

Negative Capability: Through the Lens of Religious Philosophies of The East and The West

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Abstract—Negative capability is one of the most interesting theories by one of the most beautiful creations of the Romantic era. Keats, though not recognized in his times, mostly happens with great figures, but, in modern times, his theory can be applied to every field where people work. This study is going to assess the literary meaning of the term ‘negative capability’, its applicability in Keats’ letters and poetry, its relation with the religious philosophies of the East as well as the West, and how it can transform the lives of the practitioners through the medium of meditation.

Keats is mainly concerned with the sublime idea of imagination, form and style in creating poetry of high rank. His own life experiences and the natural poetic gift shaped his views about poet, poem and poetry. His theory of ‘Negative Capability’ originated through his suffering in life and ultimately by facing extremely adverse circumstances rather than succumbing to them. Moreover, he used to go to watch the plays of Shakespeare and the actor Kean¹.

Keats used to open his heart to his family and friends by writing letters at different periods. These letters are the primary source to know and comprehend his basic philosophy of ‘silent mind²’ and ‘negative capability³’ which he practised in his own short life and experienced the state of mind which is known as ‘Superconsciousness⁴’ in the Indian religious philosophy. In the Yogic philosophy⁵, when a meditator meditates on a certain object for a consistent period and merges herself into that to experience the subjectivity of the object by way of empathy, she transforms into the concerned object and becomes one.

However, this and similar techniques are also prevalent in all the religious philosophies of the world which can be studied from the literary point of view as the ‘collective consciousness’ runs through all of us. In modern times, negative capability is studied as the literary theory of ambiguity and the theory of absurdism given by Albert Camus.

All the renowned writers like Shakespeare, John Donne, Milton, Pope, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, Shelley, Eliot, Emerson, Thoreau, and Tagore have sung the praises of detachment, depersonalization, objectivity as the religious Gurus, Avatars, Prophets and leaders have taught the value of being one with oneself and losing one’s self in the Ultimate. So, this paper is a sincere effort to bring the literary and religious personalities on one platform to explore the idea of negative capability and its need in day-to-day life to make it better and worth living.

I. INTRODUCTION

Negative capability is a term first given by the young romantic poet John Keats while sharing letters with his brothers in 1817. He used it to mention the dramatic qualities of William Shakespeare while he was going to watch the superb acting in the plays by the popular actor Edmund Keans. Keats describes the term as a capability of a writer when he remains in a space leaving behind philosophical thinking, and through his vision creates an artistic work of high rank. Here, the ‘silent mind’ or the ‘unconscious mind’ of the writer takes part in the creative process by choosing not to be involved in habitual activities, thoughts or feelings but rather adopts a way out to the ‘Socratic paradox⁷’ of knowing only that one does not know.

Keats ‘negative capability’ and ‘disinterestedness’ align strongly with the critical theories as well as with the religious philosophies of the world. Shakespeare’s ‘frenzy’, William Wordsworth’s ‘emotions recollected in tranquillity’ and ‘wise passivity’, Coleridge’s ‘willing suspension of disbelief’, T. S. Eliot’s ‘impersonality’, ‘depersonalization’, ‘objective correlative’, Albert Camus’s ‘absurdism’, Rimbaud’s ‘the systematic derangement of the senses’ and so on. All agree on one state of mind where the loss of the self in identification with the truth of the world is a must to become a visionary and create the unknown. Similarly, the religious temperament sings the praises of being objective and moving with the flow sans disturbing both the inner and the outer balance of life. Hinduism talks about ‘Sthit Pragnya⁸’, Buddhism considers ‘Middle Path⁹’, Sikhism says ‘Gurmukh, Brahma Gyani and Khalsa¹⁰’ and so on. All these and many more have their religious books written mostly in poetic forms as poetry is the religion of a poet. They can change with the change of the poetic situation and can create wonders with the flow of their metrical compositions. Keats said about himself that ‘he is a chameleon poet’ who has no stable identity and can be with all and none at the same time.

The teachings of the greatest writers of the world along with the teachings of the Prophets and Avatars who give a common message of unity of beings as well as remaining detached and objective in day-to-day affairs applying the technique of meditation can help the present world by assimilating their ideas and practising them daily. Moreover, a man can learn 'steady wisdom' taught by the Bhagavad Gita¹¹ and the practice of abstinence from active life choosing rather than just 'being' or 'empty' which normally remains occupied with thoughts, feelings, and emotions all the time. In this way, the stress and strains of a busy life can be unloaded and a man can get back to his existence by connecting himself with the philosophical wisdom of everlasting essence. Surely, past and future won't disturb anyone who establishes oneself in such a state of balanced mind. Hazlitt said, "A man's nature is originally and essentially disinterested".

II. ORIGIN OF THE WORD 'NEGATIVE CAPABILITY'

To begin with, literally the term 'negative capability' looks like an odd paradox which seems to be defining it as active passiveness or action without action. This vagueness can be resolved by explaining the literal meaning of the term. In Western civilization, the word 'negative' has several meanings as nothingness, denying, undesirable, rejection, refusal, prohibition and so on. However, Keats used it to signify freedom from routine worries, thoughts and troubles of life. On the other hand, the word 'capability' has its origin in the Greek language which means 'capacious' and ultimately denotes roomy, able to hold much or spacious. Thus, capability is both capacity and ability as well. If both words are brought together, they refer to the ability of the mind to empty itself and make room for the thoughts to leave without involving in unnecessary troubles and creating fuss rather than using its capability in creation.

