

MYSTICISM IN T.S.ELIOT'S "FOUR QUARTETS" - A STUDY

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Mysticism can be broadly defined as something mysterious, that which seems to be obscure for human comprehension. This is something indefinable, something always and everywhere meets us, reminding us of the existence of that which is beyond all human control, it is not a definite thing or a fact about which one can reason. Yet, we can define mysticism as a union with the Divine, a reunion with the infinite. It can be also said as an experience of the infinite. It can also said as an experience of the finite reaching the infinite, an evolution of the soul. Thus, it is man-God unity.

Mysticism is a quest for a hidden truth or wisdom: the treasure hidden in the centers of our souls. Mysticism or the mystical faculty of perceiving transcendental reality is said by many to belong to all men, though few use it. Aldous Huxley has stated that ' a totally unmystical world would be a world totally blind and insane' and the Indian Poet Rabindranath Tagore has noted that Man has a feeling that he is truly represented in something which exceeds himself.[1]

Mysticism cannot be defined precisely and no single definition will cover every aspect of mysticism. Definitions of mysticism include a variety, it ranges from science through psychology to theology. It is more allied to philosophy, more akin to psychological experience of religion. The origin of the word suggests, that mysticism is the science of a hidden life. The twentieth century scholars are of the belief that "the people of the hidden should not remain hidden too long and should come out in the open, befitting an era of open development and open realization." [2]

The aim of mysticism is union with the Divine or sacred. The way to that union is usually developed by following four stages: purgation, purification, illumination and unification.

After defining the term mysticism, let us see who is a Mystic? A Mystic is a person who has undergone some mystical - inexplicable - experience. And each mystic differs from the other. No one mystic is completely typical. The mystical experience of one will differ from the other. So one's experience will not be another's, but their ultimate goal is the same, that is, union with the divine. A Mystic does not have Godhead as that of a religious man, and he does not practice any religion. A Mystic, believes in the experience of a power for apprehending the higher things; a power which not every one possesses, but which can be acquired and stimulated by extraordinary efforts- in short, he believes in a mystic organ, which enables the devout or elect person to grasp what the world cannot understand; a power of flight which exceeds that of any bird, a capacity of soul which begins where reason and reasonable grounds end. [3]

A mystic has no proper adherence to rituals and practices of religion, he takes a sudden short cut to realisation, speaks an esoteric and symbolic language in communicating his experience. He lives in a elusive and always in most camouflaged surroundings. He leads a secretive life and is not interpreting and communicating his experiences. He never shares his joy with others. His life is mostly seclusive and secretive. A mystic founds no order or he has any followers.

Mysticism or mystical experience differs not only from an individual to another but also widely from country to country. So, we have Chinese Mysticism, Indian Mysticism, Persian, Greek, Primitive, German, the Mysticism of the Greek Church, Sufiism, The Mysticism of the Roman Church, New Testament Christian Mysticism.

The characteristics of true mysticism are practical, that is, "True mysticism is active and practical not passive and theoretical. It is an organic life-process, a something which the whole self does; not something as to which its intellect holds an opinion"[4] Secondly, it is transcendental and spiritual. "It is in no way concerned with adding to, exploring, re-arranging, or improving anything in the visible universe. The mystic brushes aside that universe even in its most supernormal manifestations Though he does not, as his enemies declare, neglect his duty to the many, his heart is always set upon the changeless one."[5] Thirdly the mystic is a lover that is "not merely the Reality of all that is, but also a living and personal object of love; never an object of exploration. It draws his whole being homeward, but always under the guidance of the heart."[6] Fourthly his object is union with the Absolute. And the fifth characteristic is self surrender of an individual.

