

Literary Relevance of Mysticism

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Abstract: Mysticism is a term so irresponsibly applied in English Literature that it has become the first duty of those who use it to explain what they mean by it. The *Concise Oxford Dictionary* (1911), after defining a mystic as “one who believes in spiritual apprehension of truths beyond the understanding” adds, “Whence mysticism.” Whatever maybe the precise force of the remarks in the brackets, it is unquestionably true that mysticism is often used in a semi- contemptuous way to vaguely denote any kind of occultism or spiritualism or any especially curious or fantastic views about God and the universe. My paper aims towards justifying the relevance of mysticism in Literary works throughout the centuries with special focus on the old English Literature.

1. INTRODUCTION

Symbolism has been an extremely crucial aspect of mysticism and holds immense importance in the light of its impact on Literature. The necessity of symbolism is an integral part of the belief in unity. The real essence of symbolism relies on the fact that all things in nature have something in common. For example, human love can be perceived in the similar light as that of divine love because despite working in another plane, it is governed by similar laws thus giving rise to similar results. RL Nettleship describes the nature of symbolism in mysticism in one of his papers where he states that the true nature of mysticism is a consciousness that everything which we experience is only an element that is, it is capable of being symbolic or more than its original state of being. It means that symbolism enables us to catch the reflection of the truth which we are otherwise unable to apprehend in any other way. Symbolism and Mysticism have always harmoniously coexisted in Literature for ages, playing significant role in languages and cultures. The impact of symbols can reveal hidden truths about life and make it easier for the people to understand one another. Mysticism has been an integral part of Literature through ancient scriptures, medieval texts, and modern pieces. The relationship between Mysticism and Literature has been accepted in a spiritual context for a very long time. Literary symbolism plays a crucial role in context of religious spirituality. Ideally a symbol is

something that stands for, resembles, or suggests another object, quality, or idea.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Among the English writers and poets, William Wordsworth and William Blake are the only ones who have been able to fulfil and justify the concept of Mysticism in their works. The reason why literary works provide us with a better understanding of mysticism in comparison to philosophical works like those of Plato, Kant and Descartes is because the greatest essence of Mysticism is to believe that everything we see and perceive is symbolic of something greater and moreover it was the old English poets and writers who were capable of clothing their most profound thoughts and highest aspirations in poetic form. On one hand, where the philosophers approached the concept of mysticism in a direct and straightforward manner, it was the poets whose indirect yet symbolic take on Mysticism touches us more profoundly than the direct lesson of a moral treatise. And more so because the philosophical take appeals principally to our reason whereas, the poet invokes feelings of transcendental bliss. Moreover, poetry focuses on finding resemblances and universality of thought. Therefore, we deem the literary take on the philosophy of Mysticism more valuable in comparison to their philosophical counterpart. Mysticism is the innate

tendency of the human spirit towards the complete harmony with the transcendental order, whatever be that theological formula under which that order is understood. This tendency, in great mystics, gradually captures the whole field of consciousness. It dominates their life, and in their experience called the “mystic union” attains its end. I believe this process to represent the true line of development of the highest form of human consciousness.”- (Underhill, 15). The poets could better uphold and enhance the aspects of mysticism because they could explain Mysticism to the readers by writing about their personal experiences which drove them to the said state of mind. This is exactly what distinguishes a poet from a philosopher, a theologian, and the man of science because he bases his belief not on logic, revelation, reason or demonstrated facts but on his feelings and his intuitive inner knowledge. The mystical thought has its initial literary roots in the East. The great Eastern religions like Hinduism, Buddhism and Confucianism paved way for the earliest tenets of Mysticism. It was taught by the Upanishads that the soul or the spiritual consciousness is the only source of true knowledge. “The ancient Hindu scriptures and literary work deemed the soul as the “seer” or the “knower” and considers it as a great eye in the centre of an individual’s being through which he can gaze outwards and look upon reality. They believe that the soul is capable of this because in essence it is one with the universal soul. The apparent separation between the body and soul is an illusion brought on by matter. Thus, as per the Hindu scriptures the matter is an obstruction and a deception. Therefore, the Eastern Mysticism despises, rejects, and subdues all that is material and solely focuses on realising spiritual consciousness.” (Donald, 14) The Similar kind of thought prevailed in Ancient Greek and Egyptian civilizations as well before the onslaught of Christian Age. Majority of Plato’s thoughts are mystical in their essence. He believed that the mystic school of thought which acts as a driving force of the philosophical mind can do the same for the spiritual mindset. Known as the “Element of Attraction,” it states that it is the love for things which drives an individual to hold them close and cherish them. He stated in his mystical works that familiarity and kinship are the basis of affection and attraction. Therefore, one’s desire for wisdom, love or beauty is nothing but the soul’s yearning to attach itself to what calls out to it. This concept of attraction and affection is the leading source of inspiration for the two greatest dialogues in the history of Greek philosophy and Literature namely, *The Symposium* and *The Phaedrus*. In *The Symposium*, Socrates phrases the words of the stranger priestess Diotima, to lay down the path for the soul to travel and wrote down the steps which

