

*Taoism in A. R. Ammons Book of Poems A Coast of Trees*

Assistant Professor Dr. Nadia Ali Ismael

---

---

Received: 5/12/2021

Accepted: 28/12/2021

Published: 2022

*Taoism in A. R. Ammons Book of Poems A Coast of Trees*

Assistant Professor Dr. Nadia Ali Ismael

University of Baghdad/College of Languages/Department of English

[nadeaali@colang.uobaghdad.edu.iq](mailto:nadeaali@colang.uobaghdad.edu.iq)

07902312118

**Abstract**

*A Coast of Trees* (1981) is a book comprising combination of 37 poems. The research paper provides explanation of the poems in the light of Taoistic views. A.R. Ammons (1926-2001) closely follow the Taoistic views in the book. This book clearly reveals many features of the nature that involves dynamic changes and evolution of different animals and objects. In first series of poems, Ammons describes the true picture of universe through keen observations. Taoism provides insight into humans and things that interact with each other in real time. Negating the western perspective of seeing things, the oriental school of thought prevails. Taoism is closer in vision to Buddhism due to a number of reasons. Firstly, they focus more on the soul than the physical existence. Secondly, after life and incarnation are common to both beliefs. Thirdly, meditation and righteous life are commonly held beliefs in these religions. Most importantly, the explanation of happenings in nature in terms of dynamic models is also similar. Most of the poems show supremacy of nature and reality of death through different creatures and physical objects. Poems that point out the paradox of things like life and death, reality and appearance show larger themes of the strong integration between man and nature. The poet points out that Nature itself is constructive in its dynamic evolution unless man intervenes to break its cycle. If he follows nature's path, he will not face any sense of loneliness and loss, as his poems show.

**Keywords:** Ammons, Buddhism, coast, nature ,Taoism, trees

---

---

### Introduction

The issue of what “Taoism” is has drawn great attention of scholars of Chinese religion, from East and West (Kirkland 1997,1). Most of them describe this term as common concepts and norms prevailing in the ancient Chinese culture, named as “Lao-tzu” and “Chuang-tzu” (Kirkland 1997, 1). The set of concepts revolve around living in peace and harmony with “Dao”. It is a basic idea in most of the Chinese philosophical schools and the norms surrounding this concept are covered in the term “Taoism”. This concept has great influence on Chinese culture over a course of many centuries as it drew many notions and terms from other Chinese traditions. It determined the overall philosophical system about keeping human behavior according to peaceful environment.

The historical significance of Taosim became pronounced in literature as many scholars tried to explain it in the light of ancient civilizations and cultural aspects of Chinese. However, in 1970’s, some western scholars challenged the pat definition of Taoism used in literature. They pointed out that the traditional cultural aspects of Chinese people in literature don’t comply with usually perceived meanings of Taoism. It is hard for them to accept the reality of what is Taoism according to the reflection of their ancient norms.

The modern versions of Taoists don’t clearly depict the true version of historical evolution of Chinese culture. This aspect contradicts with the speculative and pure elements found in the Chuang-tzu (Creel 1956,144). As western interpreters are becoming more familiar with the cultural importance of Taoism and its ancient faces, the overall notion of this concept modified to “Chuang-Lao Thought”. Such a modern view of Taoism is ironic considering that Taoism is not closely related to Chuang-Tzu and also the conventional versions of Chinese culture and civilization (Tzu 1944,40). Most of the Chinese cultural aspects millions of years ago are not depicted in modern versions of Taoism.

In this research paper, we will review the concept of Taoism in the light of A R Ammons’ famous book of poems *A Coast of Trees*. He was a famous poet who won annual National book award in 1973 and 1993. In most of his poetic works, he wrote about relationship of humanity with nature in ironic and comic literature. His poetry addresses cultural, religious, philosophical matters, in an innovative and diverse manner. The book *A Coast of Trees* is his typical work that describes the ancient cultural views regarding Taoism.

## *Taoism in A. R. Ammons Book of Poems A Coast of Trees*

Assistant Professor Dr. Nadia Ali Ismael

---

---

Ammons poems are quite metaphysical that describe the concepts of “Tao”, polarity, and “wu-wei” to lay strong foundation for his cosmogony. It would be unjust to consider the Taoistic influence on Ammons as trivial (Buell 1999,228). His poems provide the oriental perspective of Taoism that is more closely linked to the actual cultural and religious practices. He remarked on his work that he tried to get rid of the western cultural perspective in describing the ancient Chinese civilizations. Moreover, he tried his writing to follow the oriental perspective and thinking patterns. He was interested in Emerson’s classics and that’s why he followed Oriental school of thought (Clarke 2002,88). He centralized Lao Tzu in his writings to describe the cultural perspective of Taoism (Schneider 1999, 336).