M. H. Abrams says Negative Capability, in 'A Glossary of Literary Terms', is to "characterize an impersonal or objective author as opposed to a subjective one who is personally involved with the characters and actions represented in a work of literature and as opposed to an author who uses a literary work to present his or her personal beliefs" (194). So, it can be said that the author possessing negative capability gives up his personal beliefs and entirely identifies himself with the object he likes to describe or be part of. In religious contexts, it is the merging of a disciple with the soul of the Guru or with the Ultimate and realizing Him with naked eyes.

III. NEGATIVE CAPABILITY IN THE LETTERS AND POETRY OF KEATS

Negative capability was first used by the young romantic poet John Keats to describe the writer's competence to perceive artistic beauty even when adversity in any form creates confusion and trouble. Many writers, leaders and philosophers all over the world have since been using this term to describe it as the ability of an individual to think, feel, perceive and create beyond any predetermined capacity of the human being. In the religious context, it clears all doubts, uncertainties, mysteries etc. from all the spheres of the mind and a soul gets merged with the whole universe or with the Ultimate Reality and gets Moksha or Nirvana¹² according to Hinduism and Buddhism ideologies respectively.

However, Keats used this term while writing a letter to his brothers George and Thomas, on 21. 27 December, 1817. Through this letter, Keats tried to describe his artistic and poetic philosophy, especially concerning William Shakespeare's ability to remain in a state of uncertainty and embrace contradictions, doubts and mysteries sans pursuing any rational answers which is a sign of a great artist, and necessary to achieve exceptional artistic expression. Thus, he wrote:

I had not a dispute but a disquisition with Dilke, upon various subjects; several things dove-tailed in my mind, and at once it struck me what quality went to form a Man of Achievement, especially in Literature, and which Shakespeare possessed so enormously-I mean Negative Capability, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason-Coleridge, for instance, would let go by a fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the Penetralium of mystery, from being incapable of remaining content with half-knowledge. This pursued through volumes would perhaps take us no further than this, that with a great poet, the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration.

Keats, while praising Shakespeare, writes that an artist of high rank recreates through the intensity of his work, and experiences soul-making. He transmits his own unifying soul experience to the viewer, even though the work is uglier, and incorporates it into a beautiful harmony because of his preoccupations with the truth. And, while criticizing Coleridge, Keats declares that Coleridge had a strong liking for German idealistic philosophy which mars his artistic creation and that is the reason he looks for even minor details to fill his artistic board but he is not ready to leave the things lurking in mystery.

Throughout his poetry and letters, Keats shared his idea that beauty is invaluable in itself and that it need not declare that it is essential in any way. The idea of "disinterestedness" about which Keats and Benjamin Bailey had often talked at Oxford had shaken his impulsiveness to apply it to his personal experience. The realization of "disinterestedness" indicates the futility, in a universe of uncertainties, of the things we possess and further our attachment and possessiveness of those things. Negative capability was not meant for submission or leaving the things as they are. He wrote in his letter:

I am certain of nothing but the holiness of the Heart's affection and the truth of imagination – what the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth whether it existed before or not – for I have the same idea of all our Passions as of Love they are all in their sublime, creative of essential Beauty. ... The imagination may be compared to Adam's dream (Paradise Lost, VIII – 452-490) - he awoke and found its truth – I am the more zealous in this affair because I have never been able to perceive how anything can be known for truth by consecutive reasoning – and yet it must be – can it be that even the greatest philosopher ever arrived at his goal without putting aside numerous objections. However, it may be, O for a Life of Sensation rather than of Thoughts! (Bate 238)

It is this ability of the artist's mind to hold out a beautiful truth even though it does not take care of intellectuality or reasoning that Keats praises in Shakespeare. Poetry should be the outcome of the Negative Capability. It reflects an impersonal or objective author who can keep aesthetic distance from the work he produces, as opposed to a subjective author who is personally a part of one or the other characters or actions of the story. It is this negation of self which characterized Shakespeare, and the ability of the writer to face adversity, not through fact and reason but through an understanding of its true nature which aligns with the concept of 'Acceptance' and 'Detachment' under all circumstances of life in the religious context. It involves the ability to identify oneself with the subject of one's poetry, art or any action one is involved in because it provides balance and stability in life. William Shakespeare was indubitably the master in handling such kind of art. Keats attended the great literary critic William Hazlitt's "Literature on the English Poets" and was undoubtedly inspired by Hazlitt's Speech. According to Hazlitt:

Shakespeare's mind had the power of communication with all other minds – so that it contained a universe of thought and feeling within itself, and had no one peculiar bias, or exclusive excellence more than another...the least of an egoist that they could become. He had only to think of anything to become that thing, with all the circumstances belonging to it. (Hazlitt 11)

When Shakespeare conceived of any character, whether real or imaginary, he entered into all its thoughts and feelings and became one with the character himself. It is just like body experience which can be seen in religious philosophies of the world where a man's soul leaves his own body and enters into others as Sri Adi Shankaracharya¹³ did in his lifetime and remained in the body of a dead king for one month. Shakespeare could enter and merge into the personality of King Lear in his madness and this ability captured the attention making him the greatest of the dramatists. He possessed "Negative Capability" to such an extent that he could create an Iago or an Imogen with the same capacity. In this context, John Keats says himself: "A poet is the most unpoetical of anything in existence because he has no identity – he is continually in for and filling some other body".