Most of us compare mystical experience with that of religious experience. But this is not correct. It can be agreed that there exists some connection between mysticism and religion but it is not so direct and immediate. Mystical experience is not a religious phenomenon at all. What chiefly distinguishes mysticism is that the ordinary religious person principally contemplates the things which separate him from God, and compares his own nothingness with God's greatness, his finiteness with God's holiness. In realising the immeasurable distance, man remains fully and clearly conscious of his own humanity, and looks upon his God as a definite being quite apart from himself. But the mystic does not believe in a definable God. To him God is as indefinite as He is incomprehensible, invisible and infinite, therefore all-embracing. The true mystic refuses to think of himself as standing before his God as an I to a thou, but rather as an I to higher I. [7]

Walter T. Stace, in his book *The Teachings of the Mystics* says, In the theistic religions of the West, in Christianity, Judaism, and Islam the experience of the undifferentiated unity is interpreted as "union with God". But this is an interpretation and is not the experience itself. It is true that some Christian mystics, such as St. Teresa of Avila, invariably speak simply of having experienced 'union with God', and do not talk about an undifferentiated unity. St. Teresa did not have a sufficient analytical mind to distinguish between the experience and its interpretation. [8]

But other Christian mystics who are more analytically minded, such as Eckhart and Ruysbroeck, speak of the undifferentiated unity. This undifferentiated unity is interpreted "in terms of the Trinitarian conception of God, but by Islamic mystics as the unitarian God of Islam, and by the leading school of the Vedantists as a more impersonal Absolute." [9] And in Buddhism, this experience is not interpreted as any kind of God. For them, it becomes "the Void or Nirvana" [10] Buddhists deny the existence of a Supreme Being. It is said 'Buddhism is atheistic.' "So there can exist an atheistic mysticism, a mystical experience naked and not clothed in any religious garb. "[11] Prayer and worship may form a part of mysticism but they are only a means and not an essence and "mysticism is a pure unitary consciousness or a union with God." [12] Therefore, mysticism, confirms "the claims of religion and is viewed as providing a foretaste of the life after death." [13]

Mystical experience which is centred in seeking union with God falls mainly into two types. One is extrovertive mystical experience and the other introvertive mystical experience. In extrovertive mystical experience, a mystic "looks outward and through the physical senses into the external world and finds the one there." [14] In Introvertive experience, a mystic looks "inward, introspectively, and finds the one at the bottom of the human personality." [15] In Extrovertive mysticism, "the unifying vision is expressed in the formula of 'All in one' and is perceived through the sense organs." [16] Whereas in Introvertive mysticism, "the unifying vision of Reality is expressed as 'One', 'Void' or 'Pure Consciousness', from which all empirical content is excluded." [17] There are two approaches to see the Divine. One in many and many in one. Duality of this perception of reality distinguishes one mystic or spiritual leader from the other. He who seeth Me everywhere, and seeth everything in Me, Of him will I never lose hold, and he shall never lose hold of Me. [18]

In Introvertive mysticism, everything is Divine. Eventhough Introvertive and Extrovertive mysticism have much importance, we cannot ignore certain other types which exist like theistic and non theistic. "Another well known typology corresponding to the faculties of thinking, willing and feeling employs the Indian formula, the respective ways of knowledge (Jnana) works (karma) and devotion (bhakti). " [19]

Eventhough there are various types of Mysticism like Extrovertive, Introvertive, theistic and non theistic, their goal, is the same in which the soul is 'one' with God', according to the western medieval work The Cloud of Unknowing.

Poetry is the easiest way of communication. By combining imagination and aspiration poets are able to give us great truths. "Poetry", says Eliot, "is not the assertion that something is true, but making that truth more fully real to us. " [20] English poetry is rich in visionary poets like Langland, Blake, Wordsworth and others. But Eliot differs from them "in this attitude to the poet's task. His unique distinction among English poets is the balance he has maintained between the claims of his vision and the claims of his art. " [21]

T.S.Eliot was born at St. Louis Missouri, on 26 September 1888. At the age of eighteen he entered Harvard University where he had written 'The Love song of J.Alfred Prufrock' and attracted the attention as a writer of verse. He spent 1910-11 in Paris studying French Literature and Philosophy at the Sorbonne. Then he returned to America where he continued his study of Philosophy spending "a year in the mazes of Patanjali's metaphysics, which left him in a state of enlightened mystification." [22]

