

Women Mystics: A Comparative Study of Lalleshwari and Julian of Norwich

Meenakshi Thakur

Faith and mysticism – two supra rational modes of experience – are fundamental in unfolding the profound experience of enlightenment. In contemporary religious thoughts and tendencies, it has become important and reasonable to understand the relationship between faith and mysticism. Professor James in his *Varieties of Religious Experience* says “that personal religious experience has its roots in mystical states of consciousness” (379). He also says that “faith-state and mystical-state are practically convertible terms” (424). Herrmann, on the other hand, refuses the notion of similarity of mystic-state and faith-state. It seems that the absoluteness of these judgments requires some modification. The total exclusion of mysticism from religion leads to the impoverishments of faith but on the other hand, the overvaluation of ecstasy and trance states which characterize mysticism has been one of the great controversies of the religious life as evident from the history of Christianity. There is definitely a need for the reconstruction of the connotation of these concepts if their real intellectual worth is to be understood and to avoid any injustice to important religious interests.

The question of mysticism is not simply related to the intense psychological experiences, but it is also a way of defining and delimiting authority. Thus the question of who counts as a mystic holds political importance. From the early days of the Christian church, they have restricted the mysteries of God to the confinements of the Church, as any knowledge outside its confines can threaten the authority of the church. In the present time, the relationship between power and mysticism is more or less the same as it was in the old and medieval periods. If we believe the experience of mysticism, it serves as a basis for the knowledge related to the nature and existence of God, and this knowledge if acknowledged and established, leads to an authoritative position. If we see mysticism as private and subjective, then its authority is limited to

religion only. And mystical experience, if viewed from the perspective of gender as immanent to women and as private and subjective, then domesticity acts as a common thread between spirituality and women. This confinement to domesticity reinforces the role of women as spiritual nurturers of humanity. In the classical period, the supremacy of males in the domain of mysticism was shown by designating learned or enlightened women as “honorary males” (Miles 53-77) as an influence of Plato. In the succeeding ages too, mysticism has largely remained the domain of men. The necessary tool of gaining knowledge, that is, education was not provided to women. Indeed there were some exceptional cases, but in them too, the authority conferred by knowledge was not extended to women. The emergence of a large number of women visionaries in the high and late middle ages throughout the European continent marked their authority as spiritual teachers.

In the modern world, women and mysticism were rendered as private and personal and thus had no role to play in politics. Women take care of the household not only physically but spiritually, as both of them share the same premises. Moreover, the ‘ineffability’ of the mystical experience refers to its inexpressibility which is quite compatible with the silencing of women in the social world. The qualities of ineffability and subjectivity attached to the mystical experience as inexpressible and non communicable in everyday language and life, and out of the arena of politics, is a manipulation to justify the domestication and silencing of women.

Since it is evident that the definition and control over the concept of mysticism has largely been exercised by powerful patriarchy, religious history provides proof that there have been women who were not simply passive victims. There are exemplary women who went against the grain and have depicted their mystical experiences at length with creativity and fluency, and have established their mark in the history of mysticism. While living in a male dominant society and internalizing the rules set by men for women, these women through their lives and writings have provided live examples of their integrity and their knowledge. And it is

clear that to some extent, their strength and insight is related to their gender.

The intended feminist study tries to bring out the differences and similarities between mysticism and feminism and the interrelationship of these two disciplines. Mysticism has always been defined in terms of its essential nature and an experience across culture, religion and gender. To associate mystical with feminism raises concerns about whether women are identified with a “common core” experience that is assumed to be universal, but in fact ignores or suppresses gender disparities. Another concern of feminists is about the qualities associated with mysticism such as passivity, selflessness, silence and absence of desire which assign normative expectations to women’s behavior and thus added to their oppression.

Various feminist scholars hold a positive view of mysticism despite its being a male domain since the early ages. It has played a vital role in the lives of women in every culture and religion across centuries. Dorothee Soelle stresses the subjective element of mysticism and the personal experience of the Divine and the help it can provide to women in stepping outside the site of subjugation due to patriarchal violence. Deidre Green points towards a commonality between mysticism and feminism as both of these disciplines lead towards a transformation in women’s roles, expectations and abilities. Ursula King focuses on women’s qualities like patience in adversity and successful handling of suffering as the source of mystical foundation of women’s compassion and wisdom. These feminists consider mysticism as intrinsic to feminism as it fulfills women spiritually with dignity.

