



LITERATURE AND SPIRITUALITY: A CRITICAL STUDY OF ENGLISH POETRY

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ABSTRACT

This research paper is written to explore the theme of spirituality discussed by English poets in the poems in their different styles. If we talk about the spirituality and spiritual it means we are talking about sacred or religious things, holy, divine, renunciation, prayers, churches, temples, clergy and priest. Spirituality is a concept which can be taken by the people according to their understanding like some people feel that there is supreme power that is handling and running this whole universe. Some feel that divine power is there and they follow this divinity. People believe that spirituality meaning like to be one with this unseen and super power. They do certain rituals and ceremonies like worshipping to attain this divinity and being one. This concept of spirituality generates some positive feelings and emotions, such as peace, awe, contentment, gratitude, and acceptance.

The same has been discussed by many English poets in their poems. Many English poets have written their poems from religious point of view or spirituality. If I start from the beginning Chaucer started this theme of spirituality by his poem Prologue to the Canterbury Tales, which was followed by John Milton in his famous epic poem Paradise Lost, by Wordsworth in his nature poems, by John Donne in his religious poems, by Tagore in his best work Gitanjali, by Sarojini Naidu in her poems Flute Player of Brindavan and Soul Prayer. So this paper is a critical study of English poetry based on the theme of spirituality.

Key words: spirituality and spiritual, divinity, Prologue to the Canterbury Tales.

Introduction

Spirituality has been used in a multiple ways by the critics and theorists. If spirituality is associated with religion it is the concept of "God". This concept of God is related to a belief of almighty power. This almighty unseen power instructs, guides and rewards human beings for leaving a good life doing good deeds as per religious beliefs and norms. Freud wrote on religion, in his book "New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis" (1933), he suggested that "religion is an illusion and it derives its strength from its readiness to fit in with our instinctual wishful impulses." If spirituality is associated with transcendentalism it talks about eternal one. Where each individual carries the knowledge about themselves and others in the universe and they



perceive this spirituality in things around them. It is based on the notion that spirituality cannot be attained through logic and rationalism but introspection and intuition. In other words, transcendentalists think that spirituality cannot be explained; it must be experienced. A transcendentalist would argue that walking in a beautiful area is a more spiritual activity than reading a religious text.

Like the American transcendentalists relate spirituality in a superior intellectual property which can be perceived appalling this materialistic world, a world of the “spirit” which is not necessarily dependent on the physical senses to interpret. If all of this sounds rather mysterious, it is primarily because the conceptual nature of the term has its etymological roots in the Hebrew word *ruach*, which refers to the ethereal or elusive nature of spirit, breath, or wind, as that which gives life and animation to something. Therefore, spirituality is corresponding with human beings and abstract things both but it is paradoxically different from worldly affairs.

Literature and spirituality have a similar relation in terms of meaning of faith and knowledge that stand about a feeling of reality and presence, though distant and ethereal.

“Literature helps us represent unfamiliar situations; it prepares our minds for fuller understanding,” Matt Wickman said. “[Analogous to spirituality], literature anticipates where thought will have been; it captures us in the process of change.”

With this concept of spirituality many great English poets have glorified this theme of spirituality in their poems. This spirituality soothes the human souls and teaches them humanity and compassion as described by the poets in their poems. The same spirituality and religiousness can be seen in the famous poem of Geoffrey Chaucer’s Prologue to the Canterbury Tales when poet is talking about the blessings of St. Thomas E Backet shrine. Chaucer has described that 29 pilgrims were going to the pilgrimage in the month of April to have the blessings of the saint. Poet gave the element of spirituality and religiousness in the poem talking about the shrine and pilgrimage. He himself went to the pilgrimage for his wife’s good health. He also described about the church, clergyman and parsons their preaching’s and Christian institutional ideology.

“Batter my heart, three person'd God; for you
As yet but knocke, breathe, shine, and seeke to mend;
That I may rise, and stand, o'erthrow me, and bend
Your force, to breake, blowe, burne, and make me new.”

