

The Role of Grief, Faith, and Meaning of Life: In the High Mountains of Portugal By Yann Martel

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Abstract

The current paper aims to explore the relationship between grief, faith, and the human urge to find meaning in life. ‘*The High Mountains of Portugal*’ (2016) presents religion as a flexible and culturally shaped experience. Religion is not fixed; rather, it changes according to a person's emotions, cultural contexts, and their lifestyle. By focusing on faith and spirituality, this study examines how the central characters in Martel's novels respond to trauma, grief, and loneliness. Religion functions as a source of strength and guidance in times of deep uncertainty. Martel presents the image of the “high mountains” to symbolize the difficult yet meaningful journey towards truth and inner peace. The narrative offers pilgrimage as both a physical journey and a search for the self. By importing ideas from postmodernism, this paper argues that believing in God helps individuals to reconstruct their sense of purpose. This study highlights, that belief and imagination assist individuals to coping with loss and sustaining hope in an uncertain world.

Keywords: *Grief, Trauma, Religion, Spiritual faith, Memory, Pilgrimage.*

Introduction

Yann Martel is a contemporary Canadian author who is best known for his Man Booker Prize-winning Novel *Life of Pi* (2001). His literary career includes *Life of Pi*, *High Mountains of Portugal*, *Beatrice and Virgil*, and *Self*. His short stories include: *The Facts Behind the Helsinki Roccamatios*, *Manners of Dying*, and *Mirrors to Last till Kingdom Come*.

The present novel, *The High Mountains of Portugal* (2016), deals with the themes of Grief, Religious faith, and meaning. Grief and suffering are central parts of human life. They show how individuals respond to loss and help them in reconstructing meaning in life. When people experience grief, it often disturbs their emotional balance and creates confusion. Memory preserves the presence of what is lost, but later intensifies both pain and reflection. Grief is not about sadness but it also reminds us of whom we lost. Gradually, people turn to religion and spirituality to find the right direction in life. During difficulties, religion provides us comfort, guidance and hope in life. Religion in the novel cannot be seen as a fixed system, rather it changes from one person to another person. In such moments, religion becomes flexible and evolving phenomenon. The novel *The High Mountains of Portugal* (2016), offers a critical idea on grief, faith and the search for meaning. The main characters struggle with loss and search for meaning. The novel *The High Mountains of Portugal* is divided into three parts: Homeless, Homeward, Home. In the first part, Tomas is deeply affected by the sudden death of his beloved family. That incident led him into unusual behaviour. Similarly, In the second part Eusebio is a central character. He does not experience grief directly but his suffering appears emotional detachment and emptiness. In the last Part of the novel Peter experience grief and isolation after his wife's death. He finds solace in the companionship with a chimpanzee called Odo. These interconnected narratives present the characters who struggle with trauma, loneliness, and loss. The characters slowly develop belief and imagination to cope with uncertainties. In spite of increasing narratives, limited scope has been given to religion as a lived experience. In *The High Mountains of Portugal* (2016), the idea of pilgrimage represents both physical and search for identity and purpose. In postmodern perspective truth is not fixed, but it is built through individual experiences. This paper argues religion is a personal experience to everyone which shapes us as emotional and cultural beings. Faith and imagination will help individuals to rebuild their sense of purpose in this undetermined world.

Reflection of Grief and Memory in High Mountains of Portugal

Pain is a physical or emotional feeling while suffering refers to the personal understanding of that pain as injury or threat. Individuals experience grief in different ways which leads them to engage deeply with questions of spirituality and suffering. In *The High Mountains of Portugal* (2016), Yann Martel portrays grief not as a simple emotional response but as a deeply disruptive force. "In the course of one-week Gaspar died on Monday, Dora on Thursday, his father on Sunday his heart became undone like a bursting cocoon" (Martel p.8). After losing their loved ones, the characters experience emotional numbness, confusion, and isolation. As Martel states "Death often comes disguised as life, a mass of exuberant, anomalous cells or, like a murderer, it leaves a clue, a smoking gun, the sclerotic caking of an artery, before fleeing the scene" (Martel p.137). Death is unpredictable it appears suddenly and creates a lot of impact. Tomás's silence and unusual behaviour like walking backwards shows the symbolism of not moving forward expressively after loss. Through the novel all the characters reflect on the psychological trauma, where ordinary life becomes difficult to accept. His withdrawal from normal life suggests that trauma cannot always be articulated through language. Grief often exists beyond words. Grief is an individual matter and a social emotion. According to Nina Jokoby grief "emerges from relationships, attachments,

expectations, and obligations". What makes Martel's novel unique is that, it reflects the universal nature of grief when presenting it in a postmodern world. Death in the novel involves pain, memory, and confusion. MC dos. Santos, states that "It is not just a reaction to personal loss but also a cultural and performative ritual." However, Martel goes further by showing grief does not follow a clear or linear path towards healing. It appears fragmented and uncertain, requiring imagination and faith to make sense of suffering.

