

Negative Romanticism: An Exploration of a Sense of Isolation in Yushij's *Afsaneh*

Mohammad Hussein Oroskhan^{1,a*}, Esmaeil Zohdi^{2,b}

^{*1,2}Department of English Literature, Faculty of Humanities, Vali-e-Asr University, Rafsanjan, Kerman, Iran

^ah.araskhan@yahoo.com, ^besmaeil_zohdi@yahoo.com

Keywords: Negative romanticism, Positive romanticism, Sense of Isolation.

Abstract. From its beginning in the academic studies during the later nineteenth century, Romanticism has provoked ongoing debates over the nature of its definition. Nonetheless Morse Peckham has satisfactorily settled this matter by indicating that romanticism has dramatically altered the way of thinking therefore it should be distinctively met. For this purpose, he proposed that dealing with the concept of romanticism necessitate dividing it into two concepts of negative and positive romanticism in which a transition is occurred from negative romanticism to positive romanticism however in some cases this transition may not become completed and is lead to the obscure origin of the sense of isolation among various romantic poets. To clearly illustrate Peckham's notion of negative romanticism, it is tried to explore Nima Yushij's *Afsaneh* who is known to be the most romantic poet of Persian literature. Based upon Peckham's notion of negative romanticism, Nima's sense of despair and isolation in *Afsaneh* is fully justified and it is highly suggested that Peckham's new perspective toward romanticism can eventually settle the conflicting views on the subject of Romanticism.

Introduction

Romanticism is commonly known to be started by *Lyrical Ballads, with a Few Other Poems*, a collaborative work by William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and ended dramatically by the tragic of death of its second generation's authors including Byron, Shelly and Keats. However, it took a century when the word 'romanticism' served to be highlighted in academic studies. As *Herbert Lindenberger* 2009 in his article "On The Profession of Romanticism" mentioned that what came to be called the Romantic period emerged as an object of academic study in the universities of Western Europe and North America during the later nineteenth century [1]. Since romanticism began in academic studies, it has been considered as an ambiguous and complex subject because it has provoked hot debates among different scholars. For example, one can notice a stark contrast between Arthur Lovejoy's theory of romanticism and Rene Wellek's theory on the grounds that Lovejoy totally rejects the possibility of one unified definition of romanticism and Wellek's trio-based definition of romanticism [227].

However, it seems that Morse Peckham could find a new base for exploring this subject by proclaiming that romanticism has introduced a new way of thinking. And for acquiring a better understanding of its notion, it should be divided into two separate concept of negative and positive romanticism. And indeed romanticism itself is a journey from negative romanticism to positive romanticism. Nonetheless, in some cases, this journey is not completed and the subject may suffer a total isolation due to the breaking of his connection from any secure and firm base. Peckham adequately depicts this situation as a period of isolation and despair caused from not being able to think in terms of dynamic organicism.

Nima Yushij 1897-1960, the father of Persian Modernist Poetry, seems to experience the same situation in his life which has led him to writing the first modernist poem, *Afsaneh*. Therefore, through this study, it is tried to investigate Peckham's theory of negative romanticism in Nima Yushij's *Afsaneh* to prove that Nima as the first Modernist Persian poet could never make a journey from negative romanticism to positive romanticism and was left groundless which brought him a period of doubt, despair and social isolation.

Discussion

1. Negative Romanticism as a Preliminary Stage to Romanticism

One should be noted that romanticism is not a simple concept to be developed just in a specific and short period time whereas the romantic ideas are in large part heterogeneous, logically independent, and sometimes essentially antithetic to one another in their implications [2]. In Lovejoy's view, the notion of romanticism is filled with various theories and thoughts that one cannot easily come to an exact definition. Indeed he believed in the necessity of the recognition of a plurality of Romanticisms [2] and at last he afforded one wildly held view about the concept of romanticism as he mentioned that the word romantic has come to mean so many things that, by itself, it means nothing [2].

