The Impetus of a Personal/Spiritual Quest for Wholeness:

Magical Realism and Nature in Global Literature Viewed Through the Lens of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Young Goodman Brown*

Humanity's universal quest for wholeness is both personal and spiritual. In literature, this hybrid quest often begins with an impetus—a decision, disruption, or loss that forces characters out of stability and into uncertainty. Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Young Goodman Brown* provides a framework for examining how impetus sparks the personal/spiritual pursuit of wholeness, as Goodman Brown's restless urge to test the limits of faith unfolds through the symbolic forces of magical realism and nature. As Latef Berzenji observes, in such narratives "the protagonist's mind, rather than a physical location, is the main arena of conflict" (Berzenji). The reason these quests are both personal and spiritual is that for each character, the journey toward inner wholeness would remain incomplete without some connection to the spiritual or the divine. This interplay between the human and the transcendent gives the quest its depth and universality. In Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Young Goodman Brown*, impetus emerges as the spark of a hybrid personal–spiritual quest for wholeness, a pattern that echoes in Maryse Condé's *Waiting for the Waters to Rise*, Isabel Allende's *The Wind Knows My Name*, and Nguyễn Phan Quế Mai's *The Mountains Sing*, where magical realism and nature mirror each character's unique vision of what it means to be whole.

For Goodman Brown, wholeness means the reconciliation of faith and doubt—the restoration of moral certainty after spiritual testing. In *Young Goodman Brown*, Hawthorne shows that the impetus for spiritual wholeness arises from an inward restlessness to test faith by confronting the darkness within, a drive that continues long after the physical journey itself ends. From the

moment Brown insists, “Of all nights in the year, this one night must I tarry away from thee… My journey… must needs be done ’twixt now and sunrise” (Hawthorne), Hawthorne establishes the compulsion behind his quest. The repetition of “must” reveals that Brown’s restlessness is spiritual necessity, not mere curiosity. His separation from Faith—both wife and symbol—marks the split between innocence and experience that propels his search. When “something fluttered lightly down through the air and caught on the branch of a tree,” the fallen pink ribbons signal the loss of purity and the emergence of disillusionment (Hawthorne). The darkened forest, “twisting and wriggling itself like a living serpent,” externalizes Brown’s inner temptation and uncertainty through the fusion of the natural and the supernatural (Hawthorne). As literary scholar H. G. Fairbanks observes, Hawthorne’s Forest “embodies both temptation and the possibility of redemption,” reflecting humanity’s moral and spiritual separation from nature and suggesting that the journey through darkness is the necessary precondition of grace (Fairbanks 241). Once Brown believes his Faith is gone, his thoughts and actions reveal the darkness that has been within him all along—the same inner corruption that first drove him into the forest. Hawthorne emphasizes this transformation when he writes, “In truth, all through the haunted forest there could be nothing more frightful than the figure of Goodman Brown” (Hawthorne). Here, the source of terror is no longer the forest itself but Brown’s own reflection within it. The external darkness merely mirrors what has long existed inside him. This moment reveals that the very darkness he sought to confront was his own, and that it serves as the true impetus behind his journey. Goodman Brown’s quest arises from a spiritual void—an unconscious need to test the moral and divine boundaries of his faith to fill the pieces of himself that feel absent in ordinary life. When Brown cries, “My Faith is gone! … There is no good on earth, and sin is but a name,” his despair crystallizes the tension between spiritual loss and self-knowledge (Hawthorne). As

the story concludes, the narrator describes “a stern, a sad, a darkly meditative, a distrustful, if not a desperate man,” illustrating that for Goodman Brown, the quest for wholeness becomes an eternal restlessness of spirit. The most revealing word in this passage is desperate: it signifies that Brown’s search has not ended, that the impetus of his personal and spiritual quest remains alive though dismal.

In Maryse Condé’s *Waiting for the Waters to Rise*, wholeness is defined by love and renewed purpose—the reawakening of faith through connection. The impetus arises when Babakar, a solitary doctor, decides to take responsibility for Anaïs after her mother’s death. This act transforms loss into duty and rekindles his dormant sense of hope. Condé writes that Anaïs’s arrival fulfills “the miracle his mother, radiant with joy, had come to predict in his dream… His soul thundered out a magnificant worthy of Johann Sebastian Bach” (Condé). The blend of miracle, dream, and music conveys spiritual renewal through emotional transcendence. Similar to Hawthorne, Condé employs magical realism in Babakar’s waking dreams of his mother, allowing the supernatural to express the convergence of faith, destiny, and love. Babakar’s decision becomes both personal and divine: a response to destiny rather than chance. When “the wind and its growing fury was shaking the tops of the ebony trees and shouldering away the clouds,” (as in *Young Goodman Brown*) nature mirrors Babakar’s inner transformation—the clearing clouds symbolic of the lifting of despair (Condé). Through Anaïs, he finds what Condé describes as “the newfound spring that will irrigate his arid existence” (Condé). Water and growth imagery render Anaïs a spiritual agent of rebirth, grounding his wholeness in love and purpose. Condé also emphasizes how homeland itself nourishes the spirit. Her description of Movar when they arrive in Haiti offers a glimpse into how profoundly she views the connection between place and personal / spiritual renewal: “Movar had changed since the return to his native

