



ISSN Print: 2394-7500
ISSN Online: 2394-5869
Impact Factor: 8.4
IJAR 2023; 9(8): 196-198
www.allresearchjournal.com
Received: 03-06-2023
Accepted: 15-07-2023

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Concept of mysticism in the poetry of William Blake

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Abstract

Mysticism is often accepted as a spiritual quest for the hidden truth or wisdom, the goal of which is union with the transcendent realm. Mystic experiences are said to be unique for each individual. Yet we find that there is a marked resemblance between the experiences of mystics, not merely of the same race or cult, but also of diverse social orders and religions. Born in different lands they seemed to share a spiritual affinity. William Blake's works, though largely Biblical in its imagery, is apocalyptic in style and scope. The most prominent theme in their poetic works is that of mysticism and transcendentalism. Though their ways of depicting this is very different and diverse and their symbolism is also at variance, yet their poems bear a similar thematic purpose, which is mysticism.

Keywords: Mysticism, transcendentalism, divine, romanticism, imagination

Introduction

Mysticism is the endeavour of humans to apprehend Reality and experience the ecstasy of being in communion with God, by means of personal revelation, transcendentalism and contemplation or meditation on the Divine. It results in the freedom of the mind from the fetters of the senses and from the ordinary restrictions of social existence through the avenue of unexpected revelations. The mystic, being initiated into the mysteries of existence and the esoteric knowledge of the realities of life and death, aspires for afar, yearns for the inaccessible, and searches for the ideal heart's compassion and the desire to know the unknown (Samantaray 2011, p. 39) ^[1]. Through the purgation of bodily desires and the purification of profaneness of heart and will power, the mystic discovers the illumination of mind, which enables him to pursue the union with the Absolute, leading to a state of ecstasy, a state of bliss. The experience, thus, is vividly joyous, finely intellectual and entirely divine. It is also distinctly personal and evidently universal at the same time, which sets in a life of reception, transformation, transfiguration and continuous living in that state of rhapsodic exaltation. The mystic shuts the doors of fleeting senses and passing passions, and remains self-evident, self-sufficient and self-luminous. The mystic is essentially a transcendentalist, who integrates all the forces of mind into a unity and reconciles himself with the community and with the totality of the experience as a spiritual system. Self-transcendence is a determining feature of all mystical experience. The self is to be transcended since it is considered to block the mystic from the divine influx, and to be a barrier to the goal of union with the Divine. Metaphorical language is also mandatory to give sensible shape to these abstract thoughts, experiences, and insights. Mysticism is not a mere pursuit of supernatural joy, rather a highly specialised and active search for the Reality, which is always an object of exploration culminating in the living union with the One and the Absolute. As Radhakamal Mukerjee says.

Mysticism posits eternal values such as Truth, Beauty and Goodness, which are all infinite, and which transcend any system of human relations, but it finds these actualized in concrete human situations and experiences. God as Truth safeguards society's pursuit of knowledge and broadens the horizon of human concepts, attitudes and affections. God as Beauty assures the promotion and conservation of values in the world of art. God as Goodness and Love guarantees man and society all that is worth maintaining and developing in social life and relations. God as the Person of Persons conserves the supreme values of personality in all men and in all human situations. Finally, God as the Transcendent Being or the Real Self stands for the conjunction of the values of Truth, Beauty and Goodness.

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Mysticism...can alone offer ways of accommodation and synthesis to an individual or community faced with the problems of tension and conflict of these ultimate values of life (1960, p. 9) ^[8].

Tryst with the unknown: Mysticism in the works of Blake

An intensive study of the history of English literature reveals how mysticism has permeated English poetry. Needless to reiterate that the mysticism one encounters in English poetry is largely Christian in inspiration. In any comprehensive study of mysticism, William Blake (1757-1827), on the sheer strength of his prodigious innovativeness, has to occupy a nodal position. As we know, Blake was a born visionary. Having had the beatific vision of angels perched on a tree early in his childhood, Blake, like St. Catherine of Siena, dedicated himself to the service of the Absolute. To demystify his mystic experiences he painted the ineffable experiences, using enigmatic symbols powerful enough to make his poems at once mystical and perhaps, therefore, freighted with loads of meaning. His mystic vision is reflected in the tapestry of images systematically used in his poetical works. Blake affirms love as the essence of all religions. For him, the entire universe with its manifest contraries and contradictions is fortified with Divine Love and therefore man, loving and loved by God, can never be unparadized. In *The Lamb* (2008, p. 9) ^[12] Blake argues that love is the quintessential attribute of both man and the Maker.

He is called by thy name,
For He calls Himself a Lamb
He is meek, and He is mild
He became a little child.
I a child, and thou a lamb,
We are called by his name.

A similar microcosm in the macrocosm syndrome is evident in the poem captioned *Auguries of Innocence* (Blake 2008, p.490) ^[4].

To see a World in a grain of sand,
And a Heaven in a wild flower,
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand,
And Eternity in an hour.

The above stated lines do bear ample testimony to the poet's proven mysticism.