In 1927 Eliot declared himself to be an Anglo Catholic and became a British Citizen. He immediately began an acquaintance with Ezra Pound and the Imagist group. T.S.Eliot's first collection of Poems, Prufrock and other observations was published in June 1917 and his second Poems also known as Ara Vos Prec was published in 1920. Eliot worked on two influential literary magazines as editor of The Egoist and as editor of The Criterion. Later he turned to composition of a long poem after the publication of his critical essays, The Sacred Wood (1920), and Homage to John Dryden (1924). His first long poem was The Waste Land in 1921. The Hollow Men appeared in 1925. He went on to write religious poetry in Ash-Wednesday (1927-30) and Four Quartets (1936-42). Apart from these poems, he has written several plays like The Rock Sweeney Agonistes (1934), Murder in the Cathedral (1935), The Family Reunion (1939), The Cocktail Party (1935), The Confidential Clerk (1954),

The Elder Statesman (1958). Eliot has studied the lives of Saints and Mystics, like St. Teresa, Dame Julian of Norwich, Mme Guyon, Walter Hilton, St. John of the Cross, Jacob Bohme and St. Bernard. Apart from these, he has also made, "copious notes from Evelyn Underhill's book, *Mysticism* (1911)."[23] Eliot was also influenced by Metaphysical poets who tried to achieve the level of mystical poets but failed. He was also influenced by Dante, Christian Mysticism, Oriental Philosophy like the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Bhagavadgita, Patanjali, The Yogasutra and Buddhism.

Referring to those year at Harvard where he studied Oriental Philosophy he wrote in *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* "Long ago I studied the ancient Indian languages and while I was chiefly interested at that time in Philosophy, I read a little poetry too; and I know that my own poetry shows the influence of Indian thought and sensibility. "[24] The philosophical source of the Quartets and Christian barring a solitary example of a Hindu scripture. He uses the Bhagavad Gita, to support the Christian concept of desirelessness and dispassionate action. "The fundamental concept that he takes from the Gita is concept of disinterested action: Karma-Yoga. Action [Karma] is Arjuna's duty: the fruits of action are not his business. To work alone thou has the right, but never to the fruits thereof. Be thou neither motivated by the fruits of action nor be thou attached to in action." [25] Eliot calls The Bhagavad Gita the next greatest philosophical poem to the Divine Comedy.

Eliot's idea of the divine union might be that of Christian or Oriental Mysticism. The difference between them can be made negligible and it may be illustrated by a short passage from Thomas Aquinas:

Thus God is known in all things and yet apart from all things; and He is known through knowledge apprehended by intuition, reason, understanding touch, sense, opinion, imagination, name, and so on; while grasped by intuition nor can He be uttered or named, and He is not anything in the World, nor is He known in any existent thing. [26]

One might find echoes of The Gita in the above passage.

T.S.Eliot's poems, shed light on some mysterious world. As Marcel Proust in his book *Contre Sainte-Beuve* says,

This realm (of which works of art are fragmentary glimpses) is the poet's soul, his true soul, that one of all his souls which is his truest homeland, but where he only dwells for rare moments. That is why the light that shines there, the colours that gleam there, the figures that move there, are intellectual light colours and begins. Inspiration is the moment when the poet can penetrate into this innermost soul " Eliot's vision is of this kind, always recognizable, homogeneous, allegorical and precise-as though traced from some mysterious drawing quivering in his heart." [27]

Eliot began to write long poem like *The Waste Land* in 1921. He was then influenced by Metaphysical poets like Thompson, Yeats, Blake and others. Later, he wrote religious poetry in *Ash Wednesday* in 1927-30 and *Four Quartets* (1936-42). In *The Waste Land* he brought together Buddha and the Roman Catholic theologian St. Augustine and found the resolution of the poem, conflict in the words of the thunder from the Upanishads. *Ash Wednesday* is a "poem of oscillations between heaven and purgatory, between anxiety and hope; it is a poem which describes exactly what it feels like to long for God, to have a vision of His glory, and to be filled with the terror

of not being worthy of Him." [28] The three poems are land marks in the spiritual evolution of the poet-suffering, consolation and realisation.