John Donne is a Metaphysical poet, who has written poems on different themes. Religiousness is one of the major themes of his poetry.

John Donne is a Metaphysical poet. He is famous for his love poetry, in his poems he has used passionate and sensuous imagery but in his later writing career he wrote religious poems, hymns and sermons. In religious poems too Donne has used the same techniques what he had applied for his love poems. His two religious kinds of poems, '*Holy Sonnet (Batter my Heart)*', and '*A Hymn to God the Father*' have the spiritual aspects in both the poems.

These poems are religious in tone. In these two poems poet is addressing himself directly to God. The major difference in both the poems is the feeling expressed by the poet in these poems. '*Batter my Heart*' is a poem, consists the theme of impassioned, desperate request for God to make his presence felt. Another poem '*A Hymn to God the Father*' is describing a plea of forgiveness. These poems of John Donne describes the universal fact and feeling that how Man



is a bundle of mistakes who can commit sins therefore his duty is to obey the all powerful God.

In this poem, the poet has sanctified the ability to command God. Poet is pleading for action to be done against him, and glorifying the supremacy of God and maximizing the potency of the prayer. Poet is expressing his grief not to serving God due to the earthly pursuits like war, sex, and marriage. He requests to God to punish him for following the earthly path. So he pleads with God to imprison him and make him free from the bondage of personal pursuits of life. Similarly in his other poem '*A Hymn to God the Father*' also shows the acceptance of God's will emphasize by the poet. Here in his poem, the Poet describes a simpler universal belief which all Christians can share

“The argument contains a characteristic Donne conceit, in:

When thou hast done, thou hast not done.”

Sarojini Naidu has also portrayed the same theme of spirituality and religiousness in her poems like *Souls Prayer* and *Flute Player of Brindavan*. In her Poem *Souls Prayer* the poetess prays to God to enable her to have this kind of experience of life, without keeping any pleasure or pain aloof from her. The poetess is very eager to comprehend the complexities of human existence. The poetess wants to know the secret of laws of life and death.

“In childhood’s pride I said to Thee:

‘O Thou, who mad’st me of Thy breath,

Speak, Master, and reveal to me

Thine inmost laws of life and death.”(Souls Prayer lines no. 1-4)

She is deeply interested in comprehended the mysteries of life. She makes a fervent prayer to the almighty God to have a mature experience of life for which an understanding of sorrows and joys is necessary. Her thirsty soul is very keen to have the pleasures of life, to taste the sweet drinks of her life. But she cannot be a fighter without realizing the grim realities of life. Life is a vast struggle so God should give her courage to be a great fighter in the struggle of life.

“I, bending from my sevenfold height,

Will teach thee of My quickening grace,

Life is a prism of My light,

And Death the shadow of My face.” (Souls Prayer lines no. 25-28)

In the last stanza of this poem God gives a befitting reply to the prayer of the poetess because she is a devotee. She should realize that God is the controller of the whole universe. The poetess will slowly and slowly learn that this world has been created by God. God is gifted with creative powers. The whole world and life is the outward manifestation of the light of God. In other words, the world is a creation of God. Death is an inevitable end of human life and this mystery is also brought about by God. So God is the most powerful omniscient and universal reality. Poetess realizes that the soul of man is the part of the universal spirit of God and man is created and moulded by God.

In the poem *Flute Player of Brindavan*, through the character of Radha the poetess presents herself as a devotee of God and she is very eager to hear the music of Lord Krishna. Radha herself



has been made to express her deep and lasting devotion for her divine Lord Krishna. This love is not an ordinary one based on physical passion. It is something spiritual and may be regarded as the love of beloved for the soul of God. The divine music of the matchless flute of Lord Krishna transports her into a state of ecstasy. Enraptured by the music, she aspires to accompany Lord Krishna wherever he goes so that she may be able to hear the music of his flute.

