

A Correlation Between Oriental & Occidental Mysticism: Lal Ded and William Blake

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Abstract: There have been many philosophers, sages and saints in the Oriental world since ancient times and so mostly people in the Oriental world believe “mysticism” to be confined to their world. But that is not true as the history of mysticism in the oriental world also dates back to the ancient times. Mysticism which literally means the unification with God has its root in ancient Greek also like India. Hence the unification of the human heart with the essence of the Absolute, the Divine, could never be confined to any place or religion, even era. From time to time, in different parts of the world there have been many philosophers and seers who have swept the world with their mystical approach. In our paper, we will delve into the writings of two great mystical poets from two eras and two different countries, Lal Ded or Laleshviri and William Blake. The purpose of this research is to launch a discourse on how Mysticism as a thought and belief travelled from one world to completely another, and how it crossed the centuries to reach people of one era into another. While Lal Ded was a 14th Century Kashmiri poet, William Blake belonged to England of the Romantic Age.

Keywords: Oriental & Occidental world, Mysticism Lal Ded, William Blake, Spiritualism, Literary Theory, The Romantic Age.

Introduction

One cannot limit ‘consciousness’ and, ‘experience,’ especially when it is non-sensory. That is why the unification of the human heart with the essence of the Absolute, the Divine, could never be confined to a place and era. Mankind has been trying to comprehend this ultimate Truth of this Universe and acquire a knowledge that could lead to this Truth. A few had been able to attain that unification with Divine. This unification with Divine is ‘Mysticism.’ Since the era when Mysticism took its origin there have been many seers especially in the oriental world who have guided the world with their mystical approach leading the people towards the real essence of love and devotion. We also see some fine examples of mystical poets in the occidental world as well.

Mysticism, to put it in the most unornamented way, is unification with God. Like religion it is a practice, but it is not an organized practice. It has no set method of prayer to attain union with the Absolute, it has no scripture and no specific place to talk to God. Talking of its origin... mysticism has always been part of human existence since the evolution of this world. In different centuries and in different parts of the world there have been seers, philosophers and mystic poets who have taken the world by storm by their teachings and writings.

Mysticism has its roots in ancient Greek. In Greek it indicates, ‘to conceal.’ The Greek philosopher Diogenes of Appolonia brought Mysticism in Greek philosophy. It was in the 5th Century BCE. The development took place in other ancient religions on the basis of their respective religious premises, although

Mysticism is considered a scion of spiritual realization of man rather than religious. Scholars around the world have always believed that mystical experiences are mostly religious as they possess nature as their objects. However, Hinduism, Christianity, Islam, and many other religions have Mysticism in their attributes. As Studstill says, “The term ‘mysticism’ encompasses the experiences, traditions, practices, rituals, doctrines, etc. comprising and associated with their various religious paths.” (2005, p.1)

Studstill believes that “mysticism designates a set of phenomena that comprises ‘mystical experience’ and those aspects of religious traditions that promote the occurrence of such experience.” A person who is considered as mystic believes things in the world which are beyond the reach of an ordinary person or in other terms for them it is not real. Mostly they are religious practitioners who consciously try to explore an experience which is ultimately real and who apprehend an experience which is non-ordinary and which appears to these hermits as a paramount real experience. But Kant has totally different views on mysticism as he has depicted mystics as committing one (or both) of two errors: either Wahn (‘delusion’ – abusing the Critical philosophy’s limits on what we can know) or Schwärmerei (‘delirium’ – abusing its limits on how we employ feeling)” (Palamquist, 137, 2020)

Theoretical Framework

The word “mysticism” originated in Ancient Greek with diverse historical meanings, it has been taken from Greek word meaning, “to

conceal” or “to close”. Mysticism has a comprehensive meaning as it referred to various dimensions related with early and medieval Christianity like biblical, liturgical and spiritual. Further the definition of mysticism grew in the modern period making it more extensive in terms of beliefs and ideologies. In the current times, the term has been confined to the meaning aiming, “union with the Absolute, the infinite, or God” but with a broader range covering extensively all the religious traditions and practices. But whatever age or era it is, the key element of mysticism has always been valuing “mystical experience”. Critics have classified mysticism into these variations:

Variations of Mysticism

Shamanism

Western mysticism

Jewish mysticism

Islamic mysticism

Indic religions

Shamanism possessed one of the world’s oldest mystical traditions, as it is a system of religious practice. Its origin is mostly connected with native, indigenous and tribal culture. The follower of Shamanism, irrespective of gender is known as shamans and is believed to relate to the divine world meaning he/she possesses spiritual power which can heal the sick, can communicate with spirit and even escorts people who have died to their afterlife. Hence, in the world’s hunting religion, a shaman is an ecstatic figure whether it is male or female.