Blake is held in high regard by the critics for his expressiveness and creativity and for the philosophical undercurrents in his works. He lived during a time of intense social change – a period of aggressive British Colonialism, revolutionary changes in America and Europe, as well as the beginning of Industrial Revolution. He obtained most of his education through his readings of the Bible, Milton, and Greek and Latin classics. His poetry shows the influence of the German mystic Jakob Boehme and the thinker Emanuel Swedenborg. Boehme's "*De Signatura Rerum*" (Divine signatures in nature) and Paracelsus's theory of "*Le Principe de la medicine est. clamour*" (Love is the medicine) perhaps influenced Blake to develop his conception of absolute oneness between humans and God through the agency of love. Obviously, Paracelsus, by advocating the theory of the gracious, amiable, blessed, friendly and joyful love, inspired

Blake to search and consecrate Mercy, Pity, Peace and Love in animated world, where he was able to decipher the divine signatures. Blake who had "spent his life unveiling the face of Truth in his poetry and his art displaying a power and beauty beyond the stream of thought" (Nanavutty 1968, p. 105) ^[9] was also influenced by Hindu mythology. *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* shows how he has been influenced by "the Hindu conception of *Samsara* (mundane existence), which consists of discordant elements in opposition to one another" (Nanavutty 1968, p. 171) ^[9]. Blake's *The Four Zoas*, namely Tharmas-the Body, Luvah-Emotions, Urizen-Intellect, and Los-Urrhona-the Imagination and Spirit behave exactly as the four persons produced from Brahma's breath, namely Sinnoc-the Body, Sinnunda-Life, Sonnatin-Permanency, and Sonnin Kunar-Intellectual Existence. Though Blake's Zoas are morphological derivatives from the Zoas, or Living Creatures of Ezekiel's Vision, Blake's exposure to Alexander Dow's *History of Hindostan* should not be overlooked.

Poetry and art, according to Blake, were the avenues to social reform. Romantic-period writing in general is often characterized by an increased interest in the natural world, thus making the period popular for critics with environmentalist agendas. In *The Echoing Green* (2007, p.11). Blake uses Nature to illustrate its direct correlation to both man and the Creator.

The sun does arise,
And make happy the skies.
The merry bells ring
To welcome the spring.
The skylark and thrush,
The birds of the bush,
Sing louder around,
To the bells' cheerful sound,
While our sports shall be seen
On the echoing green.

The sparks of romanticism and imagination are intensely reflected in Blake's poetry. To him art was the expression and language of the Divine and the path in which one could attain salvation. Blake believed that imagination was eternal and Divine and hence superior to the finite material world. He declared to have seen visions from quite a young age.

The first of these visions may have occurred as early as the age of four when, according to one anecdote, the young artist "saw God" when God "put his head to the window", causing Blake to break into screaming. At the age of eight or ten in Peckham Rye, London, Blake claimed to have seen "a tree filled with angels, bright angelic wings bespangling every bough like stars." According to Blake's Victorian biographer Gilchrist, he returned home and reported this vision, and he only escaped being thrashed by his father for telling a lie through the intervention of his mother. Though all evidence suggests that his parents were largely supportive, his mother seems to have been especially so, and several of Blake's early drawings and poems decorated the walls of her chamber. On another occasion, Blake watched haymakers at work, and thought he saw angelic figures walking among them (Bentley 1996, p. 36-37) ^[1].

The visions that he saw in his childhood (which he kept seeing throughout his life) were a product of his numinous imagination. According to him, human imagination was not

only the reflection of the Divine vision but also its fruition. Blake, the visionary, has looked beyond time and space. He identified God with Man in order to show that all human beings have a divine element within themselves. He praises both God and man while asserting an identity between the two.

For Mercy Pity Peace and Love,
Is God our father dear
.....
Where Mercy, Love and Pity dwell,
There God is dwelling too (*The Divine Image* 2008, p. 12-13) ^[13].

The four virtues that Blake assigns alternately to man and God are the ones conventionally associated with Jesus. Christ was both God and man, hence the vehicle for Blake's mediation between the two.

Everything Blake created - his poems, his engravings, his illuminated books - were for the purpose of revealing to people the Higher Reality. In *Jerusalem* (5.17.26) he writes.

I rest not from my great task!
To open the Eternal Worlds, to open the immortal Eyes
Of Man inwards into the Worlds of Thought: Into
Eternity
Ever expanding in the Bosom of God, the Human
Imagination
O Saviour pour upon me thy Spirit of meekness and
love!
Annihilate the Self hood in me: Be thou all my life!
Guide thou my hand, which trembles exceedingly upon
the rock of ages,
While I write of the building of Golgonooza (2008
p.147).

He saw all temporal things as a form of eternity, having a transcendental nature. Though writing nearly half a century later even after Blake, his eastern counterpart - Rabindranath Tagore was strikingly enough echoing similar mystical experiences transcending temporal and spatial limitations bordering on the occult.

Conclusion

The relation between the Absolute, infinite, self-existent and immutable and the finite human individual who is enmeshed in the temporal order is unimaginably intimate though difficult to define and explain. An in-depth study of the works of William Blake and Rabindranath Tagore reveals that their poetic vision coalesce notwithstanding the kaleidoscopic divergence by studying their poetic art, craft and oeuvre, while casting off the cultural tensions and nationalistic pretensions aside. The most prominent theme in their poetic works is that of mysticism and transcendentalism. Blake's works, though largely biblical in its imagery, is apocalyptic in style and scope. Since Blake's true home is in vision, through visible things he has shown the invisible, formless and immutable.

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