land—ever since they had come out of the airport, to be exact, transformed, he now held himself more erect and appeared less frail, more confident, having lost that scared look" (Condé). Babakar surely hopes that by bringing Anaïs to Haiti, she too will feel whole in that way—a wholeness born of belonging. His quest extends vicariously through Anaïs in his journey to find her homeland and family—an absence that has not been filled within himself. Latef Berzenji notes that the quest for wholeness involves a psychological awakening—a movement toward integration between the self, the natural world, and the spiritual realm (Berzenji).

Condé's novel closes with Babakar's continued impetus to fulfill his personal and spiritual quest for wholeness—for both himself and Anaïs. Anaïs becomes both catalyst and symbol of rebirth. His wholeness is achieved not through escape but through reconnection—an embrace of purpose that restores his faith and love in life. His impetus continues as he seeks to make Anaïs—named after the first woman he loved besides his mother—happy. He wonders what she is "hiding from him in her little head" (Condé). It is this wonder, love, and purpose that propels him forward, no doubt with the continued help of his mother's magical presence. This marks the movement into Isabel Allende's *The Wind Knows My Name*, where magical realism becomes the language of survival. As B. Ambal explains, magical realism "serves as a bond between fragmented realities—psychological, historical, and spiritual—allowing characters and readers to integrate the supernatural with lived experience" (Ambal). In this way, Allende's novel continues the tradition of healing through the miraculous. Her young protagonist Anita, in some similarity to Allende's earlier character Alba in *The House of the Spirits*, "clings to magic to stay alive" (Ambal). For Anita, magical belief is not mere imagination but a spiritual mechanism of endurance—a means to preserve hope and identity amid displacement.

In *The Wind Knows My Name*, Anita's personal and spiritual quest for wholeness begins with separation—the loss of her mother and the disintegration of the home that once defined her sense of belonging. For Anita, wholeness is family, healing, and spiritual fulfillment. Allende frames Anita's displacement as both a physical and spiritual exile, one that she endures through the sustaining power of magical realism. Like Hawthorne's forest, Anita's Azabahar is another world—though a very different one. For Hawthorne, the forest is a journey into darkness; for Anita, it is an oasis, a refuge of light and protection where she tells her sister Claudia that guardian angels can never leave you. The permanence of those guardian angels would be especially imperative to a little girl who has lost her mother. Anita insists, "Ms. Selina said it will only be for a little while, that they only have to work out my mother's paperwork, and then we can be together" (Allende). Her unwavering hope transforms grief into perseverance, illustrating how belief itself becomes a spiritual act of survival. Through conversations with her deceased sister Claudia, Anita preserves connection: "We have our own family. We're not orphans… I don't want a different mom. I already have a mama named Marisol" (Allende). Her imagined refuge, Azabahar, becomes the embodiment of magical realism—the dreamworld where she believes she can reunite with her mother: "Mama is definitely going to come get us here, but if she takes too long we can meet her in Azabahar" (Allende). In this realm, the boundary between heaven and earth dissolves, transforming absence into faith. When Anita says, "I hope that in Azabahar there are plants and trees… green—it's the best color because it connects everything," Allende fuses nature and spirituality to express the continuity of love (Allende). Allende, like Hawthorne, uses nature as a symbol of spirituality—one that, for Anita, symbolizes connection. This connection is especially important because she has been disconnected from everything she knows and loves. For Anita, imagination becomes a sacred space where divine love and human

longing coexist, affirming that her wholeness depends on maintaining connection with the unseen, where, ironically, she is actually able to see. Anita's impetus for a personal / spiritual quest for wholeness is forced upon her; she continues it with the help of Selina, Frank, and eventually Samuel, who is on a quest of his own.

