



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2636 (Print):2321-3108 (online)

MYSTICISM IN ENGLISH LITERATURE: AN OVERVIEW OF MYSTICISM IN *THE PROPHET* BY KHLIL GIBRAN

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Article info

Article Received: 06/11/2022

Article Accepted: 10/12/2022

Published online:18/12/2022

DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.10.4.151](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.10.4.151)

Abstract

Modern philosophy and technology had developed in the nineteenth century and played a significant role in shaping the culture of that age. It challenged the theistic traditions and shook the spirituality of the people. It sought to disregard and secularize the religious or theistic concepts. It questioned one's own experience of things and of God. In this back ground, Gibran's views on spirituality were soothing as his views appealed to the human heart. He delved deep on themes that envelope the natural life of human beings and their spiritual life. His works elucidate the aspects related to the consciousness of God and the ascent of the soul emphasizing the mystical dimension in spirituality. Mysticism goes beyond religious doctrine and focusses on the individual's experience of the Divine which ultimately gives the mystic the intuitive knowledge of unity and oneness of all things.

This article explores the mystical dimensions that encompass Kahlil Gibran's *The Prophet*. It overviews mysticism and examines the mystical elements such as Love of God, Divine Being, truth, mystic path, spiritual life, soul, silence, prayer and wisdom presented by Gibran in his poetic prose. This study evaluates Gibran who reveals himself as a seeker and adopts mystical path to find meaning of life in the modern materialistic world. He guides people towards the way of spiritual and moral perfection.

Keywords: Mysticism, transcendence, spirituality, mortification, intuitive knowledge, and union with God.

Introduction

Mysticism is a religious term which indicates being one with God or the Absolute. It refers to a state of consciousness and interior union with God. It also signifies the mental exercises of pondering, meditation and contemplation which lead to the attainment of insight into the ultimate

truth and human transformation by different spiritual experiences. Margret Smith in "The Nature and Meaning of Mysticism" points out that "the word 'mysticism' itself comes down to us from the Greeks and is derived from a root meaning 'to close'. The mystic was one who had been initiated into the esoteric knowledge of Divine things, and upon

whom was laid the necessity of keeping silence concerning his sacred knowledge. The term 'mystical,' then might be applied to any secret cult revealed only to the initiated" (*Understanding Mysticism* 19).

Mysticism and English Literature

Mysticism postulates certain qualities or characteristics of faith as the basis for Union with the Supreme Reality. The mystic believes that the spirit in us apprehends the spiritual things as the intellect in us apprehends the material things. The soul, the spiritual spark innate in us, is spiritual in nature and is immortal. William Wordsworth speaks of the soul's immortality in his "Ode on the Intimations of Immortality" as having its origin in God. He writes, "The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star, /Hath had elsewhere its setting, /And Cometh from afar . . . From God who is our home" (*English Mystical Verse* 116). It is by this soul that man is capable of knowing God, the Light unchangeable. This is that inner sense, called intuition through which man can acquire the knowledge of God and receive direct revelation which is not accessible to sensation and cognition.

The divine spark within always longs for reunion with the Eternal Source. Mysticism assumes that man is a partaker of the Divine nature. It makes us aware that we are by nature akin to God for we are made in the image of God (cf. Gen 1:27). In other words, every human being is a reflection of the Divine. In order to attain to the knowledge of God, the soul has to undergo self-purification as it begins its mystical journey towards the Source Divine. This journey is guided by ardent love for Him. Elias J. W. Gibb says that "by Love and by Love alone can the soul of man win back to its Divine source and find its ultimate goal in reunion with the Truth" (*A History of Ottoman Poetry* 20).

No one can acquire spiritual knowledge through ordinary intellectual methods of argument or proof. The human intellect cannot answer the spiritually intriguing questions. Alfred Tennyson (1809-1892) highlights these spiritual questions that present the dichotomies of life in his "The Ancient Sage" thus: "Thou canst not prove the Nameless, O my son, . . . Thou canst not prove that thou art body

alone, /Nor canst thou prove that thou art spirit alone, /Nor canst thou prove that thou art both in one: /Thou canst not prove thou art immortal, no /Nor yet that thou art mortal—nay my son" (*English Mystical Verse* 168).

Mysticism underlies the thought of poets. They can give a complete expression of mystical thought and inspiration since poetry consists in finding resemblances, universalizing the particulars and indirectly teaching the profound truths. The profound truth expressed by William Blake, a mystic himself, in his "Auguries of Innocence" is captivating. He writes, "To see the 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" (*Collected Poems* 88).