In this respect, Morse Peckham 1970 has been vigilant enough not to fall victim to this ambiguous concept of romanticism. In order to achieve this aim, Peckham proposed Lovejoy's *The Great Chain of Being* as a major breakthrough. In his view it is a book on which some of the most useful scholarship of our times has been based [4]. Peckham has marked the crucial turning point of the book in which Lovejoy has referred to a change in the European art after the French revolution, a change which has exercised drastic influence on European art:

To be brief, in 1936 he stated simply that literary romanticism was the manifestation of a change in the way of thinking of European man, that since Plato European man had been thinking according to one system of thought based on the attempted reconciliation of two profoundly different ideas about the nature of reality, both stemming from Plato-and that in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries occidental thought took an entirely different direction, as did occidental art. [4]

Peckham has also agreed on such a change in the European thought therefore he tries to trace the origin of this change. Therefore, in his article "On Romanticism: Introduction", he has tried to expand on this notion. In this case, he refers to romanticism as a crisis which has occupied a suitable place in European culture and it appears to be a widely accepted notion [6]. Peckham has aptly noticed the center of this attention and described it as a "crisis in European culture" because it has totally changed the European thought into a different direction of thought. Having this issue in mind, Peckham dealt with it in his critical article entitled "Toward a Theory of Romanticism". In this article, Peckham tries to bring forward Lovejoy's *Great Chain of Being* as a monumental work for understanding the change in the thought of the mind. Then, he mentions the distinction between two dynamic and static mechanisms by saying that the shift in European thought was a shift from conceiving the cosmos as a static mechanism to conceiving it as a dynamic organicism [4, 5].

Henceforth, Peckham aims at exploring his concept of dynamic organicism. Therefore, he mentions that for clearly illustrating this concept, it is necessary to provide a distinction between when dynamic organicism appears and when it is nonexistent. In this case, Peckham coins the term positive romanticism and negative romanticism to prove his point. For positive romanticism, he defines it as a term useful in describing men and ideas and works of art in which dynamic organicism appears, whether it be incomplete or fully developed [4]. Then Peckham suggests that in the case of poets like Byron we cannot understand it in terms of the appearance of dynamic organicism therefore to it must be added the term negative romanticism, [4]. He introduces this new term of 'negative romanticism' to solve the problem of understanding Byron and defines it in this way:

Negative romanticism is a necessary complement to positive romanticism, not a parallel or alternative to it, with which it must be reconciled. Briefly, negative romanticism is the expression of the attitudes, the feelings, and the ideas of a man who has left static mechanism but has not yet arrived at a reintegration of his thought and art in terms of dynamic organicism. [4]

For clarifying this new term, Peckham decides to cite some examples from the earlier romantic writers like Coleridge and Wordsworth but not to unify Byron's work with them. He just mentions Coleridge's *The Ancient Mariner* and Wordsworth's *The Prelude* to show that these two writers could change and developed out of their preliminary states but Byron never could do that

and stayed in the state of negative romanticism. This means that Byron could not generate out of the static mechanism and enters the dynamic organicism and experience the spiritual rebirth:

A man moves from a trust in the universe to a period of doubt and despair of any meaning in the universe, and then to a re-affirmation of faith in cosmic meaning and goodness, or at least meaning. The transition from the first stage to the second, we may call spiritual death; that from the second to the third, we may call spiritual rebirth. [4]