An exploration of the two female mystic poets – Julian of Norwich and Lalleshwari reveals the importance and role of faith and mysticism in the lives of women. These female mystics belong to an environment which had a total aversion to women’s lives and rights and these women, in such an environment challenged the alleged patriarchal control and supremacy more than one in ways. Julian of Norwich was a fourteen century English anchoress and also one of the important Christian

mystics. Little is known about her personal life except through her writings. She chose the life of solitude within the doctrines of the church and there have been speculations that perhaps she was an unmarried lay woman who lost her husband and children in the plague epidemic rampant at the time. She lived during a period of social and political turmoil and came to be known as one of the great mystics and theologians of her time. In 1373, during a severe illness, she had a series of intense visions of Jesus Christ. Immediately followed *The Short Text*, a narration of visions. Then came *The Long Text* which was a theological exploration of the meaning of the visions. Her major work *Sixteen Revelations of Divine Love* is based on these visions. Her theology is optimistic and expresses faith, hope and God's love in terms of joy and compassion rather than law and duty.

Julian's views were atypical but considering that she had little impact as a woman and an anchoress, local authorities did not pay heed or challenge her theology and authority. Her theology mainly deals with her view of sin, her belief in God's love refuting His wrath, and her belief in Christ as mother. Julian's faith in God as mother was controversial as some scholars believed that it was metaphorical rather than literal, while others like F. Beer held the opposite view and believed that it was literal rather than metaphorical; that Christ is not like a mother, He is literally the mother (152). She drew a commonality between a mother's role and the role of God, and believed that the mother-child relationship is the only earthly relationship which comes closest to the relationship one can have with Jesus. She writes metaphorically of Jesus in connection with conception, nursing, labor and upbringing. Her positive attitude and faith is revealed in her book *Revelations of Divine Love* through her most famous lines which she claimed to be said to her by God Himself, "... All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well" (27).

These medieval mystics through their mystical experiences serve as mediators between God and human beings, a position held earlier by the community priest. Julian and other female mystics through their writings challenged not only the authority of the clergy but also the dogmas of

the Church. These women in the process of recording their mystical revelations successfully asserted themselves in the ecclesiastical and literary community.

Julian vividly describes her two central visions, the passion of Christ and Christ as mother, and illuminates the veracity and sanctity of her experiences. Julian's thorough attention to Christ's withering, drying and disintegrating body mimics the medieval Christian's worship of Christ's dismembered body (Bynum 5). Julian follows this traditional medieval worship by graphically describing the drying, sagging and decaying of each limb of Christ:

For I understood that the great grievous harshness of the nails had caused the wounds to gape open on account of tenderness of the sweet hands and sweet feet. The body sagged ... because of the piercing and scraping of his head and binding of the crown all baked with dry blood (451).

Julian uses the above image to establish the plausibility of her mystical visions and articulates her authority by illustrating her closeness to the highly worshipped "sweet hands and sweet feet" of Christ. Julian especially affords great detail to the wounds and limbs of Christ, a fact which connects her to the tradition of ecstatic images of Christ's blood prevalent in medieval mystical expression. She establishes the medieval beliefs that "blood is ecstasy" to assert her greater religious authority (Bynum 25). Julian had witnessed the passion of the Christ; she had seen the drying of his blood; she had seen the disintegration of his body; she had experienced ecstasy. Julian not only envisions the Passion but also participates as one of the Christ's mourners and thus asserts her authority through the link she establishes with the Divine.

Julian formulates the second image of Christ as mother but within the confines of the Church:

Thus he sustains us within him in love and labor, up to the full term when he would suffer the sharpest thorns and most grievous

pains that ever were or shall be, and he died at the last. And when he had finished, and had borne us to bliss, yet none of this would state his marvelous love (445).

Her imagery follows a style of what Carl Jung terms “extraversion” in which the author “sets the subject below the object, whereby the object receives the predominant values” (qtd. in Stone 30). Julian depicts Christ as superior to herself but her exclusive experience and visions of Christ and their writing asserts her role as a female ecclesiastical authority. Julian maintained her status as a wise and pious anchoress and a spiritually pure virgin in her writings as well as in the Christian community. Her position as an anchoress refined her visions and provided her credibility among her peers. Though an illiterate, Julian actively participated in the text’s composition and its construction through the stylus of the scribe. Through her craftsmanship and analytical tone, Julian removes herself from the text and “thus suggests, not that we should read her book because she is a holy woman, but that her book might be used as a guide to the holy” (Staley Johnson 833). She asserts her religious wisdom through her literary authority.

The other mystic woman under study, Lalleshwari is an offspring of the Bhakti Movement in India and belonged to fourteenth century Kashmir. Bhakti Movement, the greatest religious and spiritual movement of India greatly influenced the world through its enriching devotional literature, music and art. It also revived the spiritual essence which started getting obscured due to unnecessary rituals and artificial social boundaries. Some famous female mystics of the Bhakti Movement are Andal or Aandaal (10th century), Dasimayya (10th century), Akkamahadevi (12th century), Avvaiyar or Auvaiyar (13th century), Janabai (13th century), Lalleshwari (14th century), Meerabai (16th century), Bhinabai (17th century). These mystic women fought for women’s rights and tried to subvert gender roles at a time when this concept was not even formulated. Mysticism granted these women a break from generally revered virtues like beauty, modesty and gentleness. Mysticism helped these women to exercise complete freedom in every sense including the refusal of any attempt of being controlled by the other sex. In most cases, marriage and especially

husband was perceived as an obstacle in the path of devotion. These women needed to resist not only the physical attractions of man but his interference and his desire to control also.