need to be followed to attain the union with the divine. Since, only by denouncing the beauty of form and body can we appreciate and embrace the beauty of mind and spirit and as a result the beauty of God himself. He who under the influence of true love rising upward from these begins to see that beauty, is not far from the end. And the true order of going or being led by another to the things of love, is to use the beauties of earth as steps along which he mounts upwards for the sake of that other beauty, going from one to two, and from two to all fair forms, and from fair forms to fair practices, and from fair practices to fair notions, until from fair notions he arrives at the notion of absolute beauty, and at last knows what the essence of beauty is. This is that life above all others which man should live, in the contemplation of beauty absolute.” (Julian, 4). This is the very passage whose music and essence have echoed throughout the works of literature, especially in the poems of Spenser, Shelley, and Keats. Although, it is the works of Plato which act as the primary source of Mystical thought throughout Europe, it was originally his disciple Plotinus, a Neo-Platonist who is known as the “Father of European Mysticism.” Plotinus was an Egyptian by birth who lived and studied under Ammonius Sakkas in Alexandria at a time when it was the centre of the intellectual world, seething with speculation and schools, teachers, and philosophies of all kinds, Platonic and Oriental, Egyptian and Christian. Later, from the age of forty, he taught in Rome, where he was surrounded by many eager adherents. He drew the form of his thought both from Plato and from Hermetic philosophy, but its real inspiration was his own experiences. Plotinus combined, in unusual measure, the intellect of the metaphysician with the temperament of the great psychic, so that he was able to analyse with the most precise dialectic, experiences. The works of Plotinus had a major impact on the Christian Mysticism and his legacy was carried forward by two of his disciples, St. Augustine and another unknown scholar who was probably a Syrian Monk who ascribed his works to Dionysius, The Areopagite. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries the mystical tradition was carried on in France by St Bernard, the Abbot of Clairvaux, and the Irish Richard of the Abbey of St Victor in Paris, and in Italy, among many others, by St Bonaventura, a close student of Dionysius, and the three of them form the chief direct influences on our earliest English mystics. England was majorly affected by the influx of mystical thoughts and teachings in Europe during the fourteenth and fifteenth century. Initially the influence of Mysticism in the literature of England, France, Germany, Italy, and Sweden was purely religious and devotional in nature. “But the fourteenth century England, witnessed a rise of a group of writers and poets who