We are easily and naturally touched by the utterances of a poet because he touches our transcendental feeling. Many English poets, Blake and Wordsworth outstandingly, expressed the mystic thought and feeling. Caroline F. E. Spurgeon remarks that "mystical thought and the mystical attitude are curiously present in English literature, and . . . English race has a marked tendency towards mysticism" (*Mysticism in English Literature* 13). Mystics or mystical thinkers have a glimpse of the Truth and expressed it as they perceived it even to the extent of dissimilarity and contradiction. Wordsworth perceived the Divinity through Nature. But Nature is an obstacle to the Divine revelation according to William Blake. He perceived God through Imagination. The paths that are well-trodden by mystics, poets and philosophers in their quest for the Absolute or the Divine are Nature, Love, Beauty, Wisdom, Solitude, Silence, Contemplation and Devotion. All poets agree that there is unity that underlies diversity which is the basic fact of mysticism. This fundamental belief leads all to acknowledge that all things about us are manifestations of one divine life.

To know this divine life or God, we must become godlike. Body is not godlike, for it disintegrates at death, but the soul is; the soul animates the body. Illumined by the mystic vision Wordsworth refers to the soul as the "motion and a spirit, that impels /All thinking things, all objects of

all thought, /And rolls through all things" (*English Mystical Verse* 121). The soul seeks God in love, which the Bible says is the reflection of God's love for us (1 John 4:19). Francis Thompson, a poet and mystic, says that God, like a hound which chases the hare, follows the soul which, fleeing from its Origin, hides in and attaches itself to the materialistic world. In "The Hound of Heaven" he writes, "I fled Him, down the nights and down the days; /I fled Him, down the arches of the years; /I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways . . . From those strong Feet that followed, followed after" (*Hound of Heaven*9).

Mysticism in Kahlil Gibran's *The Prophet*

Kahlil Gibran (1883-1931) is a prominent figure in Lebanese literature and popular writer in Arab-American literature of his time. His literary works reflect his search for ultimate truth and anguish for world. He wrote both in Arabic and in English. His works were translated into various languages. His writing is mainly on spirituality and mysticism which emphasises the human-Divine relationship. Since he inherited the Maronite Christian faith from his family and was influenced by his mother who was a priest's daughter, he had an inclination towards spiritual matters. An inexhaustible source of influence for Gibran was the Bible. Simultaneously, Gibran's internal struggle to reconcile the Western and Eastern values and his call for renunciation of materialism in the modern era can be understood in his writings as the replication of his love of God. Further, he was also influenced by Transcendentalism and Romanticism which led him to reject the earthly pleasure and to adopt the secret of nature. His literary works present him as a seeker of the Supreme Reality in the midst of the modernist apprehension of his age.

Transcendental Journey in *The Prophet*

Gibran depicts the mystical journey towards the divine union. On the mystical path of seekers, the material world and the domain of the body hinder the soul from entering into the Spiritual realm. To begin the transcendental journey, the soul has to pass through the process of self-purification, called the purgative stage. Transcendentalism emphasizes the subjective intuition, and sees physical and spiritual phenomena as one dynamic

process. In America, transcendentalist movement in 19th century was led by the intellectuals like H. D. Thoreau and R.W. Emerson influenced Ameen Rihani, a Lebanese-American writer. Gibran and Rihani have similar philosophical perspectives about life specially relationship of oneself with God, and how the nature is the source of spirituality.

Regarding spirituality, transcendentalism gives priority to the individual. It gives him godlike qualities in defining life's mortality; the person's consciousness is the scale of mortality, and "man is the intermediary whose form is the result of his function as an organic link between man and God, in process which combines man, God, physical laws and moral law" (Rus 251). It says that the laws of morality are in the individual instincts.

Regis Michaud in "Emerson's Transcendentalism" underscores Emerson's concept of transcendentalism. Emerson believes that individuals do not need a preacher or a scholar to lecture them on how they should spiritually feel towards God. He wanted to create a better understanding of religion by a conscious relationship of what is ideal and what is real (78).

Gibran follows Emerson's view of transcendentalism which emphasizes spiritual faith than religious creed. Everyone has the divine power inside with which he can connect to God and experience Him anywhere, not necessarily in places of worship. Spirituality can exist without religion and surpasses the material world. Emerson's perception is that we should be free from all boundaries in order to understand the spirit.

The mystical journey demands total detachment, a complete renunciation from materialistic world. Even love is to be understood in spiritual sense for it exists for itself in freedom. Gibran expresses that love is good but it should not become a bondage even in conjugal relationship. He says, "Love one another, but make not a bond of love: /Let it rather be a moving sea between the shores of your souls" (*The Prophet* 16).

