modern English Poems

2.1. Molly Peacock's poem "Altruism" (1989)

Molly Peacock (1947-) is an American poet, novel and essay writer. Peacock's reputation comes from her interest in the diverse life themes like love, destiny, family relations and suffering. She graduated from the university of Binghamton with a BA degree. After that, she got an MA from Johns Hopkins university. Peacock was born in New York in 1947 and she worked as the president of Poetry Society of America. As a poet, Peacock's poetry collections are *The Widow's Crayon Box* (2024), *The Analyst* (2018), *The Second Blush* (2008), *Cornucopia: New and Selected Poems 1975-2002*. In addition to poetry, Peacock has different prose productions like a story book in (2014) entitled *Alphabetique: 26 Characteristic Fictions* (2014), a biographical work with the title *Paper Garden: Mrs. Delany Begins her life's work at 72* (2012), a guide entitled *How to Read a Poem & Start a Poetry Circle* (1999) as well as the book memoir *Paradise, Piece by Piece* (1998). (Poetry foundation. Org).

The poetry of Peacock reflects her sensational ideas. References to the details of life are mentioned in her poetry. She used to regain her previous family moments to re-establish her writing style. Her poetic sense explores many times when her life events gave her prolonged knowledge. (Peacock, 1989). In her *How to Read a Poem and Start a Poetry Circle* (1999), Peacock summarizes her knowledge about the poem when she said that " Reading a poem gives you an almost physical experience of a mental activity"(p. 14)

According to her, poetry translates the idea in one's mind to his bodily reactions. Many of human's life events rise from what is existed in their minds. Peacock's view-point is that poetry can transform one thing into another. The poet, for example, is capable of feeling and expressing things even without changing his or her place. The poem gives the reader the opportunity to travel away to different countries through its details and structures. In this sense, moreover, Peacock (1999) uses the term " Poetry Circle" (p. 16) in which the poet mentioned how the poetry effect goes in a circle of reciprocal process between the speaker and the listener. To read a poem, in Peacock's view-point, is to get benefit from all the things surrounded. Poetry, then, has a useful activity to others and this interprets its role in spreading the effect of its lines to all readers. In her poem "Altruism" 1989, from her 1989 *Take Heart* poetry collection, Peacock transforms her altruistic views in some personal ways. The following lines from the poem,

What if we got outside ourselves and there

really was an outside out there, not just
our insides turned inside out? What if there
really were a you beyond me, not just
the waves off my own fire, like those waves off
the backyard grill you can see the next yard through,
though not well—just enough to know that off
to the right belongs to someone else, not you.
What if, when we said I love you, there were
a you to love as there is a yard beyond
to walk past the grill and get to? (Peacock, 1989, p. 66)

The above lines from Peacock's poem "Altruism" denote the poet's prolonged sensation and sentimental attitude. She mixed her feeling of love with an appropriate life experience to reflect the altruistic sense that love decides. Peacock used her simple language and structure to imply what her mind generated. The poem examines the possibility of altruism in love by starting the poem with "what if"(Line, 1), this question offers a global investigation for the basic sides of love. The poem puts the capacity of love to heal and care under a direct inquiry. The point is that how much love is able to determine its major role to benefit others. Peacock's poem "Altruism", however, questions the probability of love to diminish humans' selfish intentions and seek for its healing power. (<https://thedewdrop.org>) "What if there really were a you beyond me" (line 4) this line reflects the poet's intention of discovering her lover's reactions. Ricard (2015) uses the term "Affective Empathy" (para.3) to explain the relationship between the sides of the affair and check their level of emotions.

The other part of the poem, furthermore, indicates its major altruistic questionnaire of the first part.

To endure

the endless walk through the self, knowing through a bond
that has no basis (for ourselves are all we know)
is altruism: not giving, but coming to know
someone is there through the wavy vision
of the self's heat, love become a decision. (p. 66)

The exact meaning of love centers around Peacock's search to discover herself and the world around. She focused on the role of love that represents a redemption for all the unendurable moments in her life. " someone is there through the wavy vision" (line 15) is a reference for her love who should be acting as a care-giver or a supporter, thus she ends her poem " love become a decision" (line 16) a necessity that she herself searched and asked others to follow. Characteristically, the love that Peacock dealt with in her poem reveals an alternative way for bringing altruism to the others. She called it "the endless walk through the self" (line 12) which is an endeavor for seeking the inner self and discovering her altruistic love, a kind of love that heals and gratifies. This kind of altruistic love, therefore, is a manifestation for gratitude and spiritual satisfaction for all universe. Post et al. (2003a) assumes that the idea of altruistic relationships could be observed when love determines every ideal and noble purpose. This love, of course, reflects an elegant but difficult thing to obtain in the modern world of selfishness.

2.2. Altruism in Jimmy Santiago Baca's poem *I Am Offering This Poem* (1990).

In addition Peacock's poem "Altruism", this paper sheds the light on the concept of altruism in another poem of modern English poetry which concerns with this meaning. This poem is Jimmy Santiago Baca's *I Am Offering This Poem* (1990).