Western mysticism can be classified into two segments: pagan philosophy and Christian philosophy. Scholars have often

defined it as a comprehensive range of relatively connected opinions and movements that has evolved in the occidental world. It has its impact on all the fields and continues to regulate intellectual propositions and popular culture. In Western mysticism there has been a tendency since the last 2000 years to explore the form and content of our 'natural world' as a means to connect with the divine. The laws of Absolute cannot be understood without having a good knowledge of the laws of nature. Plotinus is considered as the Father of Western Mysticism.

Gershom Scholem, the famous Jewish mystic scholar in his famous book, has differentiated Jewish mysticism into various forms; Ashkenazi Hasidim, Merkabah Kabbalah, further he has drawn distinctions in Kabbalah mysticism. The oldest mystical tradition is Merkabah, which originated in around 100 BCE - 1000 CE, the second is Kabbalah, which has its origin in the 12th century and is the most popular form and the third is Ashkenazi Hasidim which emerged in the early 13th century. The Kabbalistic Jewish mystical form has been differentiated into three common methods: Theosophical/Speculative Kabbalah, Meditative/Ecstatic Kabbalah and the Practical/Magical Kabbalah. In Theosophical/Speculative Kabbalah stream believed in exploring to apprehend and illustrate the divine realm, the Meditative/Ecstatic Kabbalah stream believed in exploring to accomplish a mystical union with Almighty and the third, Practical/Magical Kabbalah stream believed in seeking to theurgically alter the heavenly dimension and

the World. Though these three techniques or objectives of mystical traditions are co-related with each other but are different in approach. The elements of these mystical traditions are also initiated as three common typologies throughout the other Jewish mystical traditions originated before or after them.

Mysticism in Islam has originated in two distinct and autonomous ways. Sufism is the mystical and purest form of Islam but it developed at a later stage as with the advent of Islam, mysticism has been traditionally associated with the concept of "Hikmah", a combination of wisdom and philosophy. It is believed that the antecedent of mystical components in Islam can be delineated from the holy text of Islam, the Quran and in Islamic principle. Mystics and Islamic philosophers have regarded some of the Quranic verses known as ayat as a fine example of mysticism. Example: "God is the Outward and the Inward" (Quran 57:3), "He is for whom wisdom is given, He truly has received abundant good" (Quran 2:269), and some other popular ayats. The important fact of Islamic mysticism is that it stands on two aspects; practical and philosophical. It signifies that mysticism can be achieved in one of the two ways, either through practical insight, which comprises self-purification and austerity, or by a kind of philosophy which consists of discursive reasoning but is not confined to this only.

Indic religions are those religions which have evolved in the Indian subcontinent; Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism and Sikhism. They are also termed as Dharmic religions because of the concept of "dharma" in them.

Though these dharmic have many commonalities related to beliefs and the medium of worship, even some Gods also but there are differences in opinion on various issues still they live in close vicinity. There are festivals which are commonly celebrated among them. So, there are many things which they share, hence these communities possess mutual respect. They also have different types of methods of praying, customs and ritual or mode of worship.

Mysticism in Hinduism means overcoming ignorance and the concept of moksha in the afterlife. For this, there are many interconnected ascetic conventional and philosophical schools in Hinduism whose objective is moksha and the accession of divinity. Then another is Yoga, which is a physical, mental and spiritual practice whose motive is attainment of spiritual peace. Stuart Ray Sarbacker in his book, *Samadhi: The Numinous and Cessative in Indo-Tibetan Yoga* opines that all the three regions Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism possess various traditions of yoga. Basically, Hindu mysticism borders Sanatan dharma's philosophy, world views and teachings. It comprises six practices; Samkhya, Yoga, Nyaya, Vaisheshika, Mimansa and Vedanta.