Lalleshwari also fondly called Goddess Lalla, Lal Ded, Mother Lalla, Lalla Arifa was born in the mid-fourteenth century to a Brahmin family at Pandrethan near Srinagar during the reign of King Ala-ud-Din. She was married at a young age in a family at Pampore and suffered the common fate of womanhood after marriage. She was ill-treated and ill-fed by her mother-in-law.

She endured all this patiently and was an embodiment of self-denial, patience and self-discipline. From the beginning, she showed an inclination away from the mundane and the cruel treatment of her in-laws further propelled her to enter the life of renunciation, when she found her guru in Sidh Srikanth. Lalleshwari was a Shaivite mistress yogini and she worshipped the Divine as Nirankar, formless, limitless, boundless, timeless, non-conceivable and non-existent. For her God is absolute, infinite and omnipresent. She had realized God in a vacuum, in a nothingness which was inside her. Lalleshwari was a profound Shaivite philosopher, deep thinker, thought-provoking creative saint poet and artist and a great contributor to the Kashmiri language. She tried to seek self-consciousness by delving deep into her inner-self which revealed the ultimate truth to her, and which has reached us through her profound and inspiring words of wisdom. They delight our minds with inseparable ecstasy. Lalleshwari continues to survive through four-liners known as 'vaakh' (from Sanskrit Vakya meaning a sentence), and these are the medium of her thoughts, experiences and her attainment. These are sung at the beginning of every Raga or 'Muqam' of the local classical music called 'Sufiana Kalam' (literally, words of a Mystic). She is equally respected by the Hindus and Muslims of the valley. The Kashmiri language is full of her sayings. It is claimed that she died at an advanced age in Bijbehara but she remains alive in her sayings. She only kept the company of sadhus and Pi:rs. She would go around naked and claimed that she had yet to encounter a man. She was illiterate but was wise. In

her sayings or 'vaakhs,' she has dealt with everything from life, yoga, God to dharma and a:tma.

The period during the mid fourteen century laid the religious and moral foundations of Kashmir; the people of the valley were subjected to the influence of Islam. The concept of the medieval reformers or Mystics evolved out of this close contact between the two religions and their influence on each other. And it was during this time of religious upheaval that mystics like Lalleshwari and others provided a new approach to religion embracing all creeds and castes, appealing to the 'heart' rather than the 'head'. The mission of her life was to guide her countrymen, and women and did it effectively. Her life and sayings exemplify the tradition of love and tolerance and helped in moulding the character of her people.

Lalleshwari, instead of becoming a victim of circumstances, became a Subject Woman or an Empowered Woman and brought about a cultural, linguistic, social and religious revolution through her mystic poetry. A perusal of her poetry indicates that she conversed with learned men and scholars of her time on an equal footing without the reserve of a woman. The language of her poetry is not elitist Brahmnic, rather it is drawn from the world of domesticity, mainly a women's domain. In this process, she gives voice to the women. As one of her popular vaakh goes:

With thread untwisted my boat I tow through the sea,
 Would the Lord heed and ferry me across?
 Water seeps through my bowls of unbaked clay,
 Oh how my heart longs to go back home! (qtd. in Toshkhani, 25)

The metaphors are drawn from the life of a boatman and the potter, and the climax voices the cry of an unhappy woman caught in a bad marriage who wants to return home. The use of a woman's voice to express the mystic quest and abstract concepts is striking. In her vaakhs, she has also refuted the patriarchal authority of the Guru, a figure highly revered by the mystic. She placed a stronger faith on her inner self, on her own mind along with the faith on God. She emerged as an individual voice unfettered by norms, rituals, obeisance or conventions. She has defied

the patriarchal hold and transcended gender effortlessly without being aware of the prevalent gender factor or having any feeling of regret for not being able to fulfill her wishes because of her femininity. She never accepted the secondary dependent status allotted to women within the confines of Shiva rituals, and dominates the scene as Subject. Her mysticism broadened her insight to emerge as a powerful voice who acted as a torch-bearer for all those men and women who wish to rise above the dualities and hypocrisies of religion. For her, the body acts as a vehicle to carry the spirit rather than to emphasize the difference of gender.