wrote about the great power and beauty of material life. Through the works of Richard Rolle, Walter Hilton, Julian of Norwich, and the author of the *Cloud of Unknowing*, we have a body of writings dealing with the inner life, and the steps of purification, contemplation, and ecstatic union which throb with life and devotional fervour.” (Philip,6) From the time of Julian of Norwich, who was still alive in 1413, we find practically no literature of a mystical type until we come to Spenser's *Hymns* (1596), and these embody a Platonism that reached them largely through the intellect, and not a mystic experience. It would seem at first sight as if these hymns, or at any rate the two later ones in honour of Heavenly Love and of Heavenly Beauty, should rank as some of the finest mystical verse in English. Yet this is not the case. They are saturated with the spirit of Plato, and they express in musical form the lofty ideas of the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus*: that beauty, more nearly than any other earthly thing, resembles its heavenly prototype, and that therefore the sight of it kindles love, which is the excitement and rapture aroused in the soul by the remembrance of that divine beauty which once it knew. And Spenser, following Plato, traces the stages of ascent traversed by the lover of beauty, until he is caught up into union with God Himself. Yet, notwithstanding their melody and their Platonic doctrine, the note of the real mystic is wanting in the *Hymns*, the note of him who writes of these things because he knows them. A common definition of mysticism is having a personal encounter with God or the uncreated. This experience is typically extrasensory and is frequently referred to as the sixth sense. It is an experience of unity with the cosmos. Religious experiences frequently contain mysticism, yet it is not only present in religion. There is mysticism in nature, music, and the arts as well. According to some (Julian,150), mysticism is the foundation of all religions. Some claim that mysticism and religion are distinct. There are numerous divergent viewpoints on the subject. “One of the seminal literary achievements of the mystic poets and writers was the development and indoctrination of various symbolic frames to present an account of their experiences. Such as the symbols of ladder, pilgrimage and bold symbols of earthly affections, courtly love, and marriage as the analogues of the divine union. There is a simplicity and charm to the way the mystic poets present the accounts of their experiences. Such as the Franciscan influence stemming from St. Francis of Assisi and his followers, the Augustinian influence prevalent in *The Cloud of Unknowing*, written anonymously. Other masterpieces include *The Scale of Perfection* by Walter Hilton, *Revelations of Divine Love* by Julian Norwich, and poems of Richard Rolle.”(McGinn, 50) The seventeenth century England witnessed a huge

influx of literary works rich in mystical thought. First came the Quakers, headed by George Fox. This rediscovery and assertion of the mystical element in religion gave rise to a great deal of writing, much of it very interesting to the student of religious thought. Among the *Journals* of the early Quakers, and especially that of George Fox, there are passages which charm us with their sincerity, quaintness, and pure flame of enthusiasm, but these works cannot be ranked as literature. Then we have the little group of Cambridge Platonists, Henry More, John Smith, Benjamin Whichcote, and John Norris of Bemerton. These are all Platonic philosophers, and among their writings, and especially in those of John Norris, are many passages of mystical thought clothed in noble prose. Henry More, who is also a poet, is in character a typical mystic, serene, buoyant, and so spiritually happy that, as he told a friend, he was sometimes "almost mad with pleasure." His poetical faculty is, however, entirely subordinated to his philosophy, and the larger portion of his work consists of passages from the *Enneads* of Plotinus turned into rather obscure verse. So that he is not a poet and artist who, working in the sphere of the imagination, can directly present to us mystical thoughts and ideas, but rather a mystic philosopher who has versified some of his discourses. Currently, also many of the "metaphysical poets" are mystical in much of their thought. Chief among these is John Donne, and we may also include Henry Vaughan, Traherne, Crashaw, and George Herbert.

3. CONCLUSIONS

Thus, the most recent philosophy throws light on the most ancient mystic teaching, and both point to the conclusion that our normal waking consciousness is but one special type of many other forms of consciousness, by which we are surrounded, but from which we are, most of us, physically and psychically screened. We know that the consciousness of the individual self was a late development in the race; it is at least possible that the attainment of the consciousness that these individual self-forms part of a larger Whole, may prove to be yet another step forward in the evolution of the human spirit. If this be so, the mystics would appear to be those who, living with an intensity greater than their fellows, are thus enabled to catch the first gleams of the realisation of a greater self. In any case, it would seem certain, judging from their testimony, that it is possible, by applying a certain stimulus, to gain knowledge of another order of consciousness of a rare and vivifying quality. Those who have attained to this knowledge

all record that it must be felt to be understood, but that, so far as words are of use, it is ever of the nature of a reconciliation; of discord blending into harmony, of difference merging into unity.

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