Sikhism is a religion founded by Guru Nanak Dev, who is believed to have encountered intense mystical experiences since childhood. Robyn Lebron has argued that "as a mystic, Guru Nanak is assumed to emphasize that God must be seen through 'the inward eye' or the 'heart' of an individual" (2012). There are ten Guru in Sikhism, Guru Nanak being the first and Guru Arjun the fifth,

read other religion's mysticism closely and added them in the holy text of Sikhism, Guru Granth Sahib. Though Sikhs have ten Gurus, but they believe in one God and in meditation. For them, meditation is the road towards enlightenment which helps an individual to meet God. Hence the most important aspect of Sikhism is surrendering oneself through devoted meditation to the Almighty.

The Development- It is imperative to understand the history of Mysticism during its doctrines and influence over the centuries and across the countries. Richard Rohr, American Franciscan Priest and spiritual writer marks 2500 BC as the infancy of Mysticism. It was the time of, as Owen Barfield says, 'original participation,' with 'a primal unity of mind with no separation between the inner and the outer worlds.' (http://owenbarfield.org/BARFIELD/Barfield_Scholarship/Lachman.html). 500 BC is said to be the Axial Age of this thought by Karl Jaspers in his 1949 published book *The Origin and Goal of History*. That was a transformational era for religious and philosophical thought which took place simultaneously at many places like India, China, Persia and the Eastern Mediterranean region of West Asia. It was pivotal because it was the time when humans' spiritual and philosophical thoughts were substantiated. Around 200 BC Indian religious culture developed, and Yoga Sutra took birth. It was also the same time of the belief in Apocalypticism. The word mysticus first appears in the 2nd Century through Clement of Alexandria. "He understood this Christian gnosis as the work of the Logos, through which

God's relation to the world and his revelation is maintained." He considered God transcendently as an unqualified Being.

https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Clement_of_Alexandria He believed that through faith only one can attain gnosis, which is spiritual and mystical knowledge. The 4th Century witnessed the Desert Fathers, and Desert Mothers in Egypt, there were also waves of spiritualism in Syria and Palestine. who were spiritual teachers. While Lao- Tzu and Taoism spread in China in the 6th Century, Zen Buddhism in Japan and Tibetan Buddhism spread in the 7th Century. In 8th Century Iraq had an Islamic saint Rabia, who was influential all over Iraq as Sufi scholar. From the 9th to 12th Century recorded many scholars and religious proceedings of major and minor importance, the 13th Century had, in the words of Richard Rohr, 'an explosion of mysticism.' It was the time of the greatest of mystics namely, Francis and Clare in Italy, Rumi in Persia, Beguines and Beghards in Western Europe, Gertrude in Germany, Giles of Assisi, Raymond Lull, Richard Rolle, Angela of Foligno, German Dominicans Henri Suso and Johannes Tauler, Ibn'Arabi among so many others. The mystical philosophy of the Cloud of Unknowing came in the 14th Century. It is named Cloud of Unknowing because it is so deliberate and neutral that when the unification with God takes place, one forgets everything that is earthly or even remotely related to earthly. The renowned holy man Kabir was born in the 15th Century. The 17th Century was the complicated era for Mysticism, it was the time of crisis. Barfield calls it the 'desert of non- participation,'

because, "where no one belonged, few were at home in this world, and religion at its worst concentrated on controlling its own members."

Mysticism flourished in the 20th Century with mystics in their school school thoughts and modern development of it came up with a new kind of 'participation.' They were around the world searching for the true meaning of life and the ways to connect it with the absolute entity. It was the era of Rabindranath Tagore, Swami Paramhans Yoganand, MK Gandhi, Fredrich Von Hugel, Thoms Kelly, Martin Luther King, Ruth Barrows, John Main, Karl Rahner. The galaxy of the mystic valley had precious stars to enlighten the world.

Mysticism has been rooted in the culture of Kashmir for ages as the three universal religions of the world; Hinduism, Islam and Buddhism have made it a testing ground. These three religions have assimilated into the Himalayan region making a common culture termed as Kashmiriyat. This led to providing a fertile ground to the growth of mysticism in Kashmir making it a place for many seer and mystic poets.