In the Four Quartets Eliot tries to reach the Divine. Four Quartets is a poem of conflicts, conveying the struggle for the liberation and the mystical experience of soul which has a personal thirst for God and which has found at last the union it was longing for.

Four Quartets was not originally conceived as a sequence of four poem 'East Coker.' "The poems differ from each other in their moods and in their approach to the common theme, the approach to the mystery of language is different in all three" [29] except in the 'Dry Salvages.' In Burnt Norton, "the approach is philosophic." [30] In 'East Coker', "the most tragic in mood and the most personal of the Quartets, the approach is practical; the poet, the craftsman in words, is speaking not the philosopher." [31] In little Gidding', "in the last tranquil and beautiful movement, the mysterious union of words in poetry, to create a poem, is thought of as a symbol, or rather another manifestation, of the process by which past and future are woven together into meaning in our personal lives and in history." [32] .

By the time he wrote Four Quartets, the poet becomes aware that there are two worlds, two planes of existence. "Then through Marina and Ash Wednesday the certainty of an immaterial, transcendent world beyond this deepens towards the mystic conviction of the Four Quartets, in which the two planes of existence are seem to be really connected.

We move above the moving tree
In light upon the figured leaf
And hear upon the sodden floor
Below, the boar hound and the boar
Pursue their pattern as before
But reconciled among the stars. [33]

In Four Quartets, the poet had used symbols with which one has to have some familiarity in order to understand and appreciate the poem. The "primitive terror and primitive Gods have been recognised in the modern world as something more than symbols. And Emerson, Bradley, Bergson, Patanjali and St. John of the Cross are incorporated in an all embracing, if rather diffuse, Christianity." [34] Compared to Murder in the Cathedral, there is greater depth, greater intensity, and greater beauty in Four Quartets. There is longing for non-existence, non-human reality.

Each Quartet has five parts and the subject of each quartet can be defined in various ways. By adopting the method of commentators on The Divine Comedy, Helen Gardner distinguishes a literal, moral and a mystical meaning. Literally 'Burnt Norton' is simply the Poet's experience, a moment of release. Morally, it is "a submission to the truth of experience, an acceptance of what is, that involves the acceptance of ignorance.

Internal darkness, deprivation
And destitution of all property
Desiccation of the world
of sense, Evacuation of the world
of fancy, Inoperancy of the world
of spirit. [35]

Mystically "the subject of Burnt Norton is grace: the gift by which we seek to discover what we have already been shown." [36] Similarly the subject of 'East Coker' literally is age: It is a poem of earth: Dust we are to dust returning." [37] Morally the subject is faith, mystically "the subject is the Atonement: the dogma that in darkness and death man is not alone, and that through them God and man are mysteriously reconciled." [38]

In the literal sense, the subject of the 'Dry Salvages' is nothing but a sum of experiences or we can call it as history. In the moral sense it is hope and mystically, "the subject of the poem is the incarnation, through which time is united to eternity. All the annunciations of the poem have validity through the one Annunciation." [39]

The subject of 'Little Gidding' in the literal sense is a visit to a shrine in England. Morally "the subject is charity, 'the very bond of peace and of all virtues, without which whosoever liveth is counted dead': the expanding of love beyond desire. [40]

Mystically " the subject is the Holy Spirit, the gift of the risen and ascended Lord. "[41] Helen Gardner thus summarizes the themes of the Quartets in the following three phrases: the relationship between duration and the timeless, the sense of history, the mysteries of the Incarnation and Redemption.

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