Everyone can discover the untapped potential of a young romantic poet thanks to Keats' letters and a keen understanding of his poetry. Keats once said, "We detest poetry that seems to put its hand in its breeches pocket if it has a palpable design upon us and we disagree with it." Poetry should be magnificent and subtle, something that seeps into the spirit and surprises or astounds it with its subject rather than with itself. He is implying that we don't believe poetry that makes overt attempts to convince or convert us to the poet's viewpoint. It can also be argued that poetry should communicate through the strength of its image rather than the presence, more obliquely and objectively. Keats's poetry depicts a struggle between fate and the real world: the real world of sorrow, betrayal, uncertainty, and doubt, the timeless beauty and eternal truth of poetry and the capacity for human imagination. Lyrical Ballads was published twenty years after he wrote his most well-known poetry. Despite the differences between his poetry and that of Wordsworth and Coleridge, each had a lasting influence on his writing and poetic views.

Keats' odes display fundamental conflicts and inconsistencies. The lines "a drowsy numbness pains" and "both together, sane and mad" from "Ode to a Nightingale" demonstrate the contrasts in meaning and feeling. He views twofold nature as an intuitive or creative insight. The reader can experience the half-swooning emotion of the language and pass over the half-truths in silence in Ode to a Nightingale because of the apparent contradictions that Keats created and mixed with the sensual and hedonistic feeling of numbness. This allows the reader to live a life "of sensations rather than of thoughts!" The idea that thought is sublingual and that a word's "feel" is more significant than its meaning is applied by Keats. As such, we are unable, if language or actual words are scarce, to communicate our thoughts. Keats frequently addresses the feelings evoked by words as opposed to their meaning. Thus, Keats' poems equip us to discern unique meanings and uncertainties through Negative Capability. When beauty expresses truth both in its meaning and its words, it can be appreciated. For this reason, Keats's poetry embodies unique instances of beauty. Ode on a Grecian Urn (Lines 15-20) expresses this yearning when the poet says that the fair lad sitting beneath a tree cannot stop singing or the trees will never grow naked.

Even when he is so close to kissing his beloved, the lover will never be able to do so since the beauty of his beloved will never fade and will always endure. Keats seizes moments and preserves them to avert deterioration and change, basking in those instants in the realm of perfection. Keats' vision is in line with the highest vision of Indian saints, who can transcend the materialistic world and enter a realm of their imagination. These saints perceive joy in suffering, sadness in ecstasy, and abstain from all forms of attachment to people or things. He draws comparisons between dreams and reality, as well as between the real and the imagined and the tangible and the intangible. He appreciates beauty with complete knowledge knowing fully well that all things would perish sooner or later.

He shared his vision with writers like Wordsworth, Coleridge, Yeats, Tagore, Shakespeare and Saints as well as Prophets across the world that suffering is an essential part of life and the intensity of experience is the result of being wise in all such moments where great poetry or creative work is born in its entirety. Keats described suffering as a necessity for literary creation stating, “Do you not see how necessary a world of pains and troubles is to school an intelligence and make it a soul?” (NYT 38). His “negative capability” teaches that beauty is not to question, analyze or interpret but rather to appreciate, absorb and experience as it is.

In addition, negative capability inculcates the capacity in a man to find a centre, persevere, trust and create balance in life. Many poets and philosophers describe it as the ability of any individual to perceive, think and act without any preconceived ideas or human imagination. John Keats argued that a poet should be receptive rather than looking after every truth, uncertainty or doubt. Thus, all philosophies and preconceived notions about natural systems are rejected under this concept. Keats believed that Coleridge was always enquiring for a single, higher truth or solution to the mysteries of the natural world which ultimately spoilt the beauty of his work. He also found that Wordsworth and Dilke characterized their views of the human condition and the natural world as lacking impartiality, objectivity and universality. The poet receives impulses from the world, which is full of mystery and doubt, that are difficult to explain, but which the poet, with his special talent or skill and tranquil mind, can transform into art. “If poetry comes not as naturally as the leaves to a tree it had better not come at all.” “The genius of poetry must be saved in man. It should not be matured by law and order, but by feeling and awareness – the creator must create himself.” (Bate 233-234). It is a path from the rational “quest for certainty” in philosophical dialogue to the experience of philosophy nourished by the poetic element of negative capacity. Keats is fully satisfied with “half-knowledge” and it is the same faculty as Shakespeare, the “man of achievement” of poetry, possessed in abundance. According to Keats, the poet has no identity, he is constantly searching for something with full passion and devotion. Walter Jackson Bate reveals that in an uncertain and mysterious life where no system or formula can explain everything, only imaginative openness and greater acceptance of reality can create the balance needed in life.

Hence, honest resistance to temptation can try to put all understandings into a rational systematic structure, pacify one’s ego and man can transform his soul and merge with the whole. As a result, the intellect gets a boost and becomes strengthened, making one’s mind “the passageway of all thoughts.” Thus, in Keats and Shakespeare, the philosophy of accepting uncertainty and rejecting all mystery is present as an essential character. Thus, it can be noted that philosophy thrives on imaginative formation. Keats, like Shakespeare, is a wizard of words and tries to penetrate even the unconscious minds of men. It can be argued that he sees into the essence of all things and becomes everything – far and near, visible and invisible, physical and spiritual – as the prophets feel and become one with the entire nature and transform their souls into the Ultimate Reality.

