



REPRESENTATION OF MYSTICISM IN FIRDOUS' POETRY THROUGH THE LENS OF GLOBALIZATION

Dr. Ayesha Ashraf
Assistant Professor
Department of English
University of Jhang
Jhang – Pakistan
drayshaashraf@uoj.edu.pk

Ghania Khan
Lecturer
Department of English
University of Jhang
Jhang - Pakistan

Ammara Mehmood
Lecturer
Department of English
University of Jhang
Jhang - Pakistan

Abstract

Literature has always explored the significant impact of mysticism in various societies and civilizations. Similarly, English poetry as the most profound literary medium has well spread and extended mysticism all across the world. This paper investigates the impact of mysticism and divinity in the selected poems namely “Shah Shamas Tabraiz” and “Light”. This study is beneficial to get a thorough understanding of the structure and stylistics of the selected poems. Multiple stylistic devices are brought in to light as a result of the discussion that focuses on the deep philosophy of the poets in general especially in a way to capture their identity. This study is significant as it describes and analyzes the concept of mysticism and divine love in Pakistani English literature particularly, and the selected poetry specifically. However, this study restricts the discussion about Sonia Firdous being a mystic poet on the basis of the selected poems. It attempts to analyze the poems thoroughly while employing Reader Response Theory. It further highlights the existence of mystical experiences as represented in the form of symbols of absolute truth, death, and spiritual journey. Thus, the study concludes on the note that both the poems exhibit mystical and divine themes, and familiarizes the reader/s with well-



known mystic poets like, Baba Bulleh Shah, Maulana Rumi, Rahman Baba and Baba Fareed and few others. This study will benefit the readers and contribute in their knowledge of Pakistani English poetry and its connection with the theme of mysticism.

Keywords: Reader Response Theory, mysticism, divinity, Pakistani English poetry, consciousness, divinity

Introduction

The term “mysticism” was derived from Greek that means “to conceal”. In fact, this term has always fascinated mankind in their struggle to establish a connection with God. It also highlights the spiritual benefits of having direct experiences about religious and divine sources. Mysticism is about the mystic’s personal experience of spirituality and religion that varies from person to person. Throughout history, the civilizations have seen the presence of many famous mystics who preached love, especially, love of a man for his God. In this universe, love exists in different types such as love for country is called patriotism, love for nation is known as nationalism, and love for one’s religion leads to mysticism.

The love among human beings makes life either beautiful or ugly, while love of nature turns you pantheist. These examples show that any kind of love will have a certain kind of impact on lover’s life. Literature being mirror of a society portrays love in poetry, dramas and essays. However, various writers have treated love differently as some have incorporated it as a classic theme while others have presented it as tragic. Many authors’ have depicted courtly or romantic love while other writers have used it as ordinary and artificial thing.

Pakistani English literature has recently focused more on writing about mysticism because of the Sufi school of thoughts and the strong influence of religion on the writer as well as the literature. Earlier, the mystical approach was majorly portrayed in national and local languages like Urdu, Punjabi, Pashto, Seriki and Balochi etc.

Pakistan has a great mystic tradition of its own as well as it follows world mystics and Shah Shams Tabraiz is one amongst them. Tabraiz’s works on mysticism hold a significant position in human heritage and, in fact, his concept of mysticism is unique and evolving. He continuously keeps on defining his experience of spiritual re-awakening. Sonia Firdous is a Pakistani educationist, academician, writer, researcher, curriculum coordinator and teacher trainer. She has written and published her poetry on the quest of divine love, under the title of *Colors of Soul* (2018). Her poem Shah Shamas Tabraiz is a fine expression of mysticism and divinity. This research has delimited the current study to two major themes i.e. Mysticism and Divinity.

Significance of the Study



This study is unique in a sense that it highlights the notoriety and universality of Shah Shamas Tabraiz's work and its spiritual impact. This work will familiarize the national and international readers as well as future researchers in understanding the Pakistani emerging poets and their poetry.

Research Objective

The main objective of this study is:

- to explore mystical themes, symbols and images in Shah Shamas Tabraiz.

Research Question

- How does Firdous' poetry represent the mystical themes in general?
- How does the selected poem reflect mysticism and divine love?
- How does the poem Shah Shamas Tabraiz connect the reader with absolute reality and oneness?