In *The Wind Knows My Name*, wholeness for Samuel, similarly to Anita, is defined by family, safety, belonging, spiritual fulfillment, and faith in the world. Even before his separation from his parents, his violin offered him a sense of transcendence from the rough edges his life. When the children at the train station were told they could not take their belongings, Samuel was told he could not take his violin. Defying the order,

> *he removed the instrument, placed it on his shoulder, and began to play. In under a minute, a hush had fallen around the young musical prodigy as the air filled with the sounds of Schubert's Serenade. Time stood still, and for a few brief, magnificent moments, the sad crowd, weighed down by uncertainty, felt comforted. Samuel was small for his age, and the coat, which was too big, lent him an endearing, fragile quality. Seeing him play with his eyes closed, swaying slightly to the rhythm of the music, was a magical spectacle.* (Allende).

Here we see another element of Allende's use of magical realism, where music becomes a transcendent force capable of uniting those burdened by fear and grief. The moment is spiritual rather than merely artistic; it reveals the human capacity to create beauty and connection even in despair. For a boy defined by loss, this brief harmony is his first , though fleeting, experience of spiritual wholeness—a divine reprieve from the world's brutality, tearing the rest of his world apart. Even after this transcendent moment, Samuel's suffering deepens when he learns that both

of his parents have died. Yet this realization does not end his impetus for wholeness—it reshapes it. The grief that once silenced him becomes the very source of his spiritual and creative renewal. When the colonel gifts him a medal of bravery, telling him, “Whenever you are frightened, close your eyes and rub the medal and you’ll feel a huge strength grow in your chest,” the gesture fuses faith and imagination into a tangible form of magical realism (Allende). Though Samuel does eventually find a family who takes him in and treats him well, he never truly feels at home. Even through lovers and friends, he still seems more apart from rather than a part of. He finds solace only through music and nature. Like Babakar, he finds in Anita a renewed purpose, one that contributes to his personal and spiritual quest for wholeness by allowing him to provide her with something he never had. Allende writes, “The strange situation of living confined with Leticia, Anita, and the animals reinvigorated Samuel’s will to live.” He learned from Anita because she “seemed to live her life in some fantastical dimension. The attic, the garden, the empty rooms were magical realms she could escape to” (Allende). Perhaps he just didn’t realize that he did the same as she did—only through music and nature instead. In Anita, he sees a mirror of his past that he can attempt to glue back together, giving both of them—perhaps even himself—a greater sense of home than he could ever imagine. When Leticia says to him, “And this girl is traumatized—she misses her mother. She’s been pulled away from everything she knows: her family, her friends, her school, her community, her language. Can you imagine what that must be like?” Samuel responds simply, “Perfectly” (Allende). In this moment, Allende’s vision echoes Hawthorne’s symbolic use of Faith’s pink ribbons—where innocence, love, and belief are tested and transformed. For Goodman Brown, the loss of the ribbons signifies the collapse of faith and connection; for Samuel and Anita, their shared acts of imagination and care

restore those same symbolic threads, beginning to bind two fragmented souls into something whole.

In *The Mountains Sing*, loss is the impetus that spurs Huong's personal and spiritual quest for wholeness. Wholeness for Huong is identity, memory, food, and nature. Like the other protagonists we have examined, Huong realizes that she will never reconnect with some of her loved ones on this earth. Nguyễn writes, "I placed the Sơn Ca on the family altar. Kneeling, I bowed, my forehead touching the ground. I prayed for my father's soul to come home. I accepted now that I'd never see my papa again. I accepted now that those I loved so dearly could be taken away from me so suddenly" (Nguyễn). This moment of acceptance is not surrender but transformation. Where loss once fractured her spirit, remembrance becomes the source of strength. As in *Young Goodman Brown*, her quest begins with a feeling of being incomplete and the need to confront lost pieces of the self; yet where Hawthorne's protagonist continues in desperate despair, Huong transforms grief into renewal. Like Babakar's faith renewed through Anaïs and Samuel's through Anita, Huong's reconciliation with death allows her to turn grief into grace. By releasing her desire to hold on, she continues her quest toward spiritual wholeness by offering up her story to her grandmother in the heavens. In the last scene of the novel, she burns her manuscript—the story of her family—knowing that it will reach her grandmother in Heaven. As readers, we are unsure if there is any other copy, and in this way, Nguyễn illustrates that the story's true value lies in its power to connect earthly life to the divine. It is a never-ending quest, an impetus like those in each of these novels that renews itself again each day. Like Hawthorne, Nguyễn uses nature as a symbol of revelation and renewal. Huong recalls her mother's story: "He listened to the radio and heard a poem about the river that runs through his village. The poem evoked such powerful emotions that he remembered his way home"

(Nguyễn). Here, nature is both literal and spiritual—the river symbolizes continuity, carrying the past forward until it merges again with the present. Just as Goodman Brown's forest externalizes the struggle of the soul, Nguyễn's river embodies memory as a living current that guides the spirit home.