In the case of Wordsworth, Peckham mentions that he was heavily relied on the faith of French Revolution but as his ideal conception of French Revolution resulted in bloodshed he became utterly despondent and lost his faith in the French Revolution because it made men worse instead of better, and from the creation of political and intellectual freedom it turned to tyranny, slaughter, and imperialist expansion [4]. Hence Wordsworth's "spiritual death" occurred. He was totally destroyed and he lost himself until he found himself in the presence of nature and reaffirmed in new terms his faith in the goodness and significance of the universe [4]. In the presence of nature he feels the creative power of the dynamic organicism which compels him into an eternal interfusion of mind and nature. Nature and the creative soul maintain, he believed, an ennobling and enkindling interchange of action [4]. He also asserts that the same thing can be considered about Coleridge but instead of pondering over his life, one can see the portrayal of this transformation from static mechanism to dynamic organicism in one his poem entitled *The Ancient Mariner*. Upon analyzing this poem, one can see a true example of a journey from negative romanticism to positive romanticism. At the end of his article, Peckham tries to define the concept of negative romanticism based on his analysis as:

Various individuals, according to their natures, and their emotional and intellectual depths, went through the transition from affirming the meaning of the cosmos in terms of static mechanism to affirming it in terms of dynamic organicism, they went through a period of doubt, of despair, of religious and social isolation, of the separation of reason and creative power. It was a period during which they saw neither beauty nor goodness in the universe, nor any significance, nor any rationality, nor indeed any order at all, not even an evil order. This is negative romanticism, the preliminary to positive romanticism. [4]

Peckham also emphasizes that though this could be said that both positive and negative romanticism can result in isolation and despair but it differs from each other in the respect that negative romanticism causes isolation and despair because it offers no cosmic explanations, while positive romanticism offers cosmic explanations which are not shared by the society of which one is a part [4]. In this respect, Peckham has determined a clear outline for us to understand the concept of romanticism and its subcategorization. Through the presented discussion, it was attempted to ponder over Peckham's view so as to be able to have a better comprehension of the ambiguous realm of romanticism. Moreover, through the rest of this study, it is tried to conduct a new research on the father of modern Persian poetry, Nima Yushij, with respect to Peckham's view of negative romanticism.

2. Negative Romanticism Leading to a Sense of Isolation in Yushij's *Afsaneh*

Nima Yushij 1897-1960, the father of modernist poetry, was born and grew up in Yush, a small city near Rasht. Yush is a really beautiful and green village in which Nima grew up. He really adored living in Yush. However, everything changed when in 1910 he, along with his brother, was sent to Tehran for education. They were enrolled in a catholic school named Saint Louis. Later in his adulthood, he described his situation in a letter to one of his friend in this way:

Finally this place of peace and natural scenery has all of a sudden disappeared. I was separated from my roots and like all wage-laborers who went out from our village and had to say farewell to that beautiful land with pity, I came to this dirty city of Tehran [7].

His first years in Saint Louis were terrible as he was always in fight with other children and could not concentrate on his lessons due to his upbringing in the wild nature. However, this dull and monotonous situation didn't last forever when a silver lining shone in his life and his rare and extraordinary talent was recognized by a great teacher. And it was in later time that through the

encouragement of an affable and well-behaved teacher, Nezam-Vafa, that I started writing poetry [7]. Nezam-Vafa was a French language teacher. Therefore Nima became acquainted with the French language through his teacher Nezam Vafa. Yushij had a really high opinion of his teacher, this hermit poet, and so pure, full of painful sensitivity and poetical characteristics, is the one who put poetry in my mouth and led me to this path [7]. Clearly, this opinion shows that Nezam Vafa was really more than a mere French teacher; he indeed became the person whom Nima dedicated his first major poem, *Afsaneh*, I dedicate this to my mentor, although I know that this poem is a worthless gift but he will forgive the mountain people for their simplicity and candor [7]. Interestingly, Nima's *Afsaneh* became a turning point in the history of Persian poetry as critics have often interpreted the poem as manifesto on modernist poetry's mission [8]. Therefore, our aim is to explore this poem with respect to Peckham's theory of negative romanticism and to show how Nima's sense of alienation and isolation, defined as negative romanticism, led to the formation of a breakthrough as *Afsaneh* in the context of Persian poetry.