A. R. Ammons had life-long interest in Taoism as he referenced by works related to this concept. He admitted to the Grossvogel that “Tao Te Ching” was his philosophical source in its entirety (Grossvogel and Ammons 151). He kept this book around him while writing the context of poems in his famous book on Taoism. Ammons even read many translations of the book including English, and Hendricks (Hanse 1997, 165). The attraction of Ammons was centered on the literary works in Pre-Socratic era in which the scholars followed the themes very close to nature. The fundamental affinity of these philosophical ideas had significant correlation with Taoism in its ancient form. The literary taste and thinking pattern at that time considered the civilization and norms of ancient Chinese culture in pure form. Ammons found Oriental taste quite pure and he made his mind to reject the western perspective of modern Taoism.

The literary work of Ammons is mostly related to the philosophical ideas reflecting various form of culture and civilizations. Taoistic ideas and beliefs are embedded in his poems “A Coast of Trees” that were collected from the period between 1951 and 1971. It is ranked as one of the major poetic achievements in the last century. The book contains emotional version of the Ammons’ concepts regarding Taoism and its various meaning in oriental literature. The rhymes describe the poetic faith of the author. The poems include the keen observations of the natural phenomenon and sharply articulated intellectual concepts built around the ancient religious acts. The meanings embedded in the verses describe vision of the order amidst the western chaos of relating Taoism to deteriorated cultural biases. The finely articulated vision of the Ammons closely follows the mindset of traditional Chinese scholars who relate their culture to ancient literary tastes.

---

---

**The concept of Taoism in *A Coast of Trees***

The first titular poem in the book *Coast of Trees* is significant in different aspects. At the onset, it describes the feeling of one (Coast) and many (trees). The iteration of the fact that one is many and many is one confronts the reality that linguistic means of the words could be different from actual sense. This Taoistic concept points to ecological sustainability in the sense of prioritizing process and change over various forms and stasis. Tao is described as the basic principle of the cosmos that stands solitary and doesn't change with the passage of time. The processes and meaningful context of Taoism is embedded in four character phrase "du lib u gai" in Tao Te Ching. However, paradox to this ideology also exists since ten thousand things of the universe are representative of Tao and they depict the cycles of birth, death, change, and another birth according to the principle of Tao. In this sense, universe cannot be termed as the collection of fixed entities since materials keep on changing. The universe is in fact a relational field in which everything including humans change incessantly.

The scholarly ideas of Ammons match closely with those of Quantum Physics in which the universe is considered as the relational field of objects. This notion is depicted in poem "Swells" to describe the swell of the ocean as apparent information only that hides plenty of secrets. The overall notion of the world is a complex web of associations between different parts contained in it.

Ammons also considers the universe concretely as not a combination of physical objects. Things keep on changing and establish complex relationships among themselves that define the overall cultural system. This relational balance in different physical objects of the world is reflected in Ammons' work in "The Coast of Trees" in terms of relational ideas. The myths and ideas embedded in the universe are like "surface peaks" and "dibbles" in the ocean that describe depth. When you consider information about universe, it is limitless like the depth of the sea.

The next poem "Continuing" gives ideas about cyclic evolution of the nature; the humans come and go, things grow and degrade, objects get buried after a span of time. Everything in the universe follows a pattern of cycle after which it gets vanished. This vision is closely linked with the Taoism in framework described by Fritjof Capra in his famous book "The Tao of Physic". He explains the coherence in notions of relational cosmogony and Taoistic thoughts. The former notion is more closely referred to as ontological cosmogony. The cosmogony of Ammons clearly claims that

## *Taoism in A. R. Ammons Book of Poems A Coast of Trees*

Assistant Professor Dr. Nadia Ali Ismael

---

---

universe comprises delicate balance and relationship and this relationship is owed to conventional and modern versions of Taoism. The relation considers the cyclic patterns and ageing process of various objects.

Analysis of “In Memoriam Mae Noblitt” can safely assert that the Taoism in the literary work of Ammons’s poems follow the pattern of modern Quantum physics concepts. Investigation of nature of things and core ideas embedded in the ancient civilizations clearly depict that Taoistic thoughts represent the accurate version of scientific nature of the world. This poem depict that people come into the world and go. It provides reality of temporary existence. The world is “just a place” to live with all kinds of explorations and observations, in realm of Taoistic ideas. Ammons remarks that the transformation of man into different forms from berth to getting older, finally facing death and degeneration provides the basic concepts of the sacred literature.

