

POETRY: THE LANGUAGE OF THE PERENNIAL

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*... the breath of this corporeal frame,
And even the motion of our human blood
Almost suspended, we are laid asleep
In body, and become a living soul:
While with an eye made quiet by the power
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,
We see into the life of things.*

(Wordsworth, *Tintern Abbey*)

Can mystical experiences be ever translated into human language? Can language heave up the uncanny load of the illuminations a mystic gets glimpsed with? These are the questions that hover over the grey matter of philosophers, thinkers, linguists, scholars and even mystics equally. Because to describe the indescribable, to speak the ineffable, to say the unsayable in any language is so onerous that even Eliot had to say:

*Words strain,
Crack and sometimes break,
Under the burden,
Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,
Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,
Will not stay still.*

The mystic experience is so cumbersome to express that when Lord Buddha was asked about God, he didn't utter a word but wore a stupefied silence, or when Prophet Mohammad (PBUH) experienced the first divine illumination, he sought for Khadija and said just, "Wrap me! Wrap me!" So ineffable it is that Saint Augustine, when tried to make this experience explicable, was rendered wordless, and admitted, "Not asked I know, if you ask me I know not!"

However, the metaphorical language smeared with symbols and images of poetry can be a vehicle, a medium to translate some glimpses of such transcendental and mystical experiences. The world literary tradition down the ages bears witness that myriad of mystics have articulated their ethereal and perennial experiences through poetry. Roger Housden, in his book, *Poems of the Mystics: Christian Tradition from Ancient to Modern* writes:

Poetry is the language of choice for mystics in all traditions. If you want to speak of the ineffable and the essential, there is no better medium than poetry...Poetry is a language of choice for mystics...to communicate their insights and experiences for the benefit of those who will listen.

Since the essence of mysticism is rested on the belief that the things we see and know symbolise something greater, something essential, since poetry is a language consisting in looking for the resemblances, odesseying from the particular to the universal, since poet approaches philosophy obliquely, poetry becomes a medium to transmit the transcendental feelings the very being of a mystic is bubbled with.

The fundamental subject dissected in mysticism is to delve deep into the basic truth of paving an ethereal and perennial relationship of man's soul and its theomorphic nature with the Ultimate Reality. To know or to have an illumination of the Ultimate Reality, *the Haq, the Satya*, a mystic always remains vigilant to vision the divine dwelling in his soul. In the mountains at Delphi in ancient Greece, Socrates found there inscribed on the wall of the entrance hall to the temple his famous dictum "*Know thyself.*" The New Testament too focuses on self-realisation: "*Neither shall they say, Lo here! Or lo there! For, behold the kingdom of God is within you.*" (Luke 17:21). There is also a famous tradition of the Prophet of Islam, seriously taken in Sufism, "*Whoever knows his self, knows his Lord.*" What human language can describe the experiences of Mystics they are blissfully and at times harrowingly through while encountering with their self, their soul, and their trust with the divine? When a mystic, as Thomas Carlyle believes, visions the indivisible great Force that is God in everything, it is really a stunning awakening for him. And such awakening needs a metaphorical language, which is of course nothing else than poetry, to be expressed with certain justification. Can this inexpressible awakening be expressed in any better way than the verses of William Blake?

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

Mysticism is a pristine wisdom which enables a mystic to "*see God everywhere*", to observe order where others see disorder, to see light where others are blinded, to make cosmos out of chaos, or in the words of Chaung-Tzu, a Mystic "*can see where all is dark... can hear where all is still, in the darkness he alone can see light, in the stillness he alone can detect harmony.*" Such a state can only be translated through the language of poetry. ShamasFaqir, a Kashmiri mystic poet has well expressed the state where senses are dovetailed, or at times confounded, in his couplet:

*Aesh chum boozan, kanwuchanee
Ba kyahwanai, yeegouzahoor.*

*My eyes do hear, the ears see,
Would that I describe what this illumination is!*

And unlike the material, the spiritual can be known only by becoming the things sought. To comprehend the spiritual, one has to be spiritual. In the asserting words of

Spurgeon, “we must be in love if we are to know what love is; we must be musicians if we are to know what music is; we must be godlike if we are to know what God is.” For Underhill it is ‘not to know but be.’ Mystical experience is in its very essence a communion of a mystic with the One or the Universal Self. The experiences are too awe-inspiring to be gauged by logic of the intellect. One has to ‘tear the veil of thinking’ to reach the Truth. This is what a mystic aims at. Although, the mystical states do not sustain for long, they are the very ‘spots of time’ when a mystic visions himself to be held by a Superior Power. Al-Ghazzali in his autobiography *Al-Munqida min al-Dhalalah (Deliverance from Error)*, avers that such a state is achieved by a mystic when he detaches his heart from all that is not God so that his soul is capable to attain ‘union with God’- the union which is in actuality the soul’s complete conformity with God. How can such illuminating experiences be carried on the feeble shoulders of any human language and put in black and white? Impossible! Yes, language of poetry has such credence and power to heave up the load of these spell-bindingly awesome experiences, albeit in a limited sense. Plato down to the English Romantic poets, Coleridge and Shelley admit that a poet writes not through reason but by inspiration. Shelley in one of his essays, **A Defence of Poetry**, attributes poetry with prophetic and mystical prowess and describes poetry as ‘a type of super-conscious intuition.’ Is there any better language than poetry that can render mystical experience, the divine ecstasy? The following verses of Tagore from his *Gitanjali* are one of the examples:

*Light, my light, the eye-kissing light, heart-sweetening light
Ah, the light dances, my darling, at the centre of my life.
The light strikes, my darling, the chords of my love...
The light is shattered into gold on every cloud, my darling.
And it scatters gems in profusion.*

When a mystic is over-brimmed with love and longing for Eternity, the Universal Truth, God, he surrenders his soul hands down before the Absolute, and utters nothing save poetry. Rumi admits it:

*Love has taken away my practices
And filled me with poetry.*

All said and done, it can be asserted with no hesitation that if there is any language that can do justice to decipher the mystical, metaphysical and perennial experiences, it is nothing save poetry being effervescent with metaphors, imagery, symbolism and other poetic devices. Let me conclude with the verses of LalDed, the first poetic voice of Kashmiri language, who was engrossed in delving into the depths of human self and its relationship with the Divine when Chaucer was busy in painting the externalities of human character:

*Gouranwonnam kunai watchun
Nebridounnamandaratchun
Suy me laligouwakhtewatchun
Tawai me huetumnangainatchun*

*My teacher taught me but one lesson
Odyssey from the without to the within;
This is what I say in my songs*

And I wander about without a garb.

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