

Mystical Philosophy Delineated in the Poetry of Emily Dickinson

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Abstract:

Emily Dickinson, the great mystic poetess of the nineteenth century is known all over the world for her mystic poetry. Emily Elizabeth Dickinson was born in Amherst, Massachusetts, United States on December 10, 1830. She was brought up to possess the graces, virtues and abilities common to the nineteenth century ideal of American womanhood. She was so much admired by her school mates for her wit and sincerity that a strong bond existed with several girls with whom she corresponded for many years. Her parents wanted her to be a well-mannered housewife with all the refinements but she decided to devote herself to the pursuit of art. She challenged the stereotyped images of the woman of her era and contributed some 1800 poems to the world of literature. Emily never married and lived most of the years of her short lifespan indoors. Being a solitary poet, she launched mystical probing of the cosmos which led to her spiritual elevation. She began to develop a special attitude towards life, towards everything in the universe. She comprehended the world mystically and expressed her mystical thoughts through her poetry. She is one of the representative poets of mystical verse.

Key Words: Devotion, Elevation, Illumination, Mysticism, Quest, Representative

Mysticism is the special attitude of a spiritually illuminated person towards the universe. This universe is beyond what we can see and comprehend with our senses. So this need of knowing the unknown and mysterious is fulfilled by spiritual research and investigation. Evelyn Underhill defines mysticism and the mystic very aptly, "Mysticism is the art of union with Reality. The Mystic is a person who has attained that union in greater or less degree; or who aims at and believes in such attainment" (1). Thus for the attainment of the divine light, a mystic has to struggle and strive without a pause. And in order to comprehend the Divine and have an access to it, a person needs to be spiritually vigorous. S. N. Dasgupta explained Mysticism very aptly:

Mysticism means a spiritual grasp of the aims and problems of life in a much more real and ultimate manner than is possible to mere reason. A developing life of mysticism means a gradual ascent in the scale of spiritual values, experience, and spiritual ideals. As such, it is many-sided in its development, and as rich and complete as life itself. Regarded from this point of view, mysticism is the basis of all religions- particularly of religion as it appears in the lives of truly religious men. (2)

Mystics of all shades have described the progress of the spiritual life as a journey or a pilgrimage. Christian mysticism lays emphasis in strict self-discipline and inner purity as prerequisite for spiritual elevation, which enables the soul to be one with the Divine. Christian mysticism holds three remarkable phases responsible for the spiritual enhancement of a Mystic- Purgative, Illuminative and Unitive. Evelyn Underhill however, provided five phases of the spiritual path. These are: awakening of the self to consciousness of Divine Reality, Purgation, Illumination, Purification of the spirit and the union.

Emily Dickinson, a well-known American poetess stood as a distinguished poet of mystical verse. Her gigantic contribution of almost eighteen hundred poems encompassed the rare field of mysticism. She was the daughter of Edward Dickinson, who was a prominent lawyer of Amherst and Emily Norcross. Emily was the second child of her parents; the brother, William Austin Dickinson was a year older and the sister, Lavinia Norcross Dickinson was three years younger than Emily. Emily's relationship with her parents and the society at large played a pivotal role in shaping her literary output. Emily's dominant father however casted a major influence on her life. He was such a stern and authoritarian father that he didn't permit Emily Dickinson to study at Mount Holyoke Female Seminary for more than a year. Edward Dickinson, being loyal to his puritan faith preferred her to confine her reading to the Bible. But he realized that she would not and supplied her a rich variety of books. After the Bible, no books were more valued by her than Shakespeare's, particularly his Tragedies. She held in high esteem the 19th century English Women writers like Emily Bronte, Charlotte Bronte, Elizabeth Barrett Browning and George Eliot. She also revered Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Henry Thoreau. Her only access to the world outside was through the books as she was commanded by her father not to go out of the Homestead. As a young and enthusiastic woman, Emily asserted

that she wouldn't go out of the Homestead ever. She even denied going to the church which all women, young and old, were encouraged to visit. This is one of the reasons why Emily Dickinson is known to the world as unsocial, reticent, reclusive, introvert and seclusive. She remained confined all her life to the home of her father.