The ideas in “Weather Bound” depict the behavior of physical objects to follow the dynamics of the nature. As the wind blows, the intellectual approach is to follow its direction and achieve the aims along with it. Destination lies in struggling along the realistic lines. The main focus of Ammons as an eco-poet is describing the nature of the things that are constantly evolving and changing. Like Taoists, his concept regarding physics is fundamental and embedded in the deep concepts of Quantum physics. Existence of objects share common beliefs in Buddhism and Taoism due to similarities in basic evolution of life. The idea of “destination” in this poem indicates the every changing life or even the life after death that also shares similarity with Buddhism.

Ammons believes that the basic governing principle of the universe is flux i.e. constant changing of things of the world as pointed out in next poem “Where”. The shifts of the tides, direction of the winds, and other physical matters are embedded in the reality of the universe. “Where” invites the humans to explore the Taoistic view to incorporate the sacred or holistic views of nature in mind. “Shades of Actions” of the motions of the objects require deep exploration for thorough understanding of the universe.

Nature is ever munificent that doesn’t even require any kind of gratitude as depicted in poem “Strolls”. The boundaries of the universe are quite huge and it is very difficult to grasp its entirety. Ammons described his point of view of nature that it provides generous attitude without asking of returns. It invites exploration in its winds, sands, falls, and furrow. These concepts apply very closely to his own poetic concepts as compared to any other

## *Taoism in A. R. Ammons Book of Poems A Coast of Trees*

Assistant Professor Dr. Nadia Ali Ismael

---

---

scholarly work. We can draw important message from his comment that Poetry has one subject of impermanence that reflects his thinking pattern about nature and universe.

“Getting Through” provides the Taoistic concept of hindrances and obstructions in the path towards ultimate goal. The “Brook’s” way is obstructed for some time but it will eventually clear up as mentioned in the poem. The constraints regarding hindrances mostly come from time limits set by man in the world. However, nature is not bound to give enough time to man who has to work through the available resources and limitations.

“Eventually is Soon Enough” describes the irony of stagnation and limitations. Everybody has to act in his circle of influence and cannot go beyond the limitations. However, Taoistic view gives negative mindset to humans that they cannot conquer nature beyond their reach. It encloses the mind of the humans in a narrow tunnel that blocks innovation and creativity. Doing good enough job in different cases is not enough. Sometimes, you have to come up with radical and innovative ideas.

In his collection of poems *A Coast of Trees*, Ammons describe the theoretical and conceptualized notion of universe uniformly changing to dynamic nature. The ideas presented in the verses show that the world is a combination of things that keep on changing forms and shapes. This philosophy also describes the basis of Taoism from Ammons’s perspective. In next poem “Density”, he views the nature from the perspective of an innocent bird that lives his life in an endless cycle of changing weathers. His acts during summer and winter are fixed and that goes to show the constancy as well as dynamic nature of the world. Taoism reflects this concept in terms of continuous change, and the dynamics embedded in itself.

In poem “Vehicle”, he indicates that he will follow the path of the wind or dust. This journey is from “nothing to nothing”. This concept follows from “A Glimpse of Nothingness” in the Zen Buddhist’s sense. The reality of the journey of wind or dust is depicted to be “nothing” in front of dynamic evolutions all around it. This idea is close to Buddhism in the sense that reality of physical objects is quite insignificant in comparison with dynamic evolutions of the nature.

The non-violent feature of the nature is beautifully explained in “Response”. The baby spider ball character is resilient in front of variations in nature, but not strong enough to face any blow from man. It has strong safeguard feature against external disturbances. The underlying Taoistic idea is that nature is never its own enemy, but man is involved in destructing it. Harmony always

## *Taoism in A. R. Ammons Book of Poems A Coast of Trees*

Assistant Professor Dr. Nadia Ali Ismael

---

---

lie at the heart of the nature. Even if there is some inconsistency, it would be temporary.

“Easter Morning” is quite an important poem in this collection not because it recalls the notion of “Sunday Morning” of Wallace Stevens, but because Ammons rolls out the buried child in himself. In addition to the innocence of the childhood, Ammons adds seriousness due to the death of his brother. Ammons beautifully explains the paradox of life and death that ironically reflects the concepts of Taoism also. More frequently in his poetry, Ammons mourns about the “dead life” they are experiencing. Socially and psychologically, the child in the poet didn’t mature or he wasn’t even allowed to grow because he was supposed to follow his uncles, parents, aunts, and elders, who didn’t take care of him. His childhood life is completely destroyed and poem depicts this sad feelings. Moreover, the concept of life after death is also ascertained in this poem, closer in approach to Buddhism. The idea of rebirth means that the souls will revive again at some later stage after suffering demise.