In the contemporary scenario, Kashmir is considered as a battleground; a place which is not safe for Non-Muslims. As Ranjit Hoskote describes the situation in his book, I Lalla:

Religious identities in the region have become harder and more sharp-edged, following a substantial exodus of the Hindu minority during the early 1990s, and a gradual effort to replace Kashmir's unique and syncretically nuanced tradition of Islam with a more Arabocentric global template. (xiv)

But this has not been the culture of Kashmir since ages, in fact the very term “Kashmiriyat” means communal harmony or a synthesis of many cultures residing peacefully. This is the centuries-old indigenous tradition of Kashmir, though the scene in Kashmir seemed to be completely different. But everything is not what appears and most of the things which we see are not completely true, something we see partially or one-side of the story. Kashmiriyat in the himalayan valley of Kashmir emerged around the 16th century making it a land of religious and cultural harmony synthesizing patriotism and pride. It was a time when both the religion Hindu and Muslim joined hands to celebrate their festival together and share a common language, cuisine and clothing making a common culture for the natives irrespective of religion. It is Kashmiriyat where we see folks of both the religions celebrating festivals of each other's communities. This common culture was promoted by Kashmiri King, Zain-ul-Abidin. Lal Ded and Alamdar-e-Kashmir are such fine examples who are equally loved and respected by both communities.

Sanstilla in his book, *The Unity of Mystical Tradition* has tried to prove that “mystical doctrines and practices initiate parallel transformative processes in the consciousness of mystics”. This can be true not only for the saints, philosophers but also for the poets. In this paper, we are discussing two poets; Lal Ded and William Blake.

Lal Ded is one such name which is though not well known globally but it is a very popular and respected name not only in Kashmir's spiritual and poetic circle but also

in every house in the valley. The interesting fact is that she had equally got a place in Kashmiris tradition in Hindus and Muslim culture, while Hindus call her as “Lalleshvari” in Muslim, she is referred as “Lal Arifa”. This is a fine example of plural sensibility which Kashmir has nurtured since centuries. But things are changing in contemporary scenarios, in Hoskote words, “today unfortunately, these descriptions are increasingly being promoted at the expense of one another”.

In the literary circle, she is famous as “Lal Ded” which in native language means “Grandmother Lal” in literary sense it means “Lal the Womb” this is a highly designation because it refers to mother goddess. In the oral tradition, she is also popular with the name, “Lalla”. Ranjit Hoskote quotes about her:

To the outer world, Lal Ded is arguably Kashmir's best known spiritual and literary figure; within Kashmir, she has been venerated both by Hindus and Muslims for nearly seven centuries. For most of that period, she has successfully eluded the proprietorial claims of religious monopolists. (2011)

In colloquial terms, her poems are called “vakhs” which are considered as the earliest instance of Kashmiri literature, it was a time when Kashmiri language was developing as a modern language. In Kashmiri popular culture, a total of 258 “vakhs” have been popular since the fourteenth century in the form of songs, proverbs and prayers. This is quite similar to Amir Khusrau whose songs, verses and proverbs are famous till now. Most of her vakhs have a common theme running in them and some of them are even in the form of questions and answers. They provoke listeners

to be thoughtful and respond towards it. She has used simple and lucid language which is easily understandable but with a deep meaning, subjective and almost inexpressible.

Lal Ded is credited in developing Kashmiri language and in this way, she has helped Kashmiris to discover their mother tongue. In her lifetime, she tried to abridged the difference between common man and elite class and encouraged common people to communicate within themselves. Her contribution to the Kashmiri linguistic tradition is the transition from old to the modern Kashmiri language reflected in the verses known as vakhs. Gierson argues that her vakhs are the oldest illustration of Kashmiri language.

It is believed that psychological turmoil was the main reason behind the holistic and spiritual life of Lal Ded. Being born in a Brahmin family, after her marriage she was badly treated by her husband and mother-in-law. When she was not able to resist the atrocities, she left home and wandered naked, singing and dancing in ecstatic frenzy. She was influenced by spirituality since her childhood due to the pious atmosphere of her home and Siddha Mol, her spiritual teacher who taught her certain spiritual disciplines. There is confusion regarding her philosophy as different scholars have different opinions regarding it. In some scholars' views, she belonged to Kashmiri branch of Shaiva region, some believed that she was ardent follower of Hatha Yoga, Buddhism or Shankaracharya, some scholars give proof of recorded Persian chronicle that she accepted Islam and became disciple of Shah Hamadan who was living in

exile in Kashmir. Most of the scholars believed her to be a Sufi or Wali. In his book, *Tarikh-i-Hasan (1885)*, Gulam Hasan has summed up this altercation, "The Hindus say that she is one of them. The Musalmans claim that she belongs to them. The truth is that she is among the chosen of god, May god's peace be upon her" (Kaul, 1973).