Death became one of the dominant themes in Emily's poetry. She has her own unique perspective about death. She has mystically experienced death in losing her near and dear ones. She doesn't fear it, but accepts it a reality and simply a doorway to another perpetual world. She views death as the only rescuer and solacer. Emily Dickinson feels the necessity and profundity of nature. It plays an important role to make her poetic theme splendid and age-worthy. Her admiration to nature resembles her with romantics. She considers nature as the soothing mother as she finds motherly love amidst nature. Nature, like romantics, is the source of joy and beauty to Dickinson. She views nature as a divine analogy, as an escape from the evils of civilization and as a healer and moral teacher. There are multiple reasons responsible for her being reclusive and unsocial. The dominant father's home, where Emily used to be not more than a piece of furniture is responsible to a great extent in shaping her peculiar personality. The second reason is the death of her near and dear ones. It is 'death', which moved Emily from within and changed her attitude towards life. One more important reason is the search of unknown God. Emily's search for God couldn't be satiated by the conventional features of God depicted by Christian scriptures. She found a God within and started perceiving the world mystically. In the later part of her life, she completely renounced the world; she remained confined to her bedroom, avoided social gatherings and immortalized all her beautiful thoughts in the form of poetry. She didn't even marry and finally died in 1886.

It has always been Emily's endeavour throughout her life to develop a complete union with God and for this purpose she went through self-introspection. Her description of God is unique as well as strange. Her unique and paradoxical feelings for God are lighted up in her letter to her lifelong friend, Abiah Root:

It was then my greatest pleasure to commune alone with the great God and to feel that He would listen to my prayers. I determined to devote my whole life to His service and desired that all might taste of the stream of living water from which I

cooled my thirst. But the world allured me and in an unguarded moment I listened to her syren voice. From that moment I seemed to lose my interest in heavenly things by degrees...Friends reasoned with me and told me of the danger I was in of grieving away the Holy Spirit of God. (qtd. in Gupta 18)

Emily Dickinson's concern was the soul and not the body. She longed for spiritual elevation and not for bodily well-being. She told her friend Abiah Root, "I do not care for the body, I love the timid soul, the blushing, shrinking soul; it hides, for it is afraid, and the bold obtrusive body" (Todd 41). The poems and the letters of Emily serve as an authentic proof to the fact that she had full faith in the existence of God.

Emily viewed God as a Creator, Maker and Infinitude. She fully acknowledged the infinite authority of God over everything in the universe. Like a child Emily felt the great curiosity to know Him and His dwelling place. She wanted her own existence to develop a complete communion with the existence of God. Emily calls Him as the settler and tried to find out His house in the vast prairies of air. His house does not look like the house of this mortal world. His dwelling place doesn't exist at a fixed location. He is everywhere and no where visible. He cannot be perceived by the common sense. A special sense of spirituality is needed to realize His existence and authority. Emily no doubt launched a search to find God in this physical universe but failed to find Him here. However, she found her God in silence when indulged in meditation and self introspection. She could see the infinitude. She began to realize God's infiniteness and so she wondered that if He had no face that she might look at she should rather worship Him than to pray to Him. Such profound realization is expressed in the following poem:

My period had come for prayer-
No other Art- would do-
My tactics missed a rudiment-
Creator- was it you?

God grows above- so those who pray
Horizons- must ascend-

And so I stepped upon the north
To see this curious Friend-

His house was not- no sign had He-
By chimney- nor by Door
Could I infer His Residence-
Vast prairies of Air

Unbroken by a settler-
Were all that I could see-
Infinitude- Had'st thou no Face
That I might look on thee?