Text

Shah Shams Tabraiz

You are too near, yet very far
Shaking our souls in the jar!
Like a child lost in the war
Or searching a true soul in the bazaar.
Following the track of my star
As if I've been sliced by the Tatar!
The radiation of the sun tabraizi did'nt mar
Loving souls & broken hearts lived near or far
Rumi's swirling & quest for divinity received bar
Yet it is shining so brightly even from far
No inner peace without the scar
Because within a scar is a star!

Light

I tried to find him everywhere,
Haram Makky, Madani & in every fare
He wasn't there, so beware!
To locate His dwelling looked with care
Empty Masjid, Church, & Temple with sad air;
Skies, oceans, & mountains hadn't had Him there
Seven Heavens were vacant; He wasn't near
Molvi, Pundit & Pop were also unaware
Though He was present everywhere;



But lives in the broken hearts if you compare!

Literature Review

English literature has treated various themes in every age but the contribution of poetry in representing manifold emotions is great. One of the important reasons behind this is that poetry conveys a lot in fewer possible words, and is way more intense than any other form of literature. In England, mystical literature got recognition during the 14th century with the famous writings of known mystics like Richard Rolle, Walter Hilton, and Lady Julian. While mystical verse flourished in the 17th century with the publication of poetry on mysticism and divine love by metaphysical poets.

Evelyn Underhill defines mysticism as it, “is not an opinion: it is not a philosophy. It is the name of that organic process which involves the perfect consummation of the love of God (71)”. This suggests that a mystic remains in an on-going dynamic quest for the ultimate Truth, and his investigation seems to finish after formation of an association with the Absolute. Mystics confess and repent before Allah, and, throughout their life, they remain conscious regarding the purpose of life. As Umaruddin in *The ethical philosophy of Al-Ghazzali* opines the same idea while referring to the great mystic Imam Al-Ghazzali:

Al-Ghazzali thinks that the sole aim of man on this earth is to intensify his love for God. He must realize that this world is only a stage where he has to make the necessary preparation for his journey to the next world. From this world only as much should be taken as is indispensable for cultivating the love of God through good conduct. (191)

A.N. Dhar in his book titled *Mysticism Across Cultures: Studies on Selected Poets and Saints* defines: “Mysticism, as distinguished from orthodox creeds and dogmas, claims validity for itself in the emphasis it lays on man’s direct experience of the Divine, which may be understood as an immediate apprehension of Transcendent, or of the Reality behind appearances” (1). He is of the opinion that representation of mystical elements, divinity and religion has always existed in literature ranging from ancient times till now. He in *Mysticism in Literature* states; “Amidst the complexities of Victorian era, there was the growth of a new religious poetry, catholic and mystical in motive” (20). He mentions many writers and poets who have reflected religious themes in their works, especially, he mentions Christina Rossetti for her “intense spirituality” and Hopkins being a “writer of religious verse” (21). According to Dhar, after getting a place in English writings, mysticism has also spread in India. William Philip in his article “Mysticism” states: “As the state cannot live without the idealist, so the church would die without the mystic. It is the mystic that always saves the church” (619). He also is of the opinion that all mystics have same philosophy “All mystics speak the same language and come from the same country” (619-620)



Similarly, Abul Kalam Choudhury in his article titled “The theme of Mysticism and its impact to Arabic Poetry” explores impact of mysticism on human beings. He opines that mysticism sets one free from all worldly desires and connects with the God. He further states;

Jalaluddin Rumi, Ibnul farid, Imam Busuri, Hallaj and others portrayed the concept of love through their collection of poems (Diwaan). Specially Mathnawi, the Diwan -i- Kabir, the Majalis-i- Sab'ah, the Maktubat or the collection of his discourses Fihi ma Fihi written by Mawlana Jalaluddin Rumi is filled with Mystical ideas, love and wisdom of God. (182)

Similarly, Fateh Muhammad Malik in his study titles “The Mystic Melodies of Sultan Bah” explores mysticism with reference to mentioned great Muslim sufi and mystic. “Sultan Bahu’s mystical poetry is an expression of disillusionment with formal, legalistic, and institutionalized forms of religion” (4) and he takes mysticism on personal level “optimistic faith in the possibility of a personal, individual spiritual relationship with God” (ibid). Tariq Khan and Innayat Ullah in their study titled “Sufism/Mysticism Symbolized in the Select Poetry of Omer Tarin” explore representation of mystical experiences and elements. Ilyas in her study “Sufism for Common Man” opines that mysticism and sufism share a common thread despite having variations, she states; “Islamic mysticism, intellectual mysticism, nature mysticism and personal mysticism to name a few” (Ilyas 47). She further describes that these different types lead to one bigger whole. According to a wider research, mysticism is such a universal theme that it can be found in Islam, Christianity, Hinduism and Buddhism as well.