In this respect, before investigating Nima's *Afsaneh*, it is tried to mention two events occurred to Nima which had a tremendous effect on his later views and his sense of alienation and isolation. The first one is regarding his political views of the time which was heavily leaned toward a revolutionary force named *Nehzat-e Jangal* [Forest movement]. This revolutionary force dates back to the time before Reza Shah (1878-1944) took the power and became the first Shah of Pahlavi Dynasty. At that time different revolutionary forces were active in Iran. *Nehzat-e Jangal* was one of these forces located in Northern part of Iran where Nima was born. The leader of this group was Mirza Kuchek Khan Jangali. However the movement was demolished eventually when its connection with the Bolshevik peasant in Caucasia was severed because Bolshevik power decided to change their policy towards Iran and support Reza Khan to seize the throne. As a result, the unity of the Jangali movement broke and Mirza died due to frostbite in one of the Alborz Mountains named Talesh in 1921. Naficy believes that Nima's views on social reforms and revolution in these times reflect the ideas of Jangali movement [9].

This event depressed Nima to the extent that he decided to take a revenge action himself. And he expresses his emotion in a letter to his brother in this way.

After this has occurred to me, I want to make a new life for myself: Living in the forest and participating in the struggle. In a few days, I will leave this area. I will go where I can provide for this new life. If I succeed, a new uprising created by me will emerge in this part of Mount Alborz and I will display the originality of the brave warriors in this mountain [7].

However, Nima himself knew that he was not the man of battle and utterly expressed his incompetency in another letter to his brother:

What can I do my dear, I am not Comrade Lenin, I am not Karl Marx, that my soul can be confined so tight. My heart is trembling in an endless vibration and altogether I am different from all of them [7].

The other incident happened to Nima before writing *Afsaneh* is regarding his love stories. Nima fell in love with a beautiful girl named Helena when he was in Tehran however Helena never returns Nima's affection and rejects him. Then Nima decides to go back to his native place to forget his love story. Interestingly, amidst the nature, he again falls in love with a pretty girl named Safura. Filled with the bitterness of his previous beloved, Nima gets so tempted to marry Safura nonetheless he fails miserably and the image of this failure stays with Nima to the extent that Abul-Qasem Jannati Atai specifically related Nima's *Afsaneh* to this sad tale of unrequited love. Inspired by Safura's love and filled with the impact of its failure, he created the eternal poem *Afsaneh* [10]. Surely, it is not wise to relate *Afsaneh* solely to Nima's unrequited love because it is a highly philosophical poem as it will be discussed in the rest of this paper.

It was felt necessary to mention these two points regarding Nima's life to illustrate that Nima's life can also be proved to be situated in a romantic context. In this sense, Nima built his trust in the universe by strongly relying on *Jangali movement* however this movement was ruined. As a result, this phenomenon isolated Nima from his idea of participating in social movement to save the world. Then Nima heavily relied on his inner feelings and again he became dejected and alienated from

within. At this moment, this could be implied that Nima was experiencing a spiritual death like the one Wordsworth experienced through the French revolution however unlike Wordsworth he could never recover from this situation and this sense of alienation is aptly reflected through his first major poem, *Afsaneh*.

Afsaneh is in the form of a dialogue between two characters, the lover and Afsaneh. Nima himself knew that the form of his poem is unprecedented however he claimed to dispel a specific notion by applying this form of writing to his poem. This structure that my *Afsaneh* has been placed in demonstrates a natural and free-flowing style of conversation....This is precisely what I meant to accomplish: freedom in expression and the lengthening of the discourse [11]. Nima wants to free himself from the previous grand system of thought which has affected any aspect of human beings by trying to gain the freedom of expression through a new conversational style of writing poetry. This can clearly show what Peckham has described as a shift in conceiving the cosmos not as a static mechanism but as a dynamic mechanism system of thought. Achieving such a harmonious system in which everything works like a living organicism is Nima's ideal and that is why he has created the two characters of Afsaneh and the lover because in this case he can focus on the interaction of these two characters instead of relying on the previous static mechanism. And since Afsaneh's real identity can never be settled; the character of Afsaneh can be justified as an element which destroys the static mechanism of thoughts.