Gibran values the life of self-sacrifice and keeps his heart away from the modern materialism. His inner-self transcends the bondage of earthly

riches and attains the spiritual integration of body and soul that revealed the transiency of the material world. The urge or desire for the beyond is what leads the soul to the knowledge of the divine. Gibran says "In the depth of your hopes and desires lies your silent knowledge of the beyond" (*The Prophet* 93). This urge will make him work with love which unites him with others, the nature and God. The spiritual life is indeed darkness without this urge. Gibran voices: "And I say that life is indeed darkness save when there is urge. And all urge is blind save when there is knowledge, and all knowledge is vain save when there is work, and all work is empty save when there is love; and when you work with love you bind yourself to yourself, and to one another, and to God" (*The Prophet* 34). The seeker's soul is purified by leading an ascetic and virtuous life. Love for the divine is what leads the soul to the second stage called the illuminative stage. The divine light shines on the soul and it begins to make no distinction between life and death for soul focusses on divine knowledge. Gibran declares "life and death are one, even as the river and the sea are one For what is it to die but to stand naked in the wind and to melt into the sun? And what is it to cease breathing but to free the breath from its restless tides, that it may rise and expand and seek God unencumbered?" (*The Prophet* 94)

Love, the Mystic's Guide in *The Prophet*:

Gibran proves that love is the essential factor in the path of interior relationship with God. It guides a seeker towards the Real. Gibran personifies love in *The Prophet*. Almustafa, the seeker, relates his spiritual journey of love. The very first word introduced by the prophet Almustafa in his sermon is "when love beckons to you, follow him, though his ways are hard and steep. And when his wings enfold you yield to him, though the sword hidden among his pinions may wound you" (*The Prophet* 10). He clearly points out that the first spark that ignites the flame in the soul is 'love.' Love is an invitation, a signal from the Divine, to lead humans in the mystical journey. Pointing out the catalyst role of love in mysticism, Smith in *Studies in Early Mysticism in the Near and Middle East* states, "It is Love, then an all-absorbing love for God, which leads

the mystic onward and upward and finally leads to union with the Divine" (203).

Almustafa describes that the experience of love is not always pleasant. The travel charted by love is hard and steep. Love, sometimes, is like a sword that wounds the heart in order to make us supple. The hardships inflicted by love upon the travelers on the mystic path are inconceivable. Love gives at times bitter feeling to make the seeker fit for the Divine Union. Gibran elucidates love's purification process thus: "Like sheaves of corn he [love] gathers you unto himself. He threshes you to make you naked. He sifts you to free you from your husks. He grinds you to whiteness. He kneads you until you are pliant; And then he assigns you to his sacred fire, that you may become sacred bread for God's sacred feast" (*The Prophet* 11).

The soul cannot achieve the crown of glory of union with God, without the crucifixion of purification. This is exactly what Gibran observes, "For even as love crowns you so shall he crucify you. Even as he is for your growth so is he for your pruning," and adds that love will descent to the seeker's "roots and shake them in their clinging to the earth" (*The Prophet* 11) in continuous purification and irresistible passion because the soul is heaven-bound or God-bound in its journey. As the soul's love for the divine deepens, the yearning for the divine knowledge becomes unbearable. The soul is ready to do anything for the love of its Beloved. Gibran expresses the soul's preparedness "to be wounded . . . and to bleed willingly and joyfully" (*The Prophet* 15). Gibran declares that the seekers of only love's pleasure prove unfit to tread the mystic path. He tells them "It is better for you that you cover your nakedness and pass out of love's threshing-floor" (*The Prophet* 11). When the soul presses forward in love, it enters the third stage called the unitive stage. Smith writes that the soul in this stage "passes from Becoming to Being, man beholds God face to face, and is joined to Him in a progressive union" ("Nature and Meaning" 23). God reveals Himself and fills the soul now with the knowledge of Ultimate truth. The mystic experiences his being in the heart of God. Gibran demonstrates this saying, "When you love you should not say, 'God is in my heart,' but rather, 'I am in the heart of God'" (*The Prophet* 12).

Union of Soul with Divine in *The Prophet*:

Gibran's master piece *The Prophet* (1923) is a mix of the literary genre of prose poem that delivers an exhortation on mystic life of a prophet. It echoes the consciousness of God, mystical experience, intuition and transcendental journey of a seeker. The protagonist Almustafa wants to help the people of Orphalese by sharing his wisdom. The book opens with the intention of a sage Almustafa, the chosen one, who wished to leave the city and return to the island of his birth. The invitatory chapter describes the soul as essence of human being which seeks the ultimate truth in interior silence. His heart opens up in silence and prayer. Gibran says "the gates of his heart were flung open and his joy flew far over the sea. And he closed his eyes and prayed in the silences of his soul" (*The Prophet* 1).