“White Dwarf” brings up the old age feelings inside the author in which he remembers his weaknesses. The health is also deteriorating with time and it is creating trouble in dealing with complexities of life. “Twanging twists” mark the fate of the life. As he remarks in “Garbage” that the world is the combination of form and motion and it takes theoretical functioning of integration of these forms to explain the modern evolution of physics. The ever changing and modifying nature of the universe doesn’t allow man to conceptualize and build a concrete model explaining it. Ammons describes the naturalistic ideas to follow adaptable pattern as observations about different patterns grow in mind. To describe the dynamics of the universe, Ammons coined the term of “The Spindle of Energy” that provides meaning of endless cyclicity of the nature.

The notions and conceptual framework describing the ancient cultures and civilizations are numerous. Ammons’s phrases also include “firmless” as the nature of the object that is not fixed and avoids constancy. In physical world, the Taoism is associated with the evolving nature of the universe that keeps on changing with time. Centers and peripheries are constantly moving described by organic interrelations. Exploration of the world is depicted in the next poem “Distractions” in which the poet remembers the time when he was young and energetic to explore the whole world. He used to analyze the reality of various objects and things. With the passage of time, his spark died as his physical appearance, health, and strength degraded to continue with the

## *Taoism in A. R. Ammons Book of Poems A Coast of Trees*

Assistant Professor Dr. Nadia Ali Ismael

---

---

mission of exploration. Ammons imagines himself buried after death and world goes on without caring about his existence.

“Tao” itself doesn’t depict as a constant phrase or reflection of ancient ideas embedded in oriental school of thoughts. Since all things are flowing nature in terms of organic interconnection, the most important element in implementation of relationship between man and nature is accepting this pure continuous change and evolution. The phrases of Ammons such that “throw yourself / into the river / of going” clearly explain this concept of Taoism. The poem of “Rapids” beautifully explains the vision of the Tao in the sense that it could predict what is going to happen in next hundred million years after observing the pattern of physical objects. The prediction could be right or wrong but the vision is based on dynamic pattern of nature that is repeating itself in an endless cycle.

The radicalism and innovation in nature is depicted in the poem “Neighbors” in which the trees and ice storms that appear to be very happy, are shown to suffer from various changes. The vision of the Taoism to predict change of objects from one to another is embedded in this poem. It shows the awe of Ammons for nature that keeps on changing. He also declares wonder for place for humanity in this universe and their importance of role with respect to physical objects and their relationship. According to a researcher this poem describes its Taoism concept by reflecting our sense of ourselves (Hanse 1997, 216).

Ammons draws close attention to the nature. According to his observation, there is no concrete boundary of land and sea. Thus, visual observation is important for understanding various physical phenomenon. In poem “Keepsake”, he describes the loss mankind is suffering at the hands of nature. In spite of facing all kinds of challenges and dynamical changes, humans will hardly feel it because of the adaptability of nature. Acute differences in nature are everlasting and they shift paradigm of life from one shape to another.

The nature of the universe is such that it calls us out of our egocentrism to (Tobin 1999, 125). It invites us to develop real understanding of happenings around us. Poems of Ammons point out an important fact that we have to get rid of our prejudices and assumptions for understanding the universe completely. When we study a complex plot I a poem, we desire solving the mysteries in it. By learning the hidden truths behind the plots through investment of time, our narrowness and smallness of mind disappears (Bloom 1986,217). This Taoistic vision is clearly explained in his next poem



## *Taoism in A. R. Ammons Book of Poems A Coast of Trees*

Assistant Professor Dr. Nadia Ali Ismael

---

---

“Antithesis”. Undoubtedly, the viewpoint of Ammons for seeing the world is antithetical since he considers everything along with its oppositions. The complex existence of things with their counterparts is resolved in Taoistic features of the poems. In “Antithesis”, Ammons balances various contraries including up and down, fullness and emptiness, self and other, world and beyond, etc.

Horizon becomes open to explore more mysteries in the world. Ammons gives the message in his poetry that our mind is enclosed in a sort of tunnel or anthropocentric prejudice. We have to come out of it because eventually everything will transform through the process of interconversion of energy from one form to another. The scattering process of energy is responsible for this kind of transformation. Thus, the only reality that doesn't change in universe is that “everything changes” during the scattering energy process. These views are supported in his next poem “Traveling Shows” in which he unveils “nothing” in his search for reality. His Taoistic view that every composition is followed by decomposition, so the theme of the poem is that you can judge the appearance of the objects from their ashes or decomposed parts. Moreover, the dynamical changes are happening just to transform objects from one form into another.