Now with these preconceived notions, we can refer to the poem when Afsaneh relates the story of the lover in this way, "In the somber night, a madman who/Has committed his heart to a fleeting hue/Is sitting in a clod, quiet vale/Like the stem of a withered plant/He begins a sorrowful tale" [11]. It is narrated that the lover is isolated from the society and has decided to spend his time like a madman in a cold and quiet vale. The most important point of this part is when Afsaneh tells us that the lover has "committed his heart to a fleeting hue" [11]. Indeed Afsaneh is warning the human being that if anyone hangs on any of this world's truth and considers it as the ultimate truth he would become a madman because nothing in this world is static and anything is changing. Even the ultimate truths are just a mere "fleeting hue", whatever that ultimate truth may be. And in this case the ending of such a person is dreadful because he is suddenly devoid of having any value and is left alone in a cold and quiet vale.

As the beginning of the poem revealed, it was shown that a man has move from a trust in the universe to a period of doubt and despair in which he is not able to make sense of the world and this demonstrates that the transition from negative romanticism to positive romanticism has just begun. Thus, at this point Nima seems to be stuck in the state of negative romanticism as through the poem the lover is experiencing a period of doubt and despair. In this respect, the lover is considered to be devoid of having any value; "Oh my heart, my heart, my heart!/Miserable, hurt, my dear partner/With all goodness, value, and claim/What did I gain from you in the end /But a tear on the face of gloom? [11].

One's heart is the center of his reliance and now it is devoid of any value and it cannot be considered as a reliable partner anymore. In a metaphorical sense, the heart can be studied as that absolute truth on which Nima has relied. And in Nima's view nothing can be considered as the absolute truth. Surely Nima's attempt to show the lover's inability to pursue a specific goal proves the point that this world cannot be comprehended through a static system of thought because nothing is fixed and everything is ever-changing. In other world through the state of negative romanticism, one cannot offer a cosmic explanation for understanding the world. Therefore, Nima has created the character of Afsaneh to deal with the illusive nature of reality and in one part of the poem; this illusive nature is revealed when the lover addresses Afsaneh in this way:

Are you my destiny Afsaneh?
 You who is disheveled and sorrowful
 Or are you my heart, bound with anxiety
 Or are you two tear-stained eyes
 Or the devil chased out of every place.
 Are you my pre-occupied heart

You who are so unrecognized and anonymous
 Or are you my nature that you didn't search
 After splendor, fame and name?
 Or are you fortune, you who escape me so?
 Everybody has driven you away
 Not knowing that you are eternal
 Who are you? Oh you cast out of all places
 For me you have been a companion
 Are you tear-drop? Are you sorrow? [11]

The nature of Afsaneh is never fixed and it always changes. In other word, one cannot have a certain image of Afsaneh in mind; likewise, one cannot have a certain notion of reality in mind. As in another part of the poem, Afsaneh describes him/herself as "an instant that flares as lightning"[11]. This should be mentioned that through the poem Afsaneh's identity can never be settled because in different situation Afsaneh plays the role of both sexes. Probably, Nima never wants to reveal Afsaneh's identity because in his view nothing can be fixed and predetermined. One point should always be remembered that the creation of Afsaneh is not itself a new base for the concept of reality, it only has made the men aware of the fact that the world is wholly deprived of any value and meaning and it is in consistent chaos. This nature of Afsaneh is made clearer when he is talked to like this:

You are a lie
 You are sadness, a beautiful sadness
 My love and heart are left valueless
 I leave to you both my love and heart
 So that you submit yourself to me
 Oh lie! O sadness! O you who are both good and bad
 Who told you to rise? [11]

At this part of the poem, the lover sadly addresses Afsaneh as a lie. He blames Afsaneh for ripping him of any certain value. Even he wishes if Afsaneh had never been born because in that case the lover would never comprehend the valueless nature of this world. Afsaneh is described as being a lie that has deprived the lover of his heart (the center of his value) and has filled the lover with great sadness. Afsaneh is talked to as being "both good and bad", therefore, the lover cannot settle the dispute over Afsaneh whereas like a madman he is just waiting without having a clear prospect of future; "Oh come forth from this narrow vale/For it is the Shepard's best resting place/For no one knows the way here/So here, where everything is alone/We may sing together in our melancholy [11].