Their grief forces them to question life, death, and power. In this process of questioning, memory plays a crucial role in sustaining grief. The characters remain trapped in their past, unable to detach themselves from the memories of those they have lost. Martel shows the characters as emotional beings. So, grief does not go away quickly it stays with us as a constant companion. Thus, grief becomes an ongoing process rather than a temporary phase, shaping both identity and emotional experience. Martel in his book states "Every dead body is a book with a story to tell, each organ a chapter, the chapters united by a common narrative" (Martel p.137). Eusebio is a senior pathologist who does autopsy and he has to go through all the cases. As a pathologist he directly observes dead bodies daily and what exactly read in the body he has to write a report. As he completes his autopsy he comes out of the with heavy heart. "Religion and humour do not mix well; humour may point out the many mistakes of religion". (Martel p.143) Religion helps him to understand suffering and death cannot be explained through logic and science. This experience of loss leads the characters into searching for meaning of life. The world, once stable and familiar, becomes uncertain and fragmented. They begin to question the purpose of life and the existence of a higher order. Rational explanations fail to provide comfort, leaving them in a state of existential confusion. This disaster reflects a broader human condition, where suffering disturbs established belief systems and forces individuals to search for new ways of understanding reality. According to Pihkala One can often express "I feel it is unfair that God took my loved one." This action reflects on helpless and spiritual conflict after loss of loved ones. In this context, grief becomes not only a source of pain but also a catalyst for deeper reflection and transformation. Thus, their grief made them to turn towards God in the time difficulties.

Faith as a Response to Grief

Faith helps individuals respond to grief. After the loss of their loved ones, the characters in *The High Mountains of Portugal* by Yann Martel do not immediately find comfort in religion. But gradually they turn towards faith as a way to cope with their suffering. Instead, they experience emotional breakdown, silence, and confusion. Their grief creates a sense of emptiness and disconnection from the world, making it difficult for them to rely on reason or logic. Martel suggests suffering becomes meaningful when it conveyed through action. This paper shows that identity is constructed not only by avoiding pain but by active response to it. This state of suffering becomes the starting point that eventually leads them towards spiritual response. For instance, Tomás responds to loss with silence and unusual behaviour, indicating that grief has disrupted his normal life. Though Tomas responds to grief with spiritual searching, Eusebio challenges suffering through the questioning and emotional Eusebio confronts suffering through intellectual questioning and emotional

emptiness. However, Peter in the novel seeks comfort through the companionship of Odo. The central characters response show faith in the novel is personal and it is individual experience. As he struggles to cope with this emotional disaster, he begins to search for meaning beyond the material world. This search takes the form of a symbolic journey, reflecting a deeper spiritual quest. Through this journey, he gradually engages with ideas of belief, purpose, and existence. Similarly, other characters in the novel turn towards religion not as a fixed doctrine but as a personal and evolving experience shaped by their suffering. "Love is a house with an unshakable foundation and an indestructible roof" (Martel p. 24). Faith begins to emerge not as certainty, but as a way of living with doubt and uncertainty. Thus, religion becomes a source of solace and transformation. It does not remove grief, but it helps the characters accept their loss and reconstruct their sense of purpose. Through belief and imagination, they learn to live with their suffering and move toward inner peace. "Our faith is faith in his story, and there is very little beyond that story-faith" (Martel, p. 155). This extract suggests that faith is based on literary interpretation rather than on historical facts. One of the most significant aspects of Martel's narrative is the connection between religion and imagination. The novel suggests that faith is not solely based on logic or evidence but also on the human capacity to imagine and believe. To live in this world, one must believe in something supreme. Imagination allows the characters to move beyond the limitations of rational thought and find meaning in their suffering. In spiritual journey one can feel that they are not alone, there's someone who is guiding pathways.