Research Methodology

Reading is a significant skill that any reader/scholar/students must learn to become critical thinker to understand complexities associated with interpretation of different texts. Reader-response theory is one such effort to understand the relationship between the reader and the text. “Literary texts frequently contain social dilemmas and conflicts. Such reading demands personal responses from readers” (Yang 50). Rosenblatt’s reader transactional response theory places the prime concern on reader and his response in translating any text on the basis of his previous knowledge and experiences. He opines that literature is complicated thing to understand and “of all the arts, literature is most immediately implicated with life itself” (Rosenblatt 80). This theory aims to develop meaningful intellectual and emotional responses and an active reading of the text that, ultimately, shapes up reader’s comprehension of a literary work. “According to this theory, the meaning does not reside solely within the text or solely within the reader; the meaning for a text comes from the transaction between the reader and the text within a particular context” (Becker 103). “The reader maintains an active role in deriving meaning and adopts different stances, either primarily aesthetic or efferent, depending on the kind of meaning he/she intends to derive” (ibid).

4. Textual Analysis



4.1 Shah Shamas Tabraiz

Hazrat Shams-e Tabrizi (1248) was a renowned Sufi mystic who was born in Tabriz in Iranian Azerbaijan. He is known to be an influential mentor of Mawlana Jalal ad-Din Muhammad Rumi, who has dedicated him a collection of poetry titled *Diwan-e Shams-e Tabriz-i*. Hazrat Shams-e Tabrizi lived a long time with Rumi in present day Turkey, and he also traveled to Damascus (modern Syria). After spending many years with Rumi, Hazrat Shams-e Tabrizi disappeared suddenly and, after that, nothing remained certain about his whereabouts. According to speculations, his grave lies in Northern Pakistan at a place called Ziarat, while another source suggests that he was buried in Turkey. Rumi expressed his love and grief for Hazrat Shams-e Tabrizi's separation and death found in music, poetry, and dance. Rumi himself wandered in search of his beloved teacher and companion Hazrat Shams-e Tabrizi. With the passage of time, Rumi dedicated more poetry to Hazrat Shams-e Tabrizi, in fact, it seems that his poetry elevated his master to a symbol of divine love. Hazrat Shams-e Tabrizi stands for Sun because "Shams" in Arabic means "sun" that throws the divine love on Rumi. Therefore, the image of Hazrat Shams-e Tabrizi, that is reflected in poetry presents him as a wandering mystic who was keenly interested to devote his life to the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). He consistently criticized those mystics who wanted to seek higher rank above the prophets of Islam.

Sonia Firdous portrays strong impact of mysticism and divine love in her poems *Shah Shamas Tabraiz* and *Light*. In *Shah Shamas Tabraiz*, she highlights the concept that humans have a purpose of their existence that is to know and search the ultimate truth in life. During one's lifespan, he/she passes through various phases, such as, in childhood, one is supposed to learn wisdom from one's parents and teachers. In fact, in young age, one tries to do what he/she is obliged to do with the knowledge of good and bad paths/consequences. While in old age, mostly human lose the ability to do anything because of the loss of physical and mental powers. Similarly, this poem mentions that the purpose of life is to keep on struggling without getting depressed and there may be possibility that "You are too near, yet very far" (Line 1). It's the determination that can overcome many hurdles that come during this journey.

Shaking our souls in the jar!
Like a child lost in the war
Or searching a true soul in the bazaar.

In the above mentioned lines, as per the researcher's understanding, the poet has used simile to compare the situation. In this reading of the above mentioned lines, readers/researchers construct meaning through a transactional process, "in which a reciprocal bond between the text and the reader is created" (Mart 84). Conventionally, all famous world Sufis guide the humanity on how to attain the divine union. They teach the human beings that they are born to do something special in order to attain a particular purpose. Their lives should be devoted to worship of the divine creator and to serve his creation on earth. Khan and Innayt Ullah in their study *Sufism/Mysticism*



Symbolized in the Select Poetry of Omer Tarin mention “We, the humans, are born to seek the Truth, the Ultimate One” (4). He strongly believes in the idea that everyone sees the reality of this world differently. Similarly, Tabraiz also teaches his followers to feel the divine connection through experience. A mystic never gets afraid of difficulties that he comes across his spiritual journey but, on the other hand, he guides other aspirants to join him in finding the Ultimate Truth. His aim has always been to seek unheard and unseeable. In the same way, Firdous also recommends that to attain the Ultimate Truth one needs to be experiential and he/she must get rid of all inner sins or negative thinking. Moreover, she adds that in order to attain the reality of this life, one will get wounds and scars but these are actually the symbols of one’s struggle and faith.

