

# An Ecological Consciousness on Divine Oneness : A Symbiotic Analysis on Marlo Morgan's *Mutant Message Down Under*

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## Introduction

The novel *Mutant Message Down Under* by Marlo Morgan, as Marianne Williamson precisely delineates, is a "powerful book. A beautiful tale of a woman's mystical journey." It is a fascinating fictional chapter on the "spiritual odyssey of an American woman in Australia." The narrator of the novel was chosen and invited by the nomadic Aboriginals as they have come to know about her aid to the half-castes and also they 'heard her cry for help.' She was asked to accompany them on a walkabout through the outback and she makes a four month long journey with the 'Real People', as the tribe address themselves. During this time she learns how they live and thrive in natural harmony with the plants and animals that exist in the rugged geography of the desert region. She faces daily tests of her endurance, and these challenges ultimately contribute to a profound personal transformation.

## Oneness

"Oneness is not a thing...Oneness for us is not an essence that surrounds things or is present inside of things - it is everything!" (Morgan 126)"Oneness" in this modern or "civilized" society is unquestionably forgotten word. The modern society is a clustered, hierarchic, individualistic, encroaching, inflicting and infringing one. As E.F. Schumacher rightly said, "We are at war with Nature and if by chance we win the war, we shall be the loser" (qtd. Agwan 238). Instead of having a 'relational perspective' with every living and non-living being, man is trying to come out of the relations or what we call as food chain. This is very well denoted by Skolimowski as he said "nature is a web of relations...denial of relationality is denial of being"(qtd. Agwan 238).

The life of natives/aborigines is built in a rock solid foundation of equality. It is based on an unconditional acceptance of all life forms including wind, water, trees, the earth and the spirit beings too. J. Baird Callicott claims that the Indians' (American) attitude was to regard all features of the environment as enspirited. These entities possessed a consciousness, reason, and violation, no less intense and complete than a human being's. The Earth itself, the sky, the winds, the rocks, streams, trees, insects, birds and all other animals therefore had personalities and were thus as fully persons as other human beings (243).

This acceptance comes from a recognition that all things being mutually dependent on each other what

is often referred to as their symbiotic relationship with nature. Since this acceptance is total and unconditional, it automatically means that the other person or element in a relationship is treated with respect. Thus we find conflicting ideology between tribal world view and the modern or "civilized" world view. This paper is going to discuss these conflicting ideologies through a scientific concept called Symbiosis. This concept will enable us to understand the relationship between the humans and other species more elaborately in the text.

## Concept and Objectives

The definition given by Meyer in his essay "Symbiotic Relationships" on Symbiosis could be an apt one, "Symbiosis could be defined as any association between two species populations that live together, whether the species benefit, harm, or have no effect on one another" (qtd.in Rayson 38). Kent. A. Peacock also gives a very precise definition on symbiosis, he says "the central idea of symbiosis is that organisms live together in the sense that they include each other in their life cycle"(224).The relationship should be between two different species. So in this text we look into the relationship between man and the other species, i.e., animals and plants. There is no specific relationship between two particular species as we are looking into a tribe as such not individuals.

To understand the relationship between humans and the other species in the novel, we need to look into the attitude of the humans in the text. "The relationship that a human being establishes with an organism can be either deliberate or instinctive. Deliberate or instinctive, human possess an ecological consciousness" (Rayson 73). So to know this ecological consciousness in human beings it is imperative to use the concept of deep ecology propounded by Arne Naess.

"The well-being and flourishing of human and nonhuman life on earth have value in themselves (intrinsic value). These values are independent of the usefulness of the non-human world for human purposes." (Naess and Sessions 3)

*Mutant Message Down Under* very emphatically brings out this conflicting idea between tribal world view and a person living in a stratified or modern society. This conflict is seen throughout this novel. There is a conflict between anthropocentrism and Biocentrism. The intrinsic value, which realizes

that, is a basis of biocentrism which extends from living beings to non-living beings.

### Discussion

There are two categories of humans found in the text, the tribes and the modern man. The tribes call themselves "Real People" and the modern man is called 'mutant'. The Real People gave the title Mutant to the modern man because they feel that they have changed or moved away from being a real human being; biocentrism to anthropocentrism. 'Mutants' only look at what is good for them in nature and try to leech out as much as possible from other living and non-living beings. As we have discussed before the conflicting ideas of biocentrism and anthropocentrism is clearly seen. The modern man represents anthropocentric world view and the Real People has biocentric world view. The extract given below is a very good example to show the biocentric attitude of Real People.