The silence condescended-
Creation stopped- for Me-
But awed beyond my errand-
I worshipped- did not- pray- (Johnson 274)

Emily's God is the hope for hopeless and the ray of light for the people stuck in darkness. He is viewed as a savior and rescuer of the people who are afflicted and are in distress. The poet says:

Oh poor and Far-
Oh Hindered eye
That haunted for the Day-
The lord a candle entertains
Entirely for thee- (Johnson 415)

She advocated for the life of purity and innocence. On the journey of spiritual enhancement and self-realization, evil-doing and hypocrisy are the chief impediments. So the life of innocence and purity is the utmost profitable because it is devoid of worries to great extent and is more peaceful. On this path God is helping the mankind from the times of Adam and Eve. Realizing the God's infinite blessing upon mankind, the poet speaks for the repentance. She

wanted the mankind to seek the forgiveness of God as the real blessing lies in His forgiveness for all those sins which are only known to Him. This aspect of her realization is lucidly expressed in this poem:

Of God we ask one far or,
That we may be forgiven-
For what, he is presumed to known-
The crime, from us, is hidden-
Immured the whole of life
Within a magic prison
We reprimand the Happiness
That too competes with Heaven (Johnson 662)

Here is one more poem, where the poet shared the same concern. The poet again requests God not to reject man for disobeying Him:

Did we disobey Him-?
Just one time!
Charged us to forget Him-
But we couldn't learn!

Were Himself- such a Dunce-
What would we- do?
Love the dull lad- best-
Oh wouldn't you? (Johnson 122)

Emily Dickinson was the poet in whom the mystic qualities are deep-rooted. Her poems are famous for giving significance to the inner spiritual existence. Her mystical experience enabled her to redefine everything in line with her spiritual thinking. Emily Dickinson did not remain stick to the worldly possessions. She viewed this earthly life temporary and short-spanned. This life is full of chaos and confusions. She therefore privileged death over the earthly life. She viewed death as an escape route to avoid the problems of this physical world. Her poem, *I Heard a Fly Buzz when I died* is the best example in terms of finding an escape route through death. The poem presents a dying person, who is going to leave this world shortly and wants to

enter the world of immortality and eternity, but is interrupted by the buzzing sound of a fly. It portrays the pathetic atmosphere of a dying situation, but for the poet, there is nothing pathetic in dying:

The eyes around- had wrung them dry
And breaths were gathering sure
For that last onset, when the king
Be witnessed in his power (Johnson 223)

The poet further expressed the futility and purposelessness of this mortal life in the poem, *Dust is the only Secret*. For Emily, as dust is of no importance so is the case with this temporary life. Her mystical experience led her to view death more comforting than even sleep. For her, sleep relieves a person from the worldly anxieties and worries for the time being, but death relieves a person once and for all and thus grants him the access to the perpetual world. Emily admitted this fact just in the opening line of the poem, *There's something quieter than sleep*.

Emily was a true mystic, who believed in the everlasting union with God. In the poem, *The soul selects her own society* Emily says that the soul indicates the inner being of an individual which selects its own society and that society which a soul yearns for is nothing but the society of God. She acknowledged the significance of God's authority and His blessings. She went to the extent of calling herself as a beggar, who is eagerly waiting at God's door in order to be blessed with His mercy. This mystical experience is described by Emily in her poem, *I never lost as much but twice*. She says she is searching for a lost thing which may probably her communion with God. She is again and again coming at His door like a beggar to beg for the restoration of that lost connection. The beautiful lines are:

I never lost as much but twice,
And that was in the sod.
Twice have I stood a beggar
Before the door of God!

Angels, twice descending,
Reimbursed my store.

Burglar, banker, father,

I am poor once more! (Johnson 27)

Keeping the above discussion in consideration this fact is fully validated that Emily Dickinson was a phenomenal poet of mystical expression. She made extraordinary sacrifices so that she could comprehend the world mystically and could express it through her beautiful verse. She sacrificed her social world and lived totally an unsocial life. She never tied the nuptial knot. This worldly life was nothing for her but a doorway to the world of immortality. Emily really exalted on the spiritual plane which enabled her to probe the universe mystically. That is why her poetic canon is repleted with such a mystical philosophy.

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