In the following stanza, she mentions;
No inner peace without the scar
Because within a scar is a star!

Firdous’ profound interest in spirituality motivates her to study Rumi and Shah Shamas Tabraiz together as they both cannot be studied in isolation. She appreciates the zeal of Rumi in these lines, “Rumi’s swirling & quest for divinity received bar, Yet it is shining so brightly even from far”. Banani, Amin, Richard Hovannisian, and Georges Sabagh in their edited volume titled *Poetry and mysticism in Islam: The heritage of Rumi* state; “The figure of Mawlana Jalal al-Din Balkhi, known as Rumi (1207-1273) towers above the mystics of Islam as a Sufi master whose life and works are the validation of a unique paradox” (3). Moreover, Rumi’s poetry reflects on his deepest love and companionship for his beloved Shamas Tabraiz, “he points to sun (shams): he addresses his friend as aftaba (oh! sun), or calls himself the “prophet” or “servant of sun”(ibid 10).

Similarly, like Jalal-Ud-Din Rumi and Shah Shamas Tabraiz, Baba Bulleh Shah was a staunch follower of Hazrat Inayat Shah Qadri. Bulley Shah was a Pakistani Punjabi Sufi saint, and he was known as ‘one of the greatest Sufis of the world and his thought equals that of Jalal ud din Rumi and Shams Tabrez of Persia’ (Ahsan Jan Qaisar, Som Prakash Verma, Mohammad Habib 28). Firdous mentions the common belief of most people that the God can be found in stereotypical places of worship, she says, I tried to find him everywhere, Haram Makky, Madani & in every fare”. She narrates her own experience by telling the readers that like all, she also tries to connect with God in prayer areas but failed. On the other hand, she urges the readers to find the Light of God/Creator in broken heart. Similarly, mystics also believe that this life will have no meaning if we do not take care of other fellow humans and this is the Will of our Creator i.e. Allah. Furthermore, she puts forth that: “Empty Masjid, Church, & Temple with sad air, Skies, oceans, & mountains hadn’t had Him there”. Rumi, worlds famous mystic also has the same opinion when he says, “The wailing of broken hearts is the doorway to God” (Bauman np)

4.2 Light



The poet in this poem titled *Light* manifests her own special explorations of the relationship between man's struggle to find God and his willingness. The poem starts with description of poet's own experience of finding the eternal Truth and the divine Creator as Faheem Ul Haq in his study titled "Demystifying Mysticism: A Comparative Study of William Blake and Allama Iqbal" states, "Mystic experiences are said to be unique for each individual" (Ul Haq 620). Firdous seems to compare mysticism with light/clarity in the similar fashion as "Dante, in the *Paradiso*, first sees reality as the River of Light" (William Philip "Mysticism" 620). She says, "I tried to find him everywhere," because of curiosity and love of God, and in "Haram Makky, Madani & in every fare". These lines show the names of specific places where poet/speaker of the poem went in search of God in order to form a mystic connection with Him. The speaker, like a mystic, is in pursuit of a definitive reality and she wants to experience the ecstasy of being in communion with God, by introspective philosophy and personal revelation. Through the lens of reader-response theory, this study explores various interpretations of this poem, and, generally, this responsive "engagement with texts, readers endeavor to arrive at an interpretation through drawing on their background knowledge and experiences" (Mart 84).

Al-Douri, Hamdi Hameed, and Atyaf Abdel-Rezzaq Hemad in "Mysticism in Emily Dickinson's Early Poems" relate mysticism with ultimate reality as they state: "It is an experience that reveals the existence of an extrasensory aspect of reality which cannot be detected through sense perceptions, expressing love between Man and the Divine" (2258). Similarly, Firdous, being intrigued by the secrets of metaphysical knowledge and existence, is craving to know the unexplored world. The speaker, who can be or cannot be the mouth piece of poet, further, warns the reader, that to find out the exact location of God is impossible. She tried every such place where a common man thinks that he/she can find Him but "He wasn't there, so beware!" and it is extremely sensitive phenomenon "To locate His dwelling looked with care". It seems that poetry and art become two significant roads to express creativity and mystical flashes of sentimentalism. Firdous' selection of "Empty Masjid, Church, & Temple" is significant, for these specific names not only mean any human being irrespective of faith is in search of God, but also the fact that the divine creator normally exists in visible and material things. The profoundly expressed thoughts in these above-mentioned lines do indicate the clear indication to the poet's own exploration of mysticism. The poet further indicates the non-existence of ultimate power in cliché places "Skies, oceans, & mountains hadn't had Him there". And mysticism debates this issue of divine presence in visible or invisible spaces, "Mysticism involves a deep, almost obsessive, concern with such problems as death, the existence of the soul, immortality, the existence of God and heaven, salvation or redemption, etc" (Jamal Subhi Nafi, Randa Hashem Abu Hilal, Farah Rasheed Jayousip 95).