In addition, the theories of existentialism and absurdism given by Soren Kierkegaard and Albert Camus respectively support the idea of negative capability and suggest that living in the circumstances as they appear in life and facing adversity as the universe where we live is irrational as well as meaningless and search to unify or creating any kind of discipline in it is a waste of time and energy. Instead, it is better to move with the flow. On the other hand, T.S. Eliot in ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ (1919) also focuses on ‘Impersonality’ which indicates that poetry should be distinct from the personality of its writer. The idea behind it is that a good work consists of pure objectivity and a writer must ‘self-sacrifice’ to his special awareness of the historical past which will be helpful to erase the personality of a creator from his creation. Wordsworth’s ‘emotions recollected in tranquillity’, Coleridge’s ‘willing suspension of disbelief’ and many other theories like Rimbaud’s ‘the systematic derangement of the senses’ in which he says one who wants to be a poet must give time to one’s awareness, entirety; and should search soul, inspect it, test it, learn it and after that cultivate it which can make one visionary through long, boundless and systematized disorganization of all the senses. He further suggests that it will help one to exhaust all the poison stored inside and make one capable of breaking free from the conventional ways of perceiving and experiencing the world which indicates the necessity of negative capability in the personality of a man.

The same power of derangement of senses from the outer world as well as the prime example of being objective and determined under extreme adversity is visible in the lives of Jesus Christ, Socrates and others. Similarly, in Sikhism, Sri Guru Arjan Dev Ji¹⁴ and Sri Guru Teg Bahadur Ji¹⁵ who sacrificed their precious lives singing the praises of the Lord or Akal Purukh¹⁶ (Waheguru) faced such reality of life:

“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34)

“Your actions seem sweet to me” (Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji, Ang 394)

Nevertheless, it is an example of supreme poetry holding negative capability as well as the ability to be in negativity but the same passes without touching the poet. It proves that the mind is unperturbed, silent and meditative under all conditions which gives clarity to the person to reach his final destination sans involvement in any tussle. All the states of mind i.e., the conscious, sub-conscious and unconscious are in full control of the person and he is set to experience the super-conscious or ‘Turiya’¹⁷ before final parting. A writer faces the same, though momentarily, and proposes the best for the reader to cull the best.

Nevertheless, Keats means to say that set philosophies and preconceived systems of nature be rejected to become a receptive poet; and search after fact and reason be left behind to experience the oneness with the object. It is believed that Keats had some knowledge of medical lines and he took the example from there by referring to the negative pole of an electric current which is passive and receptive and always receives the current from the positive pole. In the same way, the poet receives experiences from the world which consists of mysteries, uncertainties and doubts which are difficult to solve but anyhow, a poet or an artist of high quality can translate his conditions of mind into art or through his any kind of creativity or act through the medium of meditation which is also a yogic science in which a person step by step merges himself with the object he meditates which results in the oneness of object and subject and the truth is realized that gives birth to beauty and goodness in a person.

IV. NEGATIVE CAPABILITY IN THE RELIGIOUS PHILOSOPHIES

While the concept 'negative capability' itself originated in Western literature, it can be examined concerning various religious and philosophical perspectives, particularly with the context of critical theories in English literature [revealing intriguing intersections and divergencies.

All religions are agreed to unite the world based on moral and ethical values such as peace, equality, kindness, tolerance, patience, unity, non-discrimination and so on. These virtues are part and parcel of every religious philosophy and they are the stepping stones to success in the physical, emotional and spiritual world. Moreover, each one of them is a key in itself which has the potential to connect humanity at large though the opposite can disconnect and destroy the human race with everlasting destructive consequences. One essential practice which runs common among all of them is 'Meditation' which can transform a soul from the lower ladder to the peak of success by inculcating the value of negative capability. It is already mentioned in the above discussion that negative capability has been described by writers from around the world in different contexts and texts. Various masters in literature and other fields have proven that this value has the foremost place in the present moment and can save the world from destruction at an individual level.

Etymologically, the word 'meditation' is taken from the Old French 'meditacioun' which is again taken from the Latin 'meditatio' from the verb 'meditari' which means 'to think, contemplate or ponder'. In English, the word 'meditation' stands for Eastern spiritual practice which is known as 'dhyana' in Hinduism and Buddhism and which is again taken from the Sanskrit root 'dhyai' which also means 'to meditate or contemplate'. However, looking at different viewpoints of various religions and schools of philosophy, no single universal definition of meditation can be finalized as there is a distinction between technique and tradition in each one of them. Still, it is a common practice to denote it as thinking deeply about something, focusing one's mind attentively on a certain object for a while, involving oneself in any art, skill or act to the verge of experiencing out-of-body experience, here and now, or engage fully in any mental activity to touch the level of spiritual enhancement and awareness of extreme level.

Meditation was a religious practice once but nowadays; it has taken a new turn and it is popular among every man as a way to live happily and in peace. It is essential in developing the 'negative capability' among other things as the world is full of uncertainties and doubts challenging a person to face death, decay, adversity, poverty, discrimination etc. regularly though a person has to leave this world sooner or later. Regarding it, Shakespeare has beautifully written:

"All the world's a stage,

And all the men and women are merely players;

They have their exits and their entrances;

One man in his time plays many parts,

His acts being seven ages."

Truly, in all the different stages of life, there is not a single day which goes without worrying about one or the other thing until a person has started living with the 'negative capability' through the practice of meditation or in creating beauty through some art or other engrossing work. Keats talks about the passivity and humility of a great writer like Shakespeare in a letter written to his friend Richard Woodhouse on 27th October 1818 in which he describes 'the poetical character', he maintained,

"is not itself – it has no self – it is everything and nothing – it has no character – it enjoys light and shade; it lives in gusto, be it foul or fair, high or low, rich or poor, mean or elevated – it has as much delight in an Iago (the villain of Shakespeare's Othello) as an Imogen (Shakespeare's heroine in Cymbeline). What shocks the virtuous philosopher delights the camelion[sic] poet".

