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The Poetics of the Ineffable: Mystical Consciousness in World Poetry

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Abstract:

The roots of mysticism are to be found in the Orient and the first evidence of it are to be found in the *Upanishadas*. However, it has been turned to a system by the Western mystics. Because of its diffused nature, mysticism is not easy to be defined in a crisp definition. But as a whole, it signifies an inward journey towards an intuitive awareness of the existence and the all-pervading role of the Supreme Being. Although mysticism has a very close link with religion and philosophy, it also constitutes an intrinsic feature of poetry. From the poetic works of the Vedic, Bhakti saints to the Sufi and Romantic poets to the Modern poets, the element of mysticism is unmistakably present.

Index Terms: Mysticism, poetry

Mysticism: An Introduction

The term *mysticism* is generally believed to have its roots in the Greek language, and the Western scholars are credited with establishing mysticism as an independent field of study (Abrahams, 1995, p. 5). While the origin of the term is in the West, the roots of the idea or concept is to be found in the East, more precisely in the “core of the Upanishads and such other classics belonging to the major religious traditions of the world” (Abrahams, 1995, p. xvi). Like the concept of Romanticism, the concept of mysticism also defies an easy definition which is mainly because it tends to lie outside the normative boundaries usually associated with traditional religious practices (Oliver, 2009, p. 6). Despite this ambiguity, Caroline F. E. Spurgeon (1913) characterizes mysticism not as a formal doctrine but as “a temper rather than a doctrine, an atmosphere rather than a system of philosophy (p. 2)”. Simon Critchley (2024) has spoken of five different characteristics of mysticism which are mentioned below:

1. Mysticism is not a religion, but a tendency within religion.
2. The mystical life is a journey or itinerary.
3. In mysticism, union with God is not always or necessarily straightforward.
4. “The presence of God” is a better and more supple term than “union.”
5. Mystical experience is not simply passive.

Generally speaking, mysticism has a very close relationship with religion and has informed and inspired philosophy, poetry, art and music. Mystics seek a consciousness of a beyond, a consciousness which is not of the external world of material phenomena, but of an unseen over and above the seen (Happold, 1990, p. 19). They consciously seek a unity, viewing individual objects not as isolated entities but as manifestations of a single, unifying spirit. Since all things originate from the Supreme Reality or the One, mystics maintain that its essential qualities are present in every aspect of existence, including human beings. As integral parts of the universe, humans too possess the potential to realize the Infinite—variously identified as God, the Absolute, or the Supreme Being—by cultivating these inherent qualities. This belief is aptly reflected in the words of the thirteenth-century German Christian mystic Meister Eckhart, who urged the seeker to know God “without image, without semblance and without means.”

Mystics further contend that qualities such as compassion, charity, love, and benevolence can be sustained only when individuals recognize the intrinsic worth of their fellow beings. These virtues are indispensable for a harmonious and progressive society, but these qualities require, for their own stability “the sense of worth of the universe, totality or whole transcending nature, man and society” (R.Mukherjee, 2000, p. 449). Mystical awareness provides this foundation by nurturing enduring, self-transcending devotion and enthusiasm. Given the imperfections inherent in both individuals and societies, neither can claim absolute devotion. Instead, it is the vast, all-encompassing universe—understood as an organic unity of nature, humanity, and society—that serves as the ultimate source of human reverence and commitment. Thus, allegiance to fellow beings and society is seen as an initiation into a deeper reality that lies beyond the merely human or social, a realization that mystics regard as fundamental to the rise of mysticism itself.

Mystics apprehend the presence of the Supreme Being not through logical reasoning or scientific analysis but through intuition (Goswami, 1966, p. 93). They argue that analytical and experimental approaches create a separation between the seeker and the Absolute and therefore hinder spiritual realization (Dash, 1966, p. 240). Sensory-intellectual modes of consciousness, are considered inadequate for grasping the undifferentiated unity of existence because it “assumes a duality in creation and confines knowledge to the reasoning processes” (Boreman, 1989, p. 3). Intuition, understood as immediate knowledge beyond conscious reasoning, enables a direct and authentic understanding of the universe and its ultimate source. Once attained, it dispels doubt and uncertainty, ushering in a transformative clarity of vision. As Bertrand Russell observes, mystical insight begins with the sudden unveiling of a hidden wisdom that carries an indubitable sense of certainty (1945, p. 15). Through the cultivation of intuitive awareness, mystics affirm the presence of the Supreme Reality and seek to unite with it, culminating in what they describe as mystical ecstasy.

Mystics also emphasize that the mystical state is ineffable—beyond description, definition, or verbal explanation—and therefore inaccessible to those who have not experienced it (Kodama, 2010, p. viii). They regard mysticism as primarily a mode of perception or feeling rather than an intellectual pursuit. Since language is considered inadequate to convey such experiences, mystics often refrain from direct verbal expression. Plato himself maintained that mystical knowledge could not be written down because it transcends the limits of ordinary discourse. Similarly, Arthur Koestler observed that mystical experiences are neither vague nor sentimental in themselves; they acquire such qualities only when reduced to words (1954, p. 353). Consequently, mystics rely on symbolic forms of expression, employing imagery, metaphor, simile, and symbolism to communicate insights that defy conventional language.