"They could locate a plant ready to harvest without pulling it out of the ground. They would move their hands over the plants and comment: "This one is growing, but not ready yet," or "Yes, this one is prepared to give birth"....Ultimately they taught me to dowse by asking plants if they were ready to be honored for their purpose of being. I asked permission from the universe and then scanned with the palm of my hand. Sometimes I felt heat, and sometimes my fingers seemed to have an uncontrollable twitch when I was over ripe vegetation." (55)

By asking permission from the plant the Real People shows how they respect and honour the plants. This respect comes out of their realization of intrinsic value of the plant and independence of its usefulness for human purposes. If this attitude is shown towards other living and non-living beings in the present world, which evidently is missing, the earth would have been in a better shape.

Real People's attitude towards water is another great example for us to look into: "We carried several bladder water vessels. I know that humans are approximately 70 per cent water and require a minimum of one gallon per day ideal conditions. Observing the Aborigines, I saw they did require much less, and drank less than I. In fact, they rarely drank from the water containers. Their bodies seemed to us the moisture in food to a maximum. We used the water to soak what appeared to be dead and dried-out weeds at mealtime. The brown stubs went into the water as lifeless, dehydrated sticks and came out many times miraculously looking like fresh celery stalks. (Morgan 53)

Why do they limit their drinking of water and use the moisture? Here it is their realization that water has that intrinsic value and giving life to the non-living being. This realization of the intrinsic value in other

living and non-living beings enable Real People to live in harmony with other species. This made the Real people "only take what they truly need to eat."

The Real People's relationship with nature is spiritual. It is interesting to observe their prayer and call to other living and non-living beings every morning.

Before we started walking for the day, we formed a close-knit semicircle, all of us facing the east. The Tribal Elder moved to the center and started chanting. A beat was established and carried through by each person clapping their hands, stomping their feet, or hitting their thighs. It lasted about fifteen minutes...These people believe everything exists on the planet for a reason. Everything has a purpose...The purpose of the plant kingdom is to feed animals and humans, to hold the soil together, to enhance beauty, to balance the atmosphere. I was told the plants and trees sing to us humans silently, and all they ask in return is for us to sing to them...The primary purpose of the animal is not to feed humans, but it agrees to that when necessary. It is to balance the atmosphere, and be a companion and teacher by example. So each morning the tribe sends out a thought or message to the animals and plants in front of us. They say, "We are walking your way. We are coming to honor your purpose for existence." It is up to the plants and animals to make their own arrangements about who will be chosen. (51)

The chants and the prayers make Real People to have the spiritual oneness with other organisms and in the process understand the purpose of every living being and to realize the importance of inter-dependency and companionship. Morgan further delineates, The Real People tribe never go without food. Always, the universe responds to their mind-talk. They believe the world is a place of abundance. Just as you and I might gather to listen to someone play the piano, and honor that talent and purpose, they sincerely do that same thing with everything in nature. When a snake appeared on our path it was obviously there to provide our dinner...I learned that the appearance of food was not taken for granted. It was first requested, always expected to appear, and did appear, but was gratefully received and genuine gratitude was always given. The tribe begins each day by saying thank you to Oneness for the day, for themselves, their friends, and the world. They sometimes ask for specifics, but it is always phrased "If it is in my highest good and the highest good for all the life everywhere." (52)

Here the word honour is a very important word. Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary gives number of meanings to the word 'honour'; "a quality that combines respect, pride and honesty; to show great respect for someone or something, especially in public; to honour a promise or agreement is to do what you said you would; a reward, prize or title that publicly

expresses admiration, prize or title that publicly expresses admiration and respect."

All the four different meanings have one common meaning for the word honour, i.e., respect. This is precisely what we observe in the Real People. This respect or 'honour' comes from their biocentric world view as well as their realization of the intrinsic value in other living and non-living beings. We see through the above passage how they request and also show gratitude for the other species because of the 'highest good of life everywhere'.

There are three different types of symbiosis: "1. both the organisms involved in relationship may benefit each other, 2. harm each other and 3. have no effect on each other" (Rayson 47). The first type of symbiosis is called mutualism. Mutualism, according to Mackenzie, is a "positive reciprocal relationship between two individuals of different species which results in increased fitness for both parties. Mutualism may be symbiotic, in which the organisms live together in close physical association" (qtd. in Rayson 47).

The second type is parasitism. It means in the words of Cheng: "It is...an intimate relationship between two heterospecific organisms during which the parasite, usually the smaller of the two partners, is metabolically dependent on the host. The ingestion of host cells by the common liver fluke *Fasciola hepatica* while within its bovine or sheep host is an example of parasitism" (qtd. in Rayson 48-49).