The word 'gusto' was used by Keats' contemporary, the famous essayist and critic William Hazlitt, to explain the passion for a work which makes the artist create any form he likes as an objective identity. Similarly, Keats said that great poets had gusto as they don't let their personal opinions impede their creativity in any way: a poet, he told Woodhouse, "has no identity – he is continually informing and filling some other Body". Keats talks about his nature as a chameleon poet and says that he would watch sparrows from his window and pick about with them in the gravel. He wrote to his friend Benjamin Bailey on 27th November 1817:

"In passing however I must say one thing that has pressed upon me lately and increased my humility and capability of submission, and that is the truth – Men of Genius are great as certain ethereal Chemicals operating on the Mass of neutral intellect – but they have not any individuality, any determined Character".

And Keats found this genius nature in none other than William Shakespeare 'himself who possessed 'negative capability' in abundance and 'so enormously'. In the same way, the Gurus, Prophets, Avatars, and numerous Saints from every nation and culture have written classical works of enormous heights focusing their attention and awareness on the emptiness or actless act which is the source of being in all or none at the same time and it becomes possible only when the consciousness is turned towards the internal source of wisdom through the consistent practice of meditation and samadhi (a state of nothingness). So, it can be easily said that the concept of 'negative capability' is a must to transform oneself and take flight from the transitory nature of things to eternity.

All religions have their ways of reaching the Ultimate which indicates that though the directions are different the destination is the same. However, artists in numerous fields have the same opinion but their methods of talking about the inner world and getting connected with it may be different. They use poetry, drama, painting, dancing, singing and similar skills, experience transcendentalism and sing the praises of the Creator in their ways.

In Hinduism, the concept of 'negative capability' aligns with the principle of non-attachment or 'vairagya' and acceptance of paradoxes to encourage individuals to embrace uncertainty and impermanence without seeking definitive answers, and detaching from worldly outcomes, allowing for deeper spiritual insight. Krishna in Gita (sloka 55) talks about 'Steady Wisdom' or 'Sthit Prajna' in which one attains the experience of the soul and all matters of the outer and inner world are settled sans any raga or dwesha (love or hate) and a state of equanimity arises which makes it easier for a man to push away the non-essence and attain the essence i.e., Pure Self. Moreover, one leaves all the desires running deep in the mind and fixes one's attention on Atman or Soul. This is a stage when he is with 'Truth' all the time sees 'Beauty' in all the things and shares his 'Goodness' or 'Joy' with all. 'Sthit Prajna' is a Sanskrit term which means 'contented, calm, firm in judgement and wisdom'; whereas 'Sthit' indicates 'existing, being and firmly resolved to and 'Prajna' means 'wise, clever and intelligent', and together they describe 'a man of steady wisdom'. This is a concept prevalent in Hinduism and is achieved through the regular practice of meditation. In addition, Advaita Vedanta talks about 'jivatman' (individual self) as illusory but in actuality is identical to the Supreme Brahma who is 'non-dual' Atman. It happened with Keats many a time when he merged himself with the object he focused as in 'Ode to Nightingale' or 'Ode to the Grecian Urn' and in the latter he declares his famous lines,

"Beauty is truth, truth beauty"

which is a clear indication of his experiencing the religious concept of the East i.e., Satyam Shivam Sundaram as well as Sat Chit Ananda, and unknowingly catching glimpses of a humble attitude towards the Ultimate. Similarly, in Patanjali's Yoga Sutra (c.400CE), eight limbs are mentioned which lead one to 'Kaivalya' (aloneness) in which meditation is one of them which undoubtedly was gained by Keats, Shakespeare and many others without their knowledge (of the Eastern thought) through the practice of being one with the object they brought their attention to. As Yoga Sutra says, "It is the power to focus the consciousness on a given spot, and hold it their Attention is the first and indispensable step in all knowledge."

In Jainism, meditation focuses on realizing the true self, attaining final salvation and making the soul free which is also a natural tendency to great extent in all the artists and resultantly they develop the ability to cross the boundaries of materialistic values and grow with their art only. The practitioner tries to be a knower-seer and all the attachments to the outer world are left behind. Furthermore, the Jain concept of 'Anekantavada' or multiplicity of viewpoints is akin to negative capability. Both recognize the value of holding multiple perspectives and limitations of human understanding. Moreover, the ideas of non-attachment (Aparigraha), equanimity, detachment, self-awareness and non-violence (Ahimsa) etc., are all akin to the non-judgmental and receptive nature of negative capability. On the other hand, in Buddhism – the main aim of meditation is to achieve 'Nirvana' or final awakening which leads one to live a life of middle path in which all the extremes of life as happiness or sadness are sacrificed and a person becomes purely objective or having no self as what Eliot talks 'impersonality' in his essay 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' in which the poet leaves his personality and merges it in the object he studies. He writes, "Poetry is not a turning loose of emotions, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality. But, of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things." Buddhism also emphasizes impermanence and the acceptance

of suffering (Dukkha) shares a parallel with negative capability. Moreover, the ideas of non-attachment, mindfulness and awareness, paradox and middle way and direct experience teach life's complexities and insight into the nature of reality.