Mysticism and Poetry

Mysticism bears a close connection with poetry and their relationship can be traced almost to the beginning of civilization (Bose, 2000, p. 458). It is not dry prose, but the colourful poetry which is the most preferred medium of the mystics to express their feelings and experiences. However, while admitting the veracity of the above statement, one cannot undermine the relevance of a highly valid question—if mystical experiences are incommunicable, if they are beyond mind and words, then how come poetry be able to communicate mystical ideas? For an answer to this query, we may turn to the following comment of a critic who beautifully elucidates the power of the poet to face such problems, “It is true that the words are geared to social use and discursive knowledge, they are sense-bound and saddled with socially acceptable meanings. But the poet can make them palpable and suggestive, he can add wings to them as Homer always talked of them as winged words, and make them say more than what meets the ear. And he has also the whole arsenal of rhetoric and prosodic devices at his disposal to grapple with problem of communication.” (Dutta, 1999, p. 8). Further, there are some marked similarities between the mystic and the poet. Mystics always insist that when they are undergoing mystical experience, they are in a state of ecstasy and trance, and that they can communicate it only when they come out of it. Similarly, poets also cannot give vent to their feelings and emotions anywhere and anytime because, as Wordsworth has pointed out, poetry is emotion recollected in tranquility. Moreover, some thinkers even find the basic objectives of both mysticism and poetry to be identical—both of them try to discover the hidden truth about the universe. Poetry can express mystical experiences because, very much like mysticism, it is concerned not only with the Animus—the surface self, but also with Anima—the deep self.

Henry Bremond, whom a critic (p. *ibid*) refers to in his lecture, points out that both the mystic and the poet start from the same point and share the same goal—“to know the highest truth, by knowing which all cravings for knowledge becomes redundant.” While the mystic, in the final stage of mystical experience may claim, “I am He”, the poet, before he makes such a sweeping statement, has to write about his journey towards his goal, and the accounts of his experiences bear the stamp and contours of his quest and hope for final fulfillment.

Mysticism in poetry, in contrast to popular perception, is not confined to certain ages or periods. Although periods like the Middle Ages of Europe, the 17th century of England, the 8th century of the Arab countries and the Middle Ages of India appear to be particularly enriched by the presence of the mystical elements, most historical periods, as a matter of fact, has the presence of mystical elements, either in a subdued or dominant fashion. That is why even in the “modern and secular” ages we have poets like W.B. Yeats, T.S. Eliot, Emily Dickinson, Walt Whitman etc. whose poetry is as mystical as those of Rumi or the Vaishnava poets of India. Again, even though mysticism constitutes a significant part in religious poetry, it cannot be said with absolute certainty that any religious poem on God will be mystical. Thus, neither *Paradise Lost* nor *Paradise Regained*—both of which are about God and His ways to Man—are not mystical in the strict sense of the term.

As the relationship between mysticism and poetry has been very close, the presence of the former in the poetical works can be noticed from a very ancient time. In fact, both western and eastern poetry are thoroughly blended with the elements of mysticism as can be seen in the following verse of the *Atharva Veda* where the mysticism surrounding the One is expressed in a very potent way:

*Thou art woman, thou art man;
Thou art the boy, thou the maiden;
Thou art the old man tottering with the staff;
Thou existest in all forms.*

Not only the *Vedas*, even the great Indian epics, namely, *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata* are also deeply steeped in mysticism. The spirit of mysticism continued to rule the Indian literary scene after the classical age also. In different parts of the country, saints and preachers continued to compose poetry to emanate the glory of the Supreme Being. These saints like Tirumoolar, Kabir, Guru Nanak, Sri Sankardeva, Chandidas etc. not only carried forward the wisdom of the ancient civilization, but also made the people aware of a profound mysticism enveloping everything in the universe through their literary works, mostly poetic in nature. Tirumoolar, for example, propagated the idea that ‘Love is God’ which he asserted in *Tirumantiram* :

*Senseless are they who say,
“Love and Siva are two”
They know not
It is love that becomes Siva.*

Another great Indian preacher Kabir also propagated the spirit of mysticism through his poetic utterances. He propagated the idea of a Supreme Being whom none can describe:

“Jas kahiye tas hote nahin, jas hai taisa sayi.”

[What you speak of Him, that He is not; He is what He is]

As a mystic expressing some of the most incisive account of his mystical experiences, Sant Kabir perceived the Supreme Being as all-pervading and expressed it beautifully with the help of a simile:

“Gheeve doodh mein rami raha byapak sab hi thaur.”

[He permeates the whole universe as butter permeates milk.]