Gibran reveals himself as a seeker of God and discloses his effort to guide the soul through solitude and silence of the heart where the treasure of truth is buried. Gibran states, "A seeker of silences am I, and what treasure have I found in silences that I may dispense with confidence?" (*The Prophet* 7). He believes that that the soul is man's being and encounters its creator in the interior stillness. David Knowles in "What is Mysticism?" explains that "the human soul is an entity in its own right, directly created by God to 'inform' the body and to make up with it the human being. This soul of itself a spiritual being, gives actuality to all the powers and faculties of the body, but has also of itself, intellectual and volitional powers which make it capable of rational knowledge of the universe about it" (*Understanding Mysticism* 522). His writings explain that man, in essence, is spiritual and his soul is the dwelling place of Supreme God. That Spirit is the breath of God in man. The soul, in divine union, loses its identity like an iron bar in the fire.

Almitra, knowing Almustafa's mystical experience, acknowledged him as the 'Prophet of God.' She enquired about his experience of truth, "in quest of the uttermost, long have you searched the distances for your ship." She added, "Deep is your longing for the land of your memories and the dwelling place of your great desires. . . speak to us

and give us of your truth" (*The Prophet* 9). Almustafa replied in the tone of a mystic, "of what can I speak save of that which is even now moving within your souls?" (*The Prophet* 10). He reiterates the importance of consciousness of soul in the atmosphere of aloneness where soul flies out of the prison of body to infinite resting place.

Gibran likens the soul to a battleground wherein the tussle between the desire for the sensual and the supernatural, the beginning of the mystical journey, takes place in the process of soul's union with God. The internal faculty of reason and judgement wage war against passion and appetite of the body. In this battle, soul is responsible to search for the true knowledge to evaluate the meaning of life. The desires of this life must be sublimated and turned into passion for the Ultimate Reality. Gibran points out: "Your reason and your passion are the rudder and the sails of your seafaring soul . . . Therefore, let your soul exalt your reason to the height of passion, that it may sing; And let it direct your passion with reason, that your passion may live through its own daily resurrection" (*The Prophet* 59).

In the mystical path, contemplation or prayer plays a significant role in the soul's ascent to the divine. When we pray, we join with all those who pray at that time. Gibran, through Almustafa, explains to the priestess the distinction between vocal (expressive) and mental (longing) prayer. Focusing on the people's attitude in vocal prayer, he notes that we need to pray not only when we are distressed and are in poverty but also when we are in the fullness of joy and are in plenty (*The Prophet* 78). Thus, one needs to visit his invisible temple, the heart, for ecstasy and divine communion. We need to have a conscious desire for God; He must be our need. This will be attained by mental prayer. Gibran says that not only human beings but also the creation, with its seas and mountains, prays to the Divine. He writes that in the stillness of night we "hear them saying in silence, 'Our God, who art our winged self, it is thy will in us that willeth. It is thy desire in us that desireth . . . We cannot ask thee for aught, for thou knowest our needs before they are born in us: Thou art our need; and in giving us more of thyself thou givest us all'" (*The Prophet* 81-82).

Gibran reveals the thirst of his soul which searched or longed for the unattainable (to common man). The seeker should face any obstacle on his mystical journey. People might say to him "Why seek you the unattainable . . . Descend and appease your hunger with our bread and quench your thirst with our wine" (*The Prophet* 107). Gibran replies that they too would understand what he is searching for if their souls dwelled in a deeper solitude. He is in search of the secret of joy and pain; he is searching for the greater self (*The Prophet* 107). The hunger of the soul is only to be with the Almighty. In deeper solitude and contemplation, soul quenches its thirst for interior union with God from the heavenly brook that empties the soul into the eternal ocean. Soul ascends high and achieves extra ordinary potential and knowledge to experience and grasp the Divine. Gibran's consciousness of God and his hunger for the ultimate truth raises him to the status of a mystic who acquires the spiritual vision.

Conclusion

Gibran's search for ultimate truth, the relationship between God and man, his teaching of mystical path and his discomfort with modern materialism can be traced out in his works. He sees God not as a frightening and impersonal force or supernatural figure, but as a personal and perfect Being who can listen, interact and understand. The enlightened mystic bestowed with beatific vision can "speak with God as persons with a Person . . . and live by an immediate knowledge . . . achieved in those hours of direct, unmediated intercourse with the Transcendent" (Underhill 36).

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