In Sikhism, 'Simran' (meditation) and good deeds are the prerequisites to attain the devotee's spiritual goals and without achieving the latter, the former is useless. Sikhism is a monotheistic religion with beliefs in mysticism and surrender to the will of the Divine (Hukam), embracing complexities of life i.e., the coexistence of joys and sorrows and emphasising individual experiences and direct connection with the Divine without seeking logical or rational explanations as in negative capability. Here, Sikhs practice meditation to realize and feel the everlasting blessing and presence of God or Waheguru and leave themselves to the 'Divine Will'. Keats left himself in the lap of nature and felt the eternity while declaring that

"A thing of beauty is a joy forever"

As it is a constant and never-ending source of gladness and pleasure. Its loveliness always increases with the passage of time and its charm never vanishes. The same is experienced by the devotees in Sikhism (and in others too) while finding union with God. Despite all the adversities, uncertainties, doubts or mysteries in life hit them hard, they prove their oneness with their Guru or God as can be seen in the history of Sikhism where Sri Guru Arjan Dev ji, Sri Guru Teg Bahadur Ji, Sri Guru Gobind Singh Ji and plethora of Sikhs did sacrifice their lives for the religion and did humungous as well as unparalleled deeds of intrepidity and invincibility which is a prime example of 'Supreme Negative Capability' where one is sure of death but still balanced inside and ready to leave the world with a calm and silent mind. It can be seen when Sri Guru Teg Bahadur Ji was being tortured by the Muslim ruler, Aurangzeb¹⁸, to give up His ideology to save His life. Guruji said, "He who is unaffected by praise or blame or honour or ignominy, with whom gold and iron are alike; sayeth Nanak, listen O' mind, he is liberated."

However, the same kind of sacrifice was done by Jesus Christ when He was crucified brutally on the cross and in the open. The same cross has become a dwelling place of God for all Christians now which proves the power of meditation and negative capability possessed so enormously by Christ too. In Christianity, they focus their attention on the words or passages from the Bible and reflect or contemplate on their meanings and merge themselves with them and try to attain union with the Lord and attain the beauty of the heart which gives real power to a being. In the case of Keats' 'Hyperion', he compares beauty with truth, saying, "For it's the eternal law, that first in beauty should be first in might" and further focused his keen attention on the object of his odes and touched the unknown layers of his mind from where the unsaid was said and abstract was concretized. And this is also possible when one gets the 'wise passivity' of Wordsworth in a moment or so and experiences the 'knowable and unknowable' of Plato while contemplating the Divine. In addition, it believes in parables that lead to open interpretations as negative capability does while embracing the unanswered, having faith and trust in God's plan even in the face of uncertainty, humility and open-mindedness and the themes of transcendentalism and mysticism, embracing the unknown without seeking immediate resolutions.

In Chinese meditation, 'Tao or Dao' is known as a way, route, path, principle or holistic belief. It ultimately refers to the natural order of the universe which can be attained through one's intuition to gain the individual wisdom which is eternally nameless. One's awareness can be enhanced with the practice of deep concentration, intent contemplation and perfect absorption which help one in disciplining and balancing one's mind and shun the oddities which Lionel Trilling proposes as 'the wisdom of avoidance'¹⁹ in all the adversities of life which is another name for negative capability. In such a state of mind, no fight or flight response that the autonomic nervous system provides is present rather it is void of any such reactions and can be part of any artist, scientist or religious person.

In Judaism, in the Old Testament, two Hebrew words namely 'haga' and 'siha' respectively denote 'to sigh or murmur' and 'to muse or rehearse in one's mind' which also indicate meditation. These and similar practices are part of Judaism and they help analyze and reflect to make oneself capable of comprehending any mystical concept or experience lurking in the deepest and untouched layers of the mind about which Luce Irigaray emphasized the benefit of listening to the unsaid dimension of discourse in psychoanalytic practice – something which may throw some reflection on the unconscious dimension of the person being analyzed who needs to surrender himself in the form of hypnosis. Hence, introspection and visualization help one in creating balance inside by surrendering oneself and repenting in the presence of God. On the other hand, in Islamic tradition, including Sufism, 'Dhikr (Zikr)' is a style of meditation that believes in remembering and reciting the name of Allah or God. Sufism also believes in controlling of breath and repetition of holy words in addition to intent introspection, reflection upon the universe and a state of openness and vulnerability before the Divine mysteries to learn the art of living at a point where understanding anything logically does not matter. Michel Foucault describes it as the point of life which lies as close as possible to the impossibility of living. Similar practices such as mindfulness etc. are also present in the Parsis tradition. These practices make one a balanced person in life and one grasps the 'unthought unknown' so that the death, decay and adversity just pass as a wave in the water or a cloud in the sky.

Zen or zazen meditation is popular among Chinese Buddhist sources as well as Japanese Buddhist Rinzai Schools in addition to Korean as well as Vietnamese schools of meditation. It can be practiced by following the breath (anapanasati²⁰), by repeating the

mantra i.e., any phrase, and by just monitoring any thought or feeling that emerges in the mind and paying close attention to that. Keats without practicing any of these techniques used to engross in the objectivity of the things forgetting himself, observing and letting go of thoughts and feelings and losing his self or identity so that the real nature of things be identified to create a work of art. For him, it was a sudden realization of something higher and he used to pen it down as a similar awakening happens in ‘Satori’²¹ in Japanese Buddhism that leads to deeper realization and understanding of the world around. Moreover, one becomes able to see into the true nature of things without the help of logic or reasoning as Keats in his letter to Benjamin Bailey in 1817 wrote:

“I am the more zealous in this affair because I have never yet been able to perceive how anything can be known for truth by consecutive reasoning.”