The spirit of mysticism, epitomized in the poetry of the period of the Bhakti Movement, passed over to the modern Indian poetry and reached the apex in the poetry of Rabindranath Tagore. This Nobel laureate believed that the omnipresent God would permeate his life and body. The many coloured and perfumed nectar of the Supreme Being in association with the sights, scents and songs of the earth would help him in attaining salvation. The mysticism of Rabindranath Tagore played a major role in forming the mystical ideas of a number of contemporary Bengali and Assamese poets. In Assam, the poetry of Nalinibala Devi, Ratnakanta Barkataki, Nilamoni Phukan and Jatindranath Dowrah show the presence of mysticism in its most profound and varied forms.

Mysticism is regarded to be one of the most striking features of the Arabic poetry, especially of those composed during the Umayyad Dynasty and afterwards. Most of the mystic poets of the Islamic world were propagators of Sufism. One such mystic poet was Bayazid (d.875) who was impressed by the Hindu and Buddhist philosophy of Annihilation in God or *Nirvana* and propagated the mystical doctrine of *Fana* (“dying to self”) in his poetry:

I came out of Bayazid
As a snake emerges from its skin.
Then I realized that the lover,
The beloved and love itself are one...

However, it was Omar Ibn ul-Farid (b.1181) who brought in a great deal novelty to Arabic mysticism through his masterpiece *Diwan*. In this work he expresses the idea of incarnation of God in human beings in such a subtle and fluent style that was quite unheard of in earlier Arabic poetry (Ullah, 1963, p. 156).

Omar Ibn ul-Farid was followed by another great Arab mystic poet, Muhyuddin Mohammad Ibn al-' Arabi (1165-1240) whose *The Meccan Revelations* and *The Mosaic of Wisdom* contain a complete survey of mysticism. He put forward his system of the “unity of being” and his doctrine of the “perfect man” through his poetry. Both these system is actually a reflection of his conviction that there is no difference between the Supreme One and His creations. As he speaks in one of his poems:

*He praises me by manifesting my perfections and creating me in His image
And I praise Him by manifesting His perfections and obeying Him.
How can He be independent from me?
That is why I was created
And I know Him and bring Him into existence.*

The richness of mysticism has also enriched the western poetry for a long time. Of the many western mystics, the name of St. John of Cross is especially important since he chose the medium of poetry to express his mystical experience. Many of his mystical ideas bear a close resemblance to those of the Vaisnava preachers of India. He also regarded the Lord as a lover and spoke of his pleasure at being one with Him either through birth or death:

*Oh night that was my guide,
Oh darkness dearer than the morning pride,
Oh night that joined the lover
To the beloved bride.*

Besides the poetry of the avowed mystics, one may find instances of the mystical spirit in the works of the 17th century “metaphysical”. Among these poets who dealt with both the physical and metaphysical plans with the same virtuosity, the names of George Herbert, Andrew Marvell and Henry Vaughan are really significant to the students of mysticism. Herbert expressed his belief in the omnipotence and omniscience of the Supreme Being and stated that it was never possible for him to dissociate from the Almighty:

*But as I rav'd and grew more fierce and wild
At every word
Methought I heard one calling, Child
And I replied, My Lord.*

Another metaphysical poet, Henry Vaughan, provided an account of his mystical meeting with Eternity in a way as if it were a real encounter:

I saw Eternity the other night
Like great ring of pure and endless light,
All calm as it was bright
And round beneath it, Time in hours, days, years
Driv'n by the spheres
Like the vast shadow mov'd. In which the world
And all her train were hurl'd.

The spirit of mysticism continued to be a feature of English Romantic poetry. William Blake, one of major precursors of English Romanticism, impressed his readers with the mystical strain that he first expressed in *Songs of Innocence*. He gave a fuller expression to his mystical convictions in *The Book of Thel*, *The Heaven of Heaven and Hell*, *The Gate of Paradise* and *The Vision*.

The spirit of mysticism in English poetry was carried still further by the great Romantics like Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley and Keats. In his poetry Wordsworth asserted his faith in the presence of the Supreme Being in every element of nature. Shelley, the poet of the revolutionary idealism, came under the influence of Plato and spoke off the immortality of the soul and its reincarnation. Keats, while in a mood of mystical inspiration, identified truth and beauty as one.

In the Victorian Age, the representative poet of the period, Lord Alfred Tennyson, spoke of his mystical experience of the “moments when one feels that one cannot die” and Browning, in his own style, made the Grammarian say “leave Now for dogs and apes!/ Man has forever.” Again, in the twentieth century, two of the leading lights of the period, T.S. Eliot and W.B. Yeats carried the spirit of mysticism further. Eliot not only found a still point in the supernatural but also someone on the other side, and in Yeats, the undercurrent of mysticism inspired him to relieve the gods and fairies of Celtic mythology. Again, on the other side of the Atlantic, the poetry of Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson caught the attention of the readers for their strong currents of mysticism.

Conclusion

Thus, mysticism has a very close relationship with poetry and this relationship goes back to the time when human civilization began. The mystical elements in poetry are not confined to certain ages or periods. Although periods like the Middle Ages of Europe, the 17th century England, the 8th century Arab countries and the Middle Ages of India appear to be particularly enriched by the presence of mystical elements, most historical periods, as a matter of fact, has the presence of mystical elements, either in a subdued or dominant form.

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