The third type of symbiosis is commensalism. Commensalistic relationships, according to Grier... "are those in which two species commonly live in close relationship with each other but where the benefit to one or the other is slight or not understood. Some species of social insects, for example, live very close together, even in compound nests, but they keep their broods separate and otherwise live their own lives. Even if there is no benefit to either participant or if the relationship is one sided, commensalism may preadapt the species for the evolution of more complicated relationships. Most of these associations tend to be more transient in time and place. Mixed-species groupings are seen in marine and some freshwater fish, foraging and migrating birds, roosting bats, some mixed troops of primates, some dolphins and open-plains ungulates" (qtd. in Rayson 50).

One symbiotic relationship which is chiefly prevailing in the text *Mutant Message Down Under* is mutualism. Real People's relationship with the animals and other species is most of the time mutualistic. The Real People as well as the other animals know the importance of interdependency. They are aware of the consequences they would face if they do not give respect to each other and if they do not follow the laws of the nature. The following excerpt from the text is a

good example to show their relationship: When we took water from a rocky crevice, I was taught how to approach the area so I did not contaminate it with my human scent and frighten the animals. After all, it was their water too. The animals had as much right to it as people. The tribe never took all the water, regardless of how low our supply was at the moment. At any water area, the people used the same spot from which to drink. Each type of animal seemed to follow the pattern. (53)

The humans as well as animals here know the importance of water in their ecosystems. As the ecosystem, they live in, is desert landscape water is a scarcity. This mutual acknowledgement is the basic necessity for their survival and they adhere to the pattern. Another remarkable relationship in this text is between the bush flies and the Real People.

"In truth, they are necessary and beneficial creatures. They crawl down our ears and clean out the wax and sand that we get from sleeping each night. Do you see we have perfect hearing? Yes, they climb up our nose and clean it out too...the flies crawl and cling to our body and take off everything that is eliminated....when the flies come, we surrender." (69)

Both bush flies and Real People trust each other so profoundly that they surrender one to other without any inhibition. Bush flies will take fluid from the humans for their nourishment and the mammals or the humans receive cleansing from them.

When the narrator asked them: "What exactly is your relationship to the animal kingdom? Are they your totems, your emblems that are reminders of ancestry?" "We are all one...learning strength from weakness" was their reply. The Real People's realization of finding or learning from other species makes them a complete being.

To have this kind of relationship with each other, humans as well as other organisms, one should have a very conscious and acknowledged relationship with the land, 'tinai' they live in. 'tinai' is an ancient Dravidian social order. According to Nirmal Selvamony, Tinai refers to a kind of social order which is intrinsically bound to a specific natural environment...The ancient Tamils divided the entire world into five major habitable regions: the montane (kurinci), the pastoral (mullai), the desertic (palai), the riverine (marutam), and the littoral (neytal): Daniel, Selvamony (216)

Without the established knowledge of land their survival would have been very difficult. The landscape of Real People is desert. They are very familiar with their landscape. The below given passage will show the exceptional understanding pertinent to their land.

They could find water where there was absolutely no appearance of moisture. Sometimes they would lie down on the sand and hear water underneath or hold their hands with the palm down and scan the ground for water. They put long hollow reeds into the earth, sucked on the end, and created a minifountain. The water was sandy and a dark color but tasted pure and refreshing. They were aware of water in the distance by watching the heat vapors and could even smell and feel it in the breeze. (Morgan 53)

How could one smell and feel water in the breeze? It is no magic or trickery. It is pure understanding of one's land. This difficulty in finding water enabled the Real People to realize the importance of water not just for them but also other organisms. Because of this awareness and discernment, they are able to share water without any selfishness.

The Parasitic relationship can be observed in the 'enlightened society' between the Mutants and other species. The modern society has come to the level of degradation that the water has become the biggest dispute between two countries and states within a country. The best example would be 'Indus Water Dispute' between India and Pakistan. And Cauvery Water Dispute for the inter-state water dispute.

The modern man builds dam and reservoirs for his selfish needs not bothering about other living beings, flora and fauna that depend on its flow. Anindita Basak's explanation on the dams is an apt one at this juncture: Dams are the single largest cause of 'displacement for development'. In fact, approximately 80 per cent of about five crore people, who have been estimated to be displaced in India since independence for all development projects, are due to dams." (Basik 22)

If man does not care about his own species, his care for other species is well presumed. Issues such as using animals such as chimpanzees, monkeys, mice for medicinal and scientific experiments show modern man's parasitic relationship with other species.

### Conclusion

This novel serves as a great example to show us that a biocentric attitude towards nature will enable us to have a more satisfied and adventurous life. It helps us to understand how important it is to have a mutualistic relationship with other organisms for the earth's survival. There are lot of other references in the novel which shows how Real People believed "the well-being and flourishing of human and nonhuman life on Earth have value in themselves." I conclude by saying that in the anthropocentric world there is a mindless use-oriented attitude but even in biocentric attitude you see the same use-oriented attitude but there the issue is that every other organism is treated with respect and 'honour' as an organism.

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