Lal Ded was a seer, who lived a life wandering here and there as an ascetic in search of God. In one of her verses, she says:

I didn't believe in it for a moment
but I gulped down the wine of my own voice.
And then I wrestled with the darkness inside
me,
knocked it down, clawed at it, ripped it to
shreds.

Lalla was a yogini and hence her verses were shimmered with her ascetic experience owing to the mystical practice of Kashmir Shaivism. The relevant point is that this spiritual school is a convergence of many philosophical traditions, hence in her poems we find examples of images and ideas of those spiritual traditions i.e., Tantra, Yoga, Yogacara, even the practices of Sufism. The symbols and allegories which she has used in her verses are obscure but still the openness which we find in her writings affects our hearts instinctively.

Then, there is mysticism in some of the poems of William Blake, who is considered a precursor of the Romantic movement which occurred in the 19th century. He was a poet and a spiritual visionary. Influenced by Swendenborg whose doctrines stated that God encompasses in His being everything that is present on the face of this Galaxy, whether hidden or manifest, is God, and that His power is limitless. In his younger days Blake rebelled

against religion in its well-organized institution. Like mystics he believed that religion could not be programmed in prayers, and relegated to a building such as a church. To him religion is not performed but experienced by one's imagination that should be pure and untwisted to feel it. He described four states of mind Ulro, Generation, Beulah, and Eden of Eternity, understanding which one could have a grasp over their beneficial imagination. Susana Andrews claims, "Blake cared deeply about the physical and spiritual world and believed the way to preserve the earth was to be open to the Divine, the gods and psychic beings that visited him often. He was confident that discounting the world beyond the reality in front of us was discounting a part of self." thecollector.com/william-blake-mythology-4-states-of-mind/

In his poem, "Divine Image" he mentions four human virtues: Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love. These virtues are the connecting juncture between a human heart and Divine. The heart that has these virtues, has God residing in it. To elaborate, human beings could have that divine light in them nourishing these human virtues. Human heart can be a temple in itself instead of constructing a temple outside.

And all must love the human form,
In heathen, turk or jew.
Where Mercy, Love & Pity dwell,
There God is dwelling too.

Similarly, "The Garden of Love" has hints of dissent from the contemporary structural form of religion. He writes,

I went to the Garden of Love,
And saw what I never had seen:
A Chapel was built in the midst,

Where I used to play on the green.

He believed in restriction free and command free religious practices. Since God's abode is the human heart, love towards God could be realized easily by love instead of following a strict religious protocol. In this poem he says that priests in black gowns are acting as guards of the chapel and they are driving out the joys of the poet. The Church should be a place of love to prosper, not restrict it.

In poem "The Lamb", Blake converses about the Creator who is kindest of the kind. He is as tender as His creation like lamb. This poem speaks against the religious norm of worshipping God under his fear. Like a true mystic William Blake sees the beauty of God in mundane and connecting him through his creations. True relationship with Divine could be established if the the factor of fright is dispensed away from the human heart. The God who made a fine, soft, delicate being as the Lamb is easily approachable by human beings. Mystics have the belief that their medium to get to God is, in a non-conforming way, different from the traditional access to God by people. In the poem, "Marriage Between Hell and Heaven" he seeks a balance between good and evil. The presence of both will let goodness progress in this world.

Conclusion

In the contemporary scenario, we see that mysticism is declining from the world as people are becoming increasingly materialistic. They are forgetting moral values as well as ethics and becoming more and more corrupt. But in olden days from ancient time till the last century, there were innumerable

mystics who had abandoned their comfortable lives and wandered in forest and mountains in search of knowledge and divinity. In this paper, we have discussed a mystic who is also a poet, Lal Ded and a poet who is also a mystic, William Blake.

Though Lal Ded and Blake belonged to two different countries and era and most importantly two cultural polarities; oriental and occidental world but one thing is precisely common in them and that is mysticism. It is mysticism which connects and most importantly because they have poured it in their poetry making it pure and ascetic.

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