He believed in the power of first-hand imagination without any touch of logic and reasoning which can mar the beauty and originality of the work being produced. So, he emphasized and praised Shakespeare because his work was the result of negative capability and his ever-present absence from each of his characters.

The relationship between Keats and other religious seekers is one of sublime yet it is so far unexplored as it is about the silent space between the words, not just the words themselves. Jack Kerouac points out Keats in his ‘Scripture of the Golden Eternity’ that ‘there is no me because all is emptiness. I am empty, I am non-existent. All is bliss.’ The Heart Sutra of Zen declares that ‘Form is emptiness, emptiness is form’; so, what the artist discovers in negative space (popular in Japanese minimalism²²), the mystic finds in pure awareness, free from the clutter of wandering thoughts or ‘monkey mind’.

In the modern period, negative capability can be studied as a literary theory of ambiguity in which a reader reads a poem, but is unsure, uncertain, and in doubts about the exact meaning of the poem so he rereads it and tries to identify the apt meanings which keeps the interest of the reader intact. Hence, he slowly absorbs himself in the poem and gets the meaning that can shape his inner world. In the same way, the reader of the inner world in the religions dives deep inside by practising the set standards or the suggested channels and loses his personality by experiencing the unity of beings, and out-of-body experience.

Moreover, William Empson in ‘Seven Types of Ambiguity’ claims that ‘the mechanizations of ambiguity are among its very roots’ and it moves from simple ambiguity such as double meaning to outright contradictions. However, according to the pioneer of reader-response theory, Rosenblatt-it is the mutual bond between the reader and the text that a literary text is created in some context at a specific time under certain conditions contrary to the New Criticism approach which emphasizes some objective meaning already available in the work under query or examination. It is helpful for the reader to develop a sense of mystery while reading instead of finding out each rationale behind the writer’s thought which can impede the growth of negative capability in the reader. On the other hand, if the same reader tries her hand at writing some unknown topic, she can surely get into the headspace of writing with uncertainty and doubts which can open new gates of cognitive development to create the unimaginable poem, story or anything else.

In recent times, negative capability was used by the psychoanalyst – Wilfred Bion – who described it as the capacity in a person not to react, to bear ambiguity and anxiety without dispersing the tension into compulsive acting or intellectualizing. If a patient is attentive and does not succumb to the pain, fear, tension, blame or denial and can remain in a situation where the unconscious can speak itself, he becomes capable of attaining negative capability. It is certainly true that no effort ever goes to waste on this path and a man who follows it even partially can benefit immensely from this practice. This is the particular power artists need to face psychological challenges to pursue their interpretation of beauty. Psalm 42 says ‘Deep calls unto deep’ when appreciation of beauty exceeds word and logic. The analogous thought is also given by the Brazilian philosopher, Roberto Mangabeira Unger, who claims that the art of negative capability can bring democratic empowerment when one learns the trick of living in the present and does not rely on any given or predetermined idea, movement or context of any kind. As a result, it unfolds creativity and psychic growth where one can resist the rigid social divisions and hierarchies which unlock the chains and bind us to a set standard of life. For him, it is a way to awaken to the realities of capitalist oppression and the possibilities of rebellion.

Finally, the presence of negative capability in the present world is as essential as breath for each living being. Right from birth to death, there is not a single day a man lives without uncertainties and complexities. The seven stages of life about which Shakespeare wrote in his play ‘As You Like It’ clearly depict it. When a child acquaints herself with the world, she starts facing reality and its ups and downs which prepare her for the paradoxes of life. In school and college life, she comes in contact with the teachers and her mind remains in dilemma and doubts about her outcomes even though her best efforts are put in. Growing up as a married person, she meets with the uncertainties of new relationships and their long-term effects. Further, working in an office or anywhere else, she too faces the targets, their consequences, their implications and the final results which linger in the subconscious for a long. As a parent, she handles the family having different mental make-ups and suffers due to various expectations which may spoil the relations suddenly. Moreover, as an old person, she becomes dependent on others or expects others to work for her which surely kills her values. Is there any situation in life out of the above where a person can sustain for long without following the middle path suggested

by Buddha or John Keats to remain in mysteries and contradictions without succumbing to adversities? Is such a state of mind possible without practising meditation or being in 'now and here'? Can anyone deny the values suggested by the great authors or artists and all the Prophets and Saints to adopt the virtues of tolerance, patience and wisdom to attain the final liberation or unity of beings? A soldier, a sportsperson, a doctor, a lawyer, a teacher, a leader, a politician, an actor, an artist, an engineer, or an officer all need to develop the negative capability to live a peaceful and happy life. For this, one needs to practice living in a state of equilibrium and must drop the reasoning and logic at certain times to go beyond; and enjoy the mysteries and complexities of life or accept life as it comes as it is the real and eternal source of beauty, truth and goodness to what Hindu scriptures describe as 'Satyam Shivam Sundaram' or the state of 'Sat Chit Ananda'. Buddha said,

"Everything arises and passes away, when you see this, you are above sorrow. This is the shining way."

Keats himself said, "With the great poet the sense of beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration."

It points out that the religion of a poet, an artist, a wise philosopher or any religious Guru is to merge into the Ultimate is 'Beauty' for one and 'God' for another. This is the union of Eastern and Western thought which is beyond boundaries and fencing around it is an impossible idea. Hence, meditation as an essential practice must be a part of everybody's life so that such an inner balance and negative capability be created to raise the consciousness to the highest peak of 'Samadhi' suggested in 'Yoga Sutra'; and 'to live in uncertainty, mystery and doubt' according to John Keats.