“No peril of the deep or height

Shall daunt my wingèd foot;

No fear of time-unconquered space,

Or light untravelled route,

Impede my heart that pants to drain

The nectar of thy flute!”(Flute Player of Brindavan lines no. 19-24)

Mysticism is an abstract thinking so the big problems and the complexities do not create fear in the heart of the devotee. They do not make a devotee dispirited. Her love has a divine quality and tends to remain firm inspite of all obstacles and difficulties.

Similarly, Rabindra Nath Tagore has glorified the concept of spiritualism and mysticism in Gitanjali, a collection of devotional songs which brings out zeal of poet to attain union with God. The poet praises to God to give in inspiration and guidance. In his poetry the poet tries to harmonies creator and creation. The poet prays to God to give him mental and spiritual delight. In song V the poet is very eager to attain God and therefore he wants to give up the social responsibility for sometime because if a person gets entangled in the worldly activities, he cannot get union with God. The poet had faith in God and his heart is filled with great joy and he begins to consider himself as the friend of God. When the poet begins to have faith in God, his unworthiness has removed. This noble idea is summed up in the following lines:

“Dunk with a joy of singing, I forget myself

Call the friend who is my Lord” (song II)

In song II the poet condemns the traditional modes of worship of God. God cannot be attaining by singing hymns in the Temple. God lives with the tillers of the soils. If a person desire to realize God, he must be prepare to work hard like a laborer. A person cannot get freedom from worldly responsibility. God Himself is a creator so every person should do his work sincerely. The real worship of work is the worship of God.

“Our Master Himself has joyfully, taken

Upon him the bonds of creation, He is bounds with us forever.” (song XI)

Tagore is a true devotee of God. Like a devotee he praises to God a many of songs of Gitanjali. After death the poet would be able to whole communion with divine God. This mystic idea is summed up in the following lines:

“And when my work shall be done in this work, oh, king of kings, alone and speechless shall I stand before the face to face” (song LXXVI)

Tagore points out that a person should not lead a life of renunciation and detachment. God has given responsibilities and social obligation which must be fulfilled to attain practical success. A person should enjoy the sensuous delight. During the busy life he should get some moment to remember God. This beautiful idea is summed up in the following lines:

“Deliverance is not for me in the renunciation. I feel the embrace of freedom in a thousand bonds of delight” (songLXXVI)

Mysticism is a very important feature of Gitanjali because it brings out the spiritual philosophy that God is all powerful. God inspires the poet to write devotional poetry. God is the source of joy and inspiration. If a person has faith in God all the evils are wiped out.The characters



become pure.

“I ask for a moment’s indulgence to sit by thy side. The works that I have in hand I will finish afterwards.”

Gitanjali is a popular and universal poem W.B. Yeats as praised Gitanjali lavishly, Patriotism, Nationalism, Humanism, Mysticism and metaphysical philosophy of God and universe find an appropriate expression in this poem

Milton's religiousness can be found in his famous epic Paradise Lost when he talks about the heavenly muse who will inspire him to write the grand epic. The muse will give him divine inspiration. Furthermore, the numerous biblical allusions in book 1.2 the sanctity which he attached to the scripture and the reference in which, he held it. His veneration for the Bible was his religiousness. The theme of Paradise Lost is spiritual as poet has described the Christian mythology that how Adam and Eve tasted the fruits of Forbidden tree and they were thrown on the earth. Satan and his followers waged the war against God and they were hurled in to the Hell by God. Following the classical precedent of Homer and Virgil Milton, indicates the theme of the Epic.

“Of man's first disobedience, and the fruit of that Forbidden tree, whose mortal taste brought death into the world, and all our woe with loss of Eden.”

Satan represents evil and God represents goodness. The theme of the epic is to show that God is always right because he represents virtue.

“I may assert eternal providence
and justify the ways of God to men”

The statement of theme in the fair lines is followed by an invocation to the heavenly muse. This convention was followed by Homer. Milton's Muse will inspire him to write sublime poetry. Milton needed divine inspiration in his sacred task of justifying the ways of God to men. He invokes Goddess.

“Invoke thy aid to my adventurous sing,
that with no middle flight intends to soar”

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