She also controverts serious and highly philosophical male discourse through her choice of vocabulary which she derives from the world around herself: from the potter, weaver, carpenter, blacksmith, and other unprivileged classes, and uses metaphors from their lives to present the highest philosophical truth and the subtle concept of Trikashastra, the essence of which she realized through intensely disciplined Shaivite practices. On the one hand, Lalleshwari gave new life to Kashmiri Shaivistic spiritual tradition, and on the other hand, she brought it close to approach of common individuals by articulating its tenets in the language of the common people, thus making it an effective tool not only for individual emancipation but also for social unification.

Thus whether we consider the Christian Mysticism of the Medieval period or Mysticism of the Bhakti movement, it is apparent that it may assume different forms, but the basic essence of mysticism remains the same; there lies a common thread in which beads from multitudinous places, communities and cultures are linked to form a beautiful necklace.

An intense longing for a union with God drives the lives and texts of these women mystics. Their deeper attention towards a spiritual life enabled them to become a body of wisdom and their texts reveal their journey towards the highest states of enlightened consciousness and its pains and illuminations along the way. The contemplative processes and comprehensive understanding of the operation on the inner life of sin and suffering paved the way for them from oppression to freedom and

from human love to Divine love. An analysis of the social, cultural, theological and literacy background of these women mystics leads to the conclusion that their mystic insights compelled them to write their visions actively. They achieved an inward and outward integrity of action by rendering their visions to the outer world through their texts. Their verses explicitly illuminate five essential qualities of women's mysticism – longing and love, great determination, inner monastic heart, spiritual detachment, and the annihilated self.

In the countries around the world, the sanctity of women's lives and their holiness is deliberately desecrated by males in the majority of cases to torture, humiliate and neglect the experiences of God's presence and revelations in females. Women's human rights are an essential component of reducing global violence against women, especially the "spiritual rights" of women which are meant to protect the rights of women's souls. Spiritual awakening gives a dignified edge to the life and identity of a woman and a specific category of spiritual rights further this cause within the confines of a social set up. Thus a feminist exploration of these mystic women poets is not only a literary, spiritual or psychological exercise; it is essentially a social one.

Works Cited and Consulted

Beer, F. *Women and Mystical Experience in the Middle Ages*. UK: Boydell Press, 1992. Print.

Bynum, Caroline. "Violent Imagery in Late Medieval Piety." *Bulletion of German Historical Institute* 30 (2002): 3-36. Print.

Dhar, K. N. "Lalleshwari – An Apostle of Human Values." *Saints and Sages of Kashmir*. Ed. T. N. Dhar 'Kundan'. New Delhi: APH, 2004. Print.

James, William. *The Varieties of Religion Experience*. Glasgow: Collins, 1960. Print.

Jantzen, Grace M. "Feminists, Philosophers, and Mystics." *Feminist Philosophy of Religion* 9.4 (Autumn 1994): 186-206. Print.

Julian of Norwich. "An anchoress of England" *The Writing of Medieval Women: An Anthology*. Ed. Marcelle Thiebaux. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1994. 441-466. Print.

- . *Revelations of Divine Love*. New York: Penguin Putnam Inc., 1998. Print.
- . Showings. New York: Paulist Press, 1978. Print.
- Kaul, Jayalal. *Lal Ded*. New Delhi: Sahitya Academy, 1973. Print.
- Kaul, R. N. *Kashmir's Mystic Poetess Lalla Ded alias Lalla Arifa*. New Delhi: S. Chand and Co., 1999. Print.
- Kundan, K. N. Dhar. "Lalleshwari – An Apostle of Human Values." *Saints and Sages of Kashmir*. Ed. T. N. Dhar Kundan. New Delhi: APH, 2004. Print.
- Lyman, Eugene W. "Faith and Mysticism." *The American Journal of Theology* 8.3 (Jul 1904):502-535. Print.
- Miles, Margaret. *The Image and Practice of Holiness: A Critique of the Classic Manuals of Devotion*. London: SCM Press, 1988. Print.
- Parimoo, B. N. *The Ascent of Self: A Reinterpretation of the Mystical Poetry of Lalla Ded*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1987. Print.
- Staley Johnson, Lynn. "The Trope of the Scribe and the Question of Literary Authority in the Works of Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe." *Speculum* 66(1991): 820-38. Print.
- Stone, Robert. *Middle English Prose Style: Margery Kemp and Julian of Norwich*. The Hague: Mouton & Co. N. V., Publishers, 1970. Print.
- Thiebaut, Marcelle, Ed. *The Writings of Medieval Women: An Anthology*. New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1994. Print.
- Toshkhani, S. S., Ed. *Lal Ded: The Great Kashmiri Saint Poetess*. New Delhi: A. P. H. Publishing Corporation, 2000. Print.
- Tynan, Jenna. "The anchoress and the self-proclaimed prophet: medieval female writers in ecclesiastical society." *Discoveries* 9 (2008) 91-101. Print.
- "Julian of Norwich." *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*. Wikimedia Foundation, Inc. 17 Aug. 2013. Web. 18 Aug. 2013.