The normative idea that God can be found in specific places easily and whenever anyone wants is challenged again when poet says, "Seven Heavens were vacant". The same thought is reinforced in the line that says, "Molvi, Pundit & Pop were also unaware", and it reflects poet's own context and time in terms of prevailing materialism, chaos, uncertainty and focus on science. By the end



of the poem, the poet carries on the discussion on God's huge presence that cannot be predicted with certainty by human beings. She describes that although He lives everywhere and He has got no limits because of His power, "But lives in the broken hearts if you compare!". As a matter of fact, this mystical perspective in Firdous' poetry can be related to other mystic poets ranging from William Blake, Molana Jalal-ud-Din Rumi, Baba Bulley Shah, Imam Ghazali, Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai and Allama Iqbal. These mystics, through their teachings, attempted to help common men in getting the right direction in their life.

On similar pattern, in this stanza, the poet also gives the idea that one cannot only find the God's will in mosques, cathedrals, or shrines etc., rather his huge presence dwells in a man's heart. So, if a man is happy from inside than God feels happy to see this overwhelmed state of his creation i.e. human beings. These lines also suggest that materialistic gains make a man selfish and self-centered who wants to increase worldly gains by harming his fellow beings, and this behavior is strongly detested in divine teachings. Human beings together make a society and it is their responsibility to cooperate with each other to shape a peaceful place to live in.

Findings

This study has found that:

- Firdous' poetry reflects mystical regard for the huge presence of God and man's struggle to find it.
- It also highlights the limitations of human being's mental and physical powers and a continued quest of getting peace of mind through mysticism. This was the primary objective of the current study to explore the impact of mysticism in her poetry.
- Firdous' poetry is highly influenced by some very famous Sufi poets, such as Maulana Rumi, Shah Shamas Tabraiz, Baba Fareed, , and so on.
- Firdous' poetry guides man about keeping healthy relations with each other to attain peace in society i.e. one way to find God's willingness and get success in the world hereafter. She seems to be focusing on various forms of connection to higher spiritual realities, as acquired by people of different religions such as Muslims, Hindus and so on.
- Finally, the role of a reader cannot be ignored from developing a meaningful comprehension of any literary piece of writing, especially, poetry.

Conclusion

The selected poems by Ms. Sonia Firdous on the subject of mysticism are best example of her creativity and imagination. As has seen in the discussion in this paper, Divine existence, and the connection of man with God, obsessed her. She thought of metaphysical reality constantly, she also probed about ultimate reality. Finally, her obsession became morbid, and she referred to historical mystical figures in order to find answer to her divine quest in the light of their teachings. Therefore, after studying the selected poems namely Shah Shamas Tabraiz and Lights from Sonia Firdous's book *Colours of Soul*, this research came across the presence of various mystical and



divine themes. It found the impact of mysticism on poet's personality as well as in her poetry. She believed that God being ultimate Truth prevails everywhere but its presence in broken hearts is sure. If you want to please God, than take care of people around you irrespective of their identities. In this way, the poet has deciphered mysticism in a constructive and positive way. This study has found authentic proof of poet's mystic personality – firstly, representation of extraordinary knowledge, appreciation and reflection of great mystics, and, secondly, her aspiration for establishing a spiritual connection with the divine. This study has highlighted the immediate mystical concern of the poet as reflected in her selected poems and, in this way, Sonia Firdous can be considered a mystic poet. But the fact, that poet has sought the essential/mystical moral truths hidden behind material spaces and attempted to explore the Divine Force cannot justify the claim to call her a mystic (only). Firdous' poetry is a true reflection of multiple themes besides mysticism, like, eco-criticism, feminism, and postmodernism etc. Therefore, this research recommends that her poetry should be studied/explored by researchers from all possible dimensions.



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