In “Breaking Out”, Ammons compares his skills and capabilities to different colored balloons. He says that he has allowed balloons to loose free and explore the world. He observes whether the balloons get stuck or get free during obstructions, imitating to the difficulties and challenges faced in life. The ideas of continuous theme of challenges and difficulties follows the basic theme of Taoism. Another author explains that the world is an endless flow in which the physical objects are the processional flux (Ames 2001,267). Nothing categorical or foundational cannot go beyond this theme of flux. Ammons's statement in “Garbage” also depict this kind of concept.

Taoistic idea of changing world is cementing itself in various literary work and also provides useful interpretation of the natural phenomenon. It also reminds of the test of resilience and capabilities of the things in it. The poem “Range” describes the span of capabilities of things with the example of animals like spiders and flies. It portrays what happens when you try to catch prey larger than your size i.e. the situation when you challenge your own “range” or potential capabilities. Taoism considers these concepts in the light of reality of universe that it provides potential chance to everyone to explore in its own reach and range.

## *Taoism in A. R. Ammons Book of Poems A Coast of Trees*

Assistant Professor Dr. Nadia Ali Ismael

---

---

The poem of “Carson’s Inlet” provides significant milestones for understanding the notion of Taoism clearly. All things seem to change drastically and man is left to explore them and find meaning from them. From the perspective of human observations, the change in nature may appear to be chaotic or abnormal, but nature itself follows a “disorderly order” or you may call it “chaotic order”. The poem suggests that Tao follows nature describes the concept of “random” order of the nature for explaining various physical phenomenon.

Ammons’s ideas about the nature that everything contains dynamic flow, depicts the concept of interdependence or organic connectedness of various things of the universe. His phrases in poems show his keen interest to explore this relationship that goes beyond the conventional paradigms. He explains that things will evolve soon again, following the previous patterns to take another interdependent form. In “Dry Spell Spiel”, he describes the universe from the point of view of motions of various species of animals. Snakes, squirrels, and other animals live in their own style and fashion that signifies the diversity of the living culture. This diversity invites learning living pattern of different physical objects. When you have praised life on Earth, your attention will shift towards water. It also encompasses a whole world in it.

Like “Continuing” and “Keep Sake”, the poem “Mountain Wind” also shows the history of loss for people on Earth. When you stand by the mountain, you have nothing to get against the wind. Challenging the impossible could result in loss in most of the situations. It takes motivation and courage to come above such difficult situations. The characteristic of the relationships are vaguely pointed out in the Taoism theme in Ammons’s.

The concept of “center” from where the things will evolve ultimately to take the new forms is also interesting in Ammons’s poems. The features of the center closely point to the root cause of the dynamical nature of the universe. In “Fourth Dimension”, he explains the characteristic play of verbal paradox for depicting the apparent conflict between scientific ideas and poetry. The latter introduces additional elements of time in space for reasoning from verbal to non-verbal (Ammons 1963, 202-203). He explains that these are just two different modes of experiences and observations that cannot be negated. Without and beginning or end, the nature could be explored in a variety of ways among which science and poetry are just few examples (Ammons 2002, 114-119). Taoistic view suggests that vision should be broad in all cases to interpret useful findings from any realm of observations.

---

---

“Tao” is considered as the progenitor of all processes since this word encompasses the overall cultural and social historical evolution (Schneider 1999, 340). The “center” of the dynamic evolution mentioned above is also coined as “black wells of possibility” is some other poems of Ammons’s. According to researchers, this concept of black wells or complete possibility of everything in the world could come from Taoism. The reason why Ammons devotes himself to exploring the realities of center/peripheries and One/Many comes from his deep interest in the polarity and connectivity of all things in the universe. The relationship among various things has some reality and Ammons was quite enthusiastic to explore it.

The relationship among things described above is depicted in “Country Music” that states that harmony lies at the heart of the nature. Even if any kind of “inharmony” lies in nature, it would be temporary. The poet sees harmonious music at the countryside, imagining a peaceful life, free from all troubles. Ammons regarded man-made objects as artificial and source of distress for harmony and peace. He portrays the concept of Taoism that man cannot conquer the universe because art is limited and nature has vast dimensions.

The Ammon’s ecological vision heavily resembles to the East-Asian Taoism as it urges us to stop our destructive actions of exploiting nature to our advantage. Taoist ideas suggest that we intervene with the laws of nature and don’t go along the natural patterns required to keep coherence in all aspects. It would be problematic for man if he doesn’t learn the “Way of Nature” and keep destroying different objects.