V. CONCLUSION

This article focuses mainly on the critical analysis of the concept of 'Negative Capability' given by John Keats and its relevance in the religious philosophies of the East as well as the West. Moreover, it tries to explore the deep connotation of negative capability and its application in the poetry and letters of Keats along with its applicability in different critical theories. Keats gives a clear road map to the poets to acquire the sublime imagination to experience the deeper knowledge of beauty and truth. Further, he, like many religious thinkers and their ideologies, considers that a poet can empty himself, feel the out-of-body experience and enrich his sensibility towards things around him. The practice of negative capability not only prepares one to face all the adversities and uncertainties of life but also teaches how to come out of these hard-to-win circumstances of life. All the religions unanimously agree to create balance in life and let the hardships cross themselves without disturbing the inner calmness and stability so that the spiritual bliss falls without interruption. For it, one needs to grasp the idea of being in 'now and here' while practising meditation which suits one's mentality and nature. Keats himself faced numerous tragedies in life which naturally enriched and filled him with the idea of negative capability though he first used this term for the greatest dramatist - William Shakespeare who possessed it in abundance. This paper is its unique try and effort to bring out the similarity between the idea of negative capability in literature and religious philosophies across the world. In addition, it is kept in mind to create the rhythm between both of them so that both the fields can be comprehended in each other's light and the forgotten essential values of religions can be practiced leaving behind today's logic and reason which have already spoilt the mentality of millions of people. In the end, it can be said that while the concept of negative capability originated in Western culture, it is conceptually aligned with the religions and philosophical perspectives of the East and the West. Its exploration enriches critical approaches in English literature by inviting readers to engage with texts in a way that embraces uncertainty, complexity and multiple meanings. It centres around the notion of adopting meditation as a daily practice so that the modern lifestyle and its stress, strain, worry, anxiety and depression can be reduced to a minimum and anybody can live a richer life by balancing one's inner and outer world. As a result, one becomes capable of sharing the same aura with others.

JOHN KEATS:

Born (31st October 1795) Moorgate, London, United Kingdom



Died (23rd February, 1821)

Rome, Italy

VI. END NOTES

1. Kean: (Edmund) Kean was a famous British (Shakespearean) stage actor born in England who played various roles in the plays of Shakespeare.
2. Silent Mind: A term used by John Keats to describe the unconscious mind in his poem 'Sleep and Poetry'.
3. Negative Capability: A term used by Keats to describe the ability of a person to remain calm under the adverse situations of life.
4. Superconsciousness: It is a state of mind that can transcend the limitations of the conscious, sub-conscious and unconscious mind. However, one can get true knowledge through the undiscovered dimensions of the mind and can transfer it to the conscious mind.
5. Yogic Philosophy: One of the six major orthodox schools of Hindu philosophy. Yoga Sutras of Patanjali provide in-depth knowledge about the philosophy of yoga in a systematic way.
6. Collective Consciousness: A term first used by the French sociologist Emile Durkheim in his 'The Division of Labor' in 1893 and it referred to the set of shared beliefs, ideas and moral attitudes which operate as a unifying force within society.
7. Socratic Paradox: It is a strange conclusion by Socrates that nobody ever does anything wrong knowingly.
8. Sthit Pragyā: The person who has attained the perfect wisdom and has experienced the truth from within.
9. Middle Path: Refers to the Buddha's resistance to accept any extreme theory or practice.
10. Gurmukh, Brahma Gyani and Khalsa: These are terms used in Sikhism and given by the first, fifth and tenth Gurus of the Sikhs respectively for the person who lives his life according to the will of the Guru and surrenders himself in the feet of the Ultimate.
11. Bhagavad-Gita: A 700-verse Hindu scripture which is a part of the epic Mahabharata.
12. Moksha or Nirvana: In Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism Jainism and Yogic school, it is a state of the highest meditative consciousness.
13. Sri Adi Shankaracharya: 8th-century Indian Vedic scholar and teacher (Acharya).
14. Sri Guru Arjan Dev Ji: The fifth Guru of the Sikhs who compiled the first official edition of the Sikh scripture called the Adi Granth. He is the first Guru who was martyred in the Sikh faith and was tortured and executed in 1606.
15. Sri Guru Teg Bahadur Ji: The ninth Guru of the Sikhs who sacrificed his life for the Hindu faith, and he was beheaded in 1675.
16. Akal Purukh: It is an interchangeable name for the God or the omnipresent Divine in Sikh philosophy.
17. Turiya: In Hindu philosophy, it is the true self or soul (atman) beyond the three common states of consciousness i.e., waking, dreaming and deep dreamless sleep.
18. Aurangzeb: He was the Mughal emperor who reigned from 1658 until he died in 1707.
19. The Wisdom of Avoidance: This is a term given by the American literary critic Lionel Trilling by which he means to avoid a situation which may spoil the inner calm and peace, and remain in a state of mind which brings clarity to handle the situation effectively.
20. Anapanasati: It is a meditation technique attributed to Gautam Buddha. In it, a practitioner focuses mindfully on the inhalation and exhalation of the breath so it is also known as mindfulness meditation.
21. Satori: It refers to the experience of awakening or seeing one's true nature according to the Japanese Buddhist and Zen traditions.

22. Japanese Minimalism: It is inspired by Japan's Zen Buddhism and focuses on keeping life simple, clean and limited to the essentialities of life or living life as simply as possible

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