A beautiful description of what it would be like for Guava (Huong) to be whole appears in her reflection on the sacredness of the everyday. She says, "If I had a wish, I would want nothing fancy, just a normal day when all of us could be together as a family; a day where we could just cook, eat, talk, and laugh. I wondered how many people around the world were having such a normal day and didn't know how special and sacred it was" (Nguyễn). In this simple longing, the grand themes of identity, memory, and faith converge. In her personal and spiritual quest for wholeness, the impetus is for the living to connect with the dead, and the Sơn Ca—the bird—is a symbol of that connection. Nguyễn writes, "They say the Sơn Ca's song can reach Heaven and souls of the dead can return in the Sơn Ca's singing" (Nguyễn). Through this image, the barrier between life and death dissolves, transforming grief into communion. For Guava, wholeness is not achieved through dramatic revelation or escape, but through peace—the holiness of ordinary life. Like the other protagonists in this study, her spiritual fulfillment arises when the boundaries between the personal and the divine dissolve. The "normal day" becomes both prayer and answer, embodying a sense of completeness that stems from gratitude, family, and the enduring cycles of nature.

Just as in Hawthorne, nature reveals itself as a symbol of spirituality, and for Huong, it often manifests through the moon. In one luminous moment, she reflects, "Above us, the moon was floating on a dome of darkness, surrounded by glittering stars. If paradise was up there, perhaps my father was free from all the pain of the world" (Nguyễn). The moon here functions as both

comfort and revelation—a celestial mirror that bridges sorrow and hope. As in Hawthorne's *Young Goodman Brown*, the sight of the heavens is a sign of grace—one that he utilizes to try and save his dear Faith, the possibility of grace—while Nguyễn's night sky restores a sense of divine presence, suggesting that paradise and peace coexist with earthly pain. Through this image, Huong's quest for wholeness comes to a full continuum: the natural world becomes the medium through which she perceives both her father's freedom and her own.

Nguyễn's vision of spiritual renewal finds its clearest parallel in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, where human grief itself becomes a form of prayer. Milton writes, "Sighs, which in their hearts sincere were breathed, rose like incense to the Heaven" (Book XI, lines 5–7). This moment signifies man's first quest, one that is a continuous personal and spiritual journey towards wholeness. These lines reflect the same spiritual mechanism at work in Huong's ritual of burning incense and letters for her ancestors. Both acts transform sorrow into offering, linking the personal and the divine through smoke and breath. In Huong's world, the burning of memory is not destruction but transcendence; the physical act of release becomes a spiritual restoration. Like Milton's Adam and Eve, whose repentance allows their loss to be heard in Heaven, Huong's remembrance ensures that her family's suffering is not forgotten but sanctified. Through this connection, Nguyễn affirms that wholeness emerges not from escaping pain but from transforming it into communion—between body and spirit, earth and heaven, the living and the dead.

In Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Young Goodman Brown*, the impetus for a personal and spiritual quest for wholeness begins with an act of restlessness—the decision to enter the forest and test faith itself. Hawthorne's fusion of magical realism and nature's symbolism creates a paradigm through which we can view later global narratives of spiritual search. His forest and sky become

the archetypal spaces where humanity confronts its own darkness and the possibility of grace. Reading through this lens, we see that the same movement from disruption toward meaning animates the characters in these global works: Babakar in Maryse Condé's *Waiting for the Waters to Rise*; Samuel and Anita in Isabel Allende's *The Wind Knows My Name*; and Huong in Nguyễn Phan Quế Mai's *The Mountains Sing*. In each, the impetus endures—a daily spiritual and personal exertion through which love, memory, and identity seek harmony with the divine. Magical realism and nature remain the shared language of this quest, rendering the unseen visible and the sacred tangible. Thus, *Young Goodman Brown* stands not merely as one tale among others but as an illuminating lens through which the universal human longing for wholeness is revealed—an unending impetus of the soul, carried forward each day by the living pulse of life itself.

In a broader global context, these stories affirm that the search for wholeness often arises from histories of colonization, war, and displacement—realities that fragment both nations and spirits. Yet within these fractures, literature becomes a bridge across cultures and centuries, revealing how faith, love, and remembrance persist even amid loss. The continuing impetus that drives each character toward wholeness reflects humanity's shared struggle to reclaim meaning from chaos, to reconnect with the divine through the landscapes and languages of survival.

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