The theme of Taoism is to practice non-coercive relationship with the nature. The inherited cultural legacy explained by Ammons in the sense that the universe and mankind are linked in a complex relationship in which each entity must have some kind of observation. The viewpoint of Ammons is quite different from anthropocentric and western view of the world that encloses mind in a tunnel to describe nature and scientific ideas.

Love with nature and affection received in return is described briefly in “Wiring”. Man could find the way of nature by exploring its activities. In that case, the nature will benefit the man in its own way. This poem describes the concept of harmony and friendship between living things. The Taoistic perception of the universe is that everything is interconnected. The interrelatedness of all the things in the universe could be described through observation of pairs and organic connectivity. A single point in the universe

## *Taoism in A. R. Ammons Book of Poems A Coast of Trees*

Assistant Professor Dr. Nadia Ali Ismael

---

---

seems to get link from every other part, and a single lead of the tree is associated with all branches of the tree.

The overall Taoistic vision of the universe is based on dynamic interconnectedness that puts everything in a balance with each other. The Taoistic point of view sees the nature and its objects from perspective of having great sense of uniformity in terms of their features. Sameness of huge number of things indicate that the identification in self-centered manner doesn't carry any significance. Like man explores nature, the significance of the things lie in reverse manner of their exploration by nature itself. Moreover, the identification of the humans lies in their relationship with other animals and interconnectedness with several other thousands of things. The key Taoist idea is to explore the nature in its pure form and reality of mankind associated with it.

Ammons shows the concept of forever and unlimited time in "Sunday at McDonald's". In face of unlimited time, nobody could live happily as he has to face extreme challenges. Nature supports man in his quest for solving complexities, but the wheel of nature goes on and on. "Sunday" describes the day when finally man will be able to stand firm and tall, having solved his problems and enjoying his favorite meal at "McDonald's". However, this journey is not easy and he has to overcome various issues.

Taoism promotes acting to support the way of nature. If a man follows the natural way of doing things, he will always stay happy. Ammons beautifully crafts this notion in "Sweetened Change" and "Parting". He asserts that natural way of accomplishing tasks saves man from all kinds of difficulties in the face of "loneliness". Moreover, natural way is the only solution to overcome feeling of loss as in "Givings", "Mountain Wind", "Continuing", and "Keepsake".

Taoism in Ammons's poems also explain the concept of sexual bias of different things. He attributes this concept to the polarity of some sort that has different ends to it. Male and females comprise the interworking of all relationships among humans. Emotional attachment due to polarity in natural manner is depicted in "Parting". The notion of polarity is quite different from the western perspective of the dichotomy. According to the idea of polarity, all things are different aspects of one's nature and their existence without others cannot be established. The polar relationship is unique in the sense that it derives reality and physical significance of one thing from the other.

For explaining the polar nature of things, the second chapter of "Tao Te Ching" provides a useful explanation. Hidden and manifest are correlated,

## *Taoism in A. R. Ammons Book of Poems A Coast of Trees*

Assistant Professor Dr. Nadia Ali Ismael

---

---

difficult and easy stay beside each other, long and short are closely related, high and low measure each other (Tzu 1944, 5). The concept of polarity is quite interesting and uncovers many realities of the universe. Humans and all things in the universe are tied in an indivisible relationship, beyond conventional relations that decide the dynamic nature of the changes. Human and nature are organically interconnected in a sort of mutual dependence.

“Feel Like Travelling On” further promotes the concept of following the “Nature’s” way of doing things. Ammons enjoys the concept of lonely endless Sunday that signifies the world of nature that has peace and harmony. If man follows natural means of doing things, he will enjoy harmony forever. This ecological perspective of the Ammons is quite interesting to visit in the sense that he describes the interconnectedness of the things in universe in through Taoistic touch. The concepts and ideas of Ammons clearly negate the anthropocentric arrogance and tunnel vision. The concepts of the nature are all realistic and follow a definite pattern. The work of Ammons provides the norms to all values in the world. He provides mature ideas regarding importance of identity of a person. This poem provides a strong message that identity of a person should be recognized by the universe and nature, instead of person determining his own identity and remain self-centered. Recognition and confirmation should come from the nature itself. This kind of nature identification will be realistic version of the real image of the character. Otherwise, people would be surrounded by their self-inflicted images.