Jimmy Santiago Baca (1952-) is the American poet, screen producer, story & essay writer. His life in New Mexico, where he was born, was not that perfect. He spent several years of his early life in prison due to drug issue and that period contributed to shape his writing career. As a poet, Baca's publications represent various talents in different genres of literature. Among these publications his early famous *Immigrants in Our Own Land* (1979, 1991), which was an embodiment for his life when he was imprisoned. Later on, Baca produced other poetry collections including, *Healing Earthquakes* (2001), followed by (2002) *C-Train & 13 Mexicans*. In addition to *Winter Poems Along the Rio Grande* in (2004) and *Spring Poems Along the Rio Grande* in (2007). These poetry collections were previously supported by a novel published in 1987 entitled *Martin and Meditations on the South Valley*. (Poetry foundation. Org).

References to Baca's early life are scattered in most of his works. He experienced living in an orphanage after being deserted by his parents and left to his grandmother. Then after, Baca's life changed to be fruitful when his prison years made him discover the writing talents. His contribution to English literature also represented by his memoir *A Place to Stand: The Making of a Poet* (2002) and his screen play *Bound by Honor* (1993) in addition to *A Glass of Water* in 2009. Baca gained the

American Book Award in 1989 for the success of his novel *Martin and Meditations on the South Valley* (1987) as well as the Hispanic Heritage Award for his literary achievement. (The World's Poetry Archive, 2012).

In his poem " I Am Offering This Poem", from his collection *Immigrants in Our Own Land and Selected Early Poems* reprinted in 1990, Baca's altruistic poetry appears when he offers his beloved this poem and that was all he had. In the starting lines of the poem, he declared,

I am offering this poem to you,
since I have nothing else to give.

Keep it like a warm coat,
when winter comes to cover you,
or like a pair of thick socks
the cold cannot bite through,

I love you,

(The World's Poetry Archive, 2012, p. 31)

The first stanza of the poem opens with an offer by the poet to his beloved that the only thing he could show to her is love. Baca's love, in this sense, is truly altruistic in addition to being free and unconditioned. This kind of love determines the possibility for giving more than taking, thus it is altruistic and supporting. In other words, Baca's altruistic love extends to be like a shelter that protects his beloved from outer danger, " the cold cannot bite through" (line 6).

Universally, themes that study the altruistic love of this kind often fail to understand the arrogant behaviors of others and thus invite readers to search for that love that is "constitutes a perennial moral and spiritual ideal" (Post et al, p.1).

I have nothing else to give you,
so it is a pot full of yellow corn
to warm your belly in the winter,
it is a scarf for your head, to wear
over your hair, to tie up around your face,

I love you, (p. 31)

In the second stanza, however, the poet emphasizes his love concept by using the words " a scarf" (line 11) and before it the words " pot full of yellow corn" (line 9). These words, however, send an international message of how love could be a source of silence and warmth which surrounds his beloved. It is this kind of giving that rises from the poet's altruistic mind to give the most precious thing he has and share a humanistic purpose.

Keep it, treasure it as you would
if you were lost, needing direction,
in the wilderness life becomes when mature;
and in the corner of your drawer,
tucked away like a cabin or a hogan
in dense trees, come knocking,
and I will answer, give you directions,
and let you warm yourself by this fire,
rest by this fire, and make you feel safe,
I love you, (p. 31)

The third stanza describes an emotional status of rare love which has a vital role of compensation and empathy. The poet's words convey his extreme feelings of love when this love could be used as a guide that enlightens the beloved's life and guides her to an area of settlement. " Keep it, treasure it as you would" (line 14) the poet uses the word "treasure" as a reference to the most needful thing one may require to obtain happiness. Love, in this poem manifests the inner side of the poet's heart that becomes a place to welcome his beloved wherever she goes. Other words like "drawer" and "hogan" (lines 17 & 18) center around the meaning of altruistic love as the poet continues to remind his beloved that his heart displays an unconditional love that functions as a cave to protect her from the outer ugly world of suffering and pain. Worthington Jr, (2006) expresses this sense of love in terms of virtual concepts of altruism which are given to the other with no expectation of a reward. Moreover, this altruistic sense motivates the preference for the other's sake.

It's all I have to give,
and it's all anyone needs to live,
and to go on living inside,

when the world outside
no longer cares if you live or die;
remember,
I love you. (p. 31)

The last stanza of the poem emphasizes Baca's altruistic love by mentioning the necessity for this love to constitute life and determine its value. "and it's all anyone needs to live" (line 25), this line illustrates the poet's view that all one might seek in life is that kind of love that purifies and compensates. Baca's altruism could be seen as a particular way that enables people to live quietly by understanding life. Post (2003b, p. 171) explains this meaning when love is made to "... care of others for their own sake"

Conclusion

The world's universal purpose, in the current time, is to find a humanistic meaning for every attempt to live more easily. This need for a realistic and altruistic intentions seems capable of encouraging philosophers, thinkers, writers and poets to contribute to the social behavior of prioritizing the other's benefit. English modern poets and writers participate in this strategy. They take their role in the international process of adding a sense of goodness or nobility by attempting to achieve the altruistic topics in their life situations. The meaning of altruism, then, starts to be widely welcomed in modern world due to the materialistic society which neglects the major properties of human life.

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