Nima longs for a place which is deprived of having any connection with the external world. In his view, nothing can have any value in this world therefore the Shepard should avoid chasing his herd (the nature of reality) and be settled in a "narrow value" because in this place "everything is alone". It is really important that Nima has used "everything" not "everyone" for this part. In this case, this could be implied that he is referring to the whole system of the world in which every part is now fallen apart because the central value of this world has been demolished. And the only thing, the lover aims to do is to collect everybody around and sing together which means to woo over the situation. This means that though Nima has left the static mechanism, he hasn't been successful in reaching the dynamic organism in other word he is in the state of negative romanticism which is a period of doubt, despair and social isolation.

Conclusion

In our Persian context, Nima is the embodiment of the concept of negative romanticism. Beginning by considering his private life, one could easily see that how he became dejected and isolated from his external world. And this sense of isolation and alienation continues to be reflected

in his *Afsaneh* which is deemed to be the first example of modern Persian contemporary poem. Indeed Nima's *Afsaneh* shows a transition not only from Persian classical poetry but also from thinking in terms of static mechanism to dynamic organicism. Nonetheless in this poem, Nima never finds his way to reach out of the negative romanticism and to arrive at the state of dynamic organicism. Though Nima has used a conversational style of writing to have a freedom in expression, he was never able to comprehend the world and was doomed to feel despair and isolated from the world. In this respect, the only thing he is able to do is to gather other people around and sing a melancholy song to show his social isolation.

References

- [1] H. Lindenberger, Theories of Romanticism: From a Theory of Genre to the Genre of Theory, *Essays in Romanticism*. 17 (2009) 27-51.
- [2] M. H. Oroskhan, E. Zohdi, Sohrab Sepehri's Imaginative Voyage from Negative Romanticism to Positive Romanticism in his Cycles of Poems, *Advances in Language and Literary Studies*, 6 (2014) 227-233.
- [3] A. O. Lovejoy, On the Discrimination of Romanticism, *PMLA*. 39 (1924) 229-253.
- [4] R. Wellek, The Concept of 'Romanticism' in Literary History I. The Term 'Romantic' and Its Derivatives, *Comparative Literature*. 1 (1949) 1-23.
- [5] M. Peckham, Toward a Theory of Romanticism, *PMLA*, 66 (1951) 5-23.
- [6] M. Peckham, Toward a Theory of Romanticism: II. Reconsiderations, *Studies in Romanticism*. 1(1961) 1-8.
- [7] M. Peckham, On Romanticism: Introduction, *Studies in Romanticism*. 9 (1970) 217-224.
- [8] N. Yushij, Nameha-ye Nima Yushij, *Sirus Tahbaz*, ed., Tehran, Nashr-e abi, 1984.
- [9] A. Karimi-Hakkak, K. Talattof, (Eds.), *Essays On Nima Yushij: Animating Modernism In Persian Poetry*, Boston, Brill Press, 2004.
- [10] M. Naficy, *Dar Jostojuy-e Shadi: Naqd-e Farhang-e Marg Parasti Va Mard Salari Dar Iran*. Sweden, Baran, 1991.
- [11] A. Jannati Ata'I, *Nima Yushij: Zendegani va Athar-e u*, second ed, Tehran, Alishah, 1955.
- [12] N. Yushij, *Majmu'e-ye Kamel-e Ash'ar Nima Yushij: Farsi va Tabari*, Tehran, Negah, 1992.