Robert Aitken remarked regarding the concept of identification of a person by nature and universe that humans discover the universe and advance their nature exploration (Aitken1984, 150). The efforts of humans are aligned with observation of dynamic evolution and flux changes. In the same manner, the universe has to regard the identity of the “self” in a sense that humans should be recognized by the interdependence of the relations. “Poverty” relates the efforts of the man with his destiny. The man could strive hard while staying in poverty, where nobody would care about him. His journey towards destination could take long, and he has to face challenges along in this journey. The journey signifies the challenges of life that provide “downhill” for steep changes and radical dynamics. We have to fight with these changes to stay in touch with the cycle of nature.

“Givings” portrays the concept of being at loss at all the times, an idea of Taoism due to following man’s way. Moving back and forth in life to tackle challenges doesn’t necessarily bring happiness. Dream and reality are different things, as the wheel of changes takes us through various phases of

## *Taoism in A. R. Ammons Book of Poems A Coast of Trees*

Assistant Professor Dr. Nadia Ali Ismael

---

---

loss. The message in the poem is again emphasizing the natural way of perceiving and observing things. Taoism supports the point that man follows the observations in a naturalistic way.

The capacity of the nature and art is explained in “An Improvisation for the Stately Dwelling”. According to Ammons, art cannot include everything the nature has to offer. The scientific methods could explore the meanings of happenings, but cannot conquer every phenomenon due to high complex features of the nature and universe. Ammons describes the supremacy of nature over man who falsely thinks that he could use nature for his advantage. The concept of acting in the way of nature is asserted here again as discussed in some earlier poems like “Country Music”. Sense of loss and loneliness could be averted through systematic approach of nature and universe. The direction of the man’s efforts follow scientific evidence instead of close observation of nature. It means that he is tunneled in a single mindset instead of thinking in a broad fashion to encompass the naturalistic ideas.

In most of the poems, Ammons asserts that perception is not receiver. He moves beyond the perceptions of humans into a new thinking world of the Tao. He observes the things from the perspective of Tao. He refers to the Taoistic vision as “the naked vision” which is very close to the Taoism in its actual form and spirit. Ammons’s ideas regarding the relationship between human and nature culminates in his passages in “Tape” that describe that man is quite small as compared to the overall reality of the universe. The world is incomprehensible and interlinked with many complex things. The importance of the mankind in the universe lies in its interconnectedness with the universe.

The concept of life and death is artistically explained by Ammons in “An Improvisation for Jerard Bullis”. Everything in nature is temporary and falls to ground after passing a certain span of time. Man doesn’t seem to accept the reality that he is mortal and he has to eventually die. His target and aims should be according to the temporary world. He has turned blind to the happenings of the nature that teach him a significant lesson about reality of life.

Ammons carries the lesson of life and death to the last concluding poem of the book “Persistences”. This poem also articulates the notion of life and death. Man doesn’t perceive the permanent and temporary things. His efforts are aligned to get the temporary that has to die eventually and we will end up getting nothing out of it. In the choice between life and death, man chooses life as if it were eternal and doesn’t have to end. Due to limitations of

## *Taoism in A. R. Ammons Book of Poems A Coast of Trees*

Assistant Professor Dr. Nadia Ali Ismael

---

---

thinking and ideology, man favors the logic of everything. Nature involves not only logic, but also keen observation of happenings in the world. Most of the experiences are meaningless due to involvement of false beliefs and ideas.

The analogy of “debris” with temporary world in “Persistences” shows the vision of the poet since he considers the things inside universe to be temporary since they always keep on changing with time. It is quite possible that we consider the concept of life and death in Ammons’s views to be close to that of Christianity, but overall mindset doesn’t comply with the teachings of Christianity. The Taoist vision claimed in this series of poems resembles more closely with the Buddhist due to resemblance in dynamic evolution ideas, life after death, peacefulness of nature, meditation and righteous life.

### **Conclusion**

*A Coast of Trees* describes the vision of the A.R. Ammons from perspective of exploring the reality of the world. The approach takes the Taoist vision with beliefs and ideas reflecting the Tao’s ideas. In first series of poems, he doesn’t discuss much about Taoism. He focused more on nature and observations to explore secrets of the universe. The latter part of the book included poems that have significant elements of Taoism. Interconnectedness of universe, coherence of happenings, and other indications convince to follow the nature instead of scientific evidences. The combination of paradoxes like big and small, and many others describe the way nature could take various forms. Objects with their counterparts exist in nature that shows their interconnectedness.

In Taoistic view, man is helpless before nature. He has to learn quickly how he will live with harmony and peace in nature to become more successful in life. Reality of life and death must be understood, rather than blindly following the scientific principles that would lead to damaging results. Staying harmonious with nature is the only solution presented in these poems. The Taoist approach resembles closely to the Buddhism for explaining the nature of the universe. Overall, the work of A.R. Ammons is commendable in presenting the views of Taoism in a diverse and simplified manner.