Finding Solace Through Religion

Religion provides solace by offering emotional comfort, as a sense of purpose, and a way to understand loss. It helps the characters to accept their grief rather than to escape from it. As he declares, "with this object I'll give God His comeuppance for what He did to the ones I love" (Martel, p. 84). Belief in God is an emotional response for people but later develops as doubt and question. Individual offers prayer to God not because for their comforts but to gain strength to overcome their fears and problems. Through belief, they begin to rebuild their identity and find stability in an uncertain world. Religion does not reduce the pain of suffering but it helps individuals to cope with emotional suffering. Regular religion and spiritual experiences are connected with a positive mood and better moral support. Martel portrays Tomás's search for crucifix became both physical and spiritual quest. The theme of pilgrimage and the symbol of the "high mountains" represent this journey towards inner peace. Similarly, the crucifix portrays the characters search for spiritual journey, while chimpanzee symbolises companionship and healing. Peter is often confused by Odo's bonding to him, particularly once he wonders, "Why Odo wants his presence, his in particular, he doesn't know" (Martel p. 289). This puzzle represents Peter's failure to understand Odo's unconditional bonding. Although religion does not remove grief, it provides a framework through which Tomás can challenge his suffering and reconstruct meaning in an uncertain world. The physical movement of the character reflects their inner struggle, showing that the search for meaning is both external and internal. Martel challenges religious views by saying that "we are risen apes not fallen angels" (Martel p.131). The emotions of suffering and grief are not punishments but natural aspects of life. Religious comfort is found

by coexisting with it, but not forgetting what has been lost. People get solace through religion, because they need to transform their lives and wanted to create meaning of life.

Transformation and Reconstruction of Meaning

Religion and spirituality give strength to individuals to face grief and suffering. Even in the most difficult situations, they offer hope and direction. Although grief first leads to despair, it later becomes a transformative force. Grief in the novel can be compared to the character of Naomi, who, after losing her husband and sons, she expresses deep sorrow and bitterness. Naomi States, “Call me Mara, because the almighty has made my life very bitter” (Ruth 1:20) The characters’ journey in both physical and emotional aspects help them to move toward and accept self-discovery. Biologically men have control over their abilities and feelings, so they never cry. In ancient times men used to return work as early as possible so grief is suppressed instead of being processed. In the bible we come across the character of Job after losing his family, wealth he still has faith on God. “God will be closer to those who are broken gives emotional comfort” (Job 18:34). When we compare Biblical characters with Martel’s protagonists they respond to grief in different ways. “The lord gave me and the lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the lord” (Job 1:21) Job never lost his faith on even getting many circumstances. Tomas walking backwards shows his puzzle of not accepting the reality of life. Eusebio turns towards science and intellectual so that it reflects on disinterest rather than faith towards God. Peter loves having a friendship with a chimpanzee to get rid of his pain. Faith plays an important role in this transformation by guiding the characters toward a renewed sense of purpose. Martel states that “What is gilded should be replaced by what is gilded.” (Martel p. 325) Emotional and religious practices cannot be substituted with general things. In this paper characters want to recover from stabilized loss. Religious and spiritual beliefs offer resources for understanding life and to cope with loss. Many people think death is a temporary or it is transition from one life to be a mortal. As the novel suggests, healing does not mean forgetting the past but learning to live with it. The characters do not completely overcome their grief; instead, they accept it as part of their lives. This helps them to understand themselves and the world. The reconstruction of meaning shows the strength of the human spirit, where faith and imagination allow individuals to live with loss and move forward with hope. Unlike the biblical characters, the characters in high mountains of Portugal experience transformation through sorrow. Finally, their loss shapes the understanding of faith, identity, and existence leads to accept their way of life.

Conclusion

In conclusion, *The High Mountains of Portugal* (2016) offers a deep exploration of grief, memory, and faith. Yann Martel portrays faith as a dynamic and evolving response to emotional suffering rather than a fixed belief system. Through these experiences, the characters in the novel highlight that grief disturbs meaning, faith, and imagination, which help to rebuild it. Ultimately, Martel emphasizes that belief remains a powerful tool in an uncertain world, helping individuals manage with loss and sustain hope. In this context, spirituality and religion become not only a source of guidance but also a means of finding

emotional balance and purpose. The novel thus reconsiders the enduring importance of faith in helping individuals to navigate the complexities of human existence. Grief makes people experience both physical and mental suffering. Suffering is an inevitable part of human life. When we talk about grief, society expects women to grieve more than men. Deaths are a result of god's protection and guidance to another world. As individuals, we would not have to suffer in this uncertain world. Therefore, religion helps humans to express their loss and find comfort in it. To overcome distress, people want to involve themselves with spiritual faith and belief.

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