## *Taoism in A. R. Ammons Book of Poems A Coast of Trees*

Assistant Professor Dr. Nadia Ali Ismael

---

---

### References

Aiken, Robert (1984), *The Mind of Clover: Essays in Zen Buddhist Ethics*, North Point Press, New York.

Ames, Roger T.(2001), “The Local and the Focal in Realizing a Daoist World.” in *Daoism and Ecology*, Harvard University Press,Cambridge, pp. 265–82.

Ammons, A. R.(1963), “A Note on Prosody.” *Poetry*, JSTOR, pp. 202–03.

---. (1968),“A Poem Is a Walk.” *Epoch*, vol. 18, no. 1, p. 116.

Ammons, Archie R.(2002), *A Coast of Trees*. WW Norton & Company,New York.

Bloom, Harold (1986), *AR Ammons, Modern Critical Views*. Chelsea House, Chelsea.

Buell, Frederick (1999)“Ammons’s Peripheral Vision: Tape for the Turn of the Year and Garbage.” in *Schneider,S.(Ed.), Complexities of Motion: New Essays on AR Ammons’s Long Poems*, Cambridge University Press,Cambridge, pp. 214–38.

Clarke, John James (2002), *Oriental Enlightenment: The Encounter between Asian and Western Thought*. Routledge,Oxford.

Creel, Herrlee G.(1956), “What Is Taoism?” *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, vol. 76, no. 3, JSTOR, pp. 139–52.

Grossvogel, David I., and A. R. Ammons.(1973), “Interview: AR Ammons.” *Diacritics*, JSTOR, pp. 47–53.

Hanse, Bertha J.(1997), *The Spiritual Eye of AR Ammons: Mystical Elements in" Sphere: The Form of a Motion"*. Routledge,Oxford.

Kirkland, Russell.(1997), *The Taoism of the Western Imagination and the Taoism of China: De-Colonializing the Exotic Teachings of the East*, Cambridge University Press,Cambridge,

Schneider, Steven P.(1999), “From the Wind to the Earth: An Interview with AR Ammons.” in in *Schneider,S.(Ed.), Complexities of Motion: New Essays on AR Ammons’s Long Poems*, Cambridge University Press,Cambridge, pp. 325–49.

Tobin, Daniel.(1999), “AR Ammons and the Poetics of Chaos.” in *Schneider,S.(Ed.) Complexities of Motion: New Essays on AR Ammons’s Long Poems*, Cambridge University Press,Cambridge, pp. 113–37.

Tzu, Lao(1944) ,“The Way of Life According to Lao Tzu.” *Translated by W. Bynner*. New York University Press, New York.



□ مفهوم الفلسفة الطاوية في كتاب أي. أر. أمنز الشعري شاطيء الأشجار

ا.م.د.نادية علي اسماعيل

جامعة بغداد/كلية اللغات/ قسم اللغة الانكليزية

[nadeaali@colang.uobaghdad.edu.iq](mailto:nadeaali@colang.uobaghdad.edu.iq)

07902312118

مستخلص البحث:

يتألف كتاب أي. أر. أمنز (1926-2001) الشعري شاطيء الأشجار (1981) من 37 قصيدة. يناقش البحث هذه القصائد من منظور فلسفة الطاوية والتي اتبعها الشاعر بدقة في كتابه. يظهر الكتاب بوضوح الكثير من ملامح الطبيعة والتي تتضمن تغيرات ديناميكية وتطور تدريجي لمختلف الكائنات الحية. يصف الشاعر في اول سلسله من قصائده الصورة الحقيقية للكون من خلال رؤيا عميقة للطاوية والتي تظهر جليا من خلال تفاعل الانسان مع الطبيعة. توضح القصائد تقارب الطاوية من الفلسفة البوذية في التركيز على الروح والحياة بعد الموت والتأمل. كما تبين القصائد تفوق الطبيعة وحقيقة الموت والتناقض الذي يخترق الطبيعة متمثلا بالموت والحياة والحقيقة والمظهر كما تؤكد القصائد الارتباط القوي بين الانسان والطبيعة والذي يكون بحد ذاته بناانا الا اذا تدخل الانسان بطريقه هدامه. يتوصل البحث الى حقيقة ان الانسان لم ولن يشعر بالوحده اذا ما اقترب وارتبط بالطبيعة. الكلمات المفتاحية: أمنز, البوذية, شاطيء, طبيعة, الطاوية, اشجار