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Sadia Javed

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THEORY OF MYSTIC EXPERIENCE IN ISLAM: A CRITICAL APPRAISAL OF EAST AND WEST

Sadia Javed ¹

Abstract: Being a part of this spatio-temporal “phenomena” and wishing the knowledge of the “nuoma” or “Divine Reality” which is above from our commonly known capabilities and tools of acquiring knowledge through a particular way of meditation and absorbing esoteric experience is the main feature of mysticism. So questions arise: What is the nature of this experience? What are its basic characteristics? How it can be experienced? Whether it is religious or not? And so on. They are the questions which will be answered in this research...

Keywords: *Allama Iqbal, Epistemology, Esoteric knowledge, highest level, Mystic Experience, Prayer, Psychological Experience.*

Mysticism is a phenomenon that may be traced in any religion of the world, it has neither geographical boundaries nor it is legacy and copyright of any one nation or one particular religion. Though universally accepted as well as experienced yet it remained esoteric in its nature. Its description is beyond the reach of ordinary language and sense perception. Its knowledge is possible only through mysterious intuition², it is alleged to be the result of long introspection and also may be defined as the intuitive and emotive apprehension of spiritual reality.³ Within the theological domain it believes in the spiritual union with God⁴ and endeavors to come into direct contact with the Divine⁵ on the one hand and in the philosophical sphere it is a theory as well as practices which

¹ Ph.D. scholar, Institute of Islamic studies, University of the Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan.

² Bunn, N. (2004). *The Blackwell Dictionary of Western Philosophy*. Malden, USA: Blackwell Publishing. PP:451.

³ Ferm, V. (1945). *An Encyclopedia of Religion*. New York, USA: The Philosophical Library. PP: 513.

⁴ Staff, W. (1946). *The Winston Dictionary*. Philadelphia, USA: The John Winston Company p646

⁵ Canney, M. A. (1921). *An Encyclopedia of Religions*. New York, USA: George Routledge & Sons. pp254

aims at the attainment¹ of the ultimate truth through intuition, introspection and meditation on the other. This contact with ultimate truth or spiritual union has been termed as “Mystic Experience” and it reveals esoteric type of knowledge of the Ultimate Truth to the subject. The experience holder or the mystics claim that this knowledge cannot be accessed through sense perception, rational or conceptual thought.² The epistemology of this mystic way or absorbing form of experience³ participates in the domains of psychology, theology, mysticism and philosophy.

William James being psychologist and philosopher regarded this as “personal religious experience”⁴ and termed it “mystical state of consciousness”. In analyzing its epistemological characteristics he presented its following attributes:

1. Ineffability⁵ is the first trait of mysticism. It generally means which cannot be described or is inexpressible⁶ but in James’ use it has peculiar sense viz. it is not a state of intellect but it is a feeling which lacks the quality of express-ability. Anyone who experience it, is not able to communicate the content of one’s experience in words save only those who had already experienced it they can feel it in the light of theirs’ own yet they too cannot communicate it to others. That is why he regarded it as a negative quality of the experience or state.

If a researcher analyzes the term and its etymology he would find that Mysticism means secret⁷ or concealed⁸ so the origin is self-revealing its nature that it is clandestine and its knowledge is not to and cannot be expressible but it is to be kept secret. So the first feature of mystic experience and its epistemology according to James is its incommunicability and ineffability.

¹ Staff, W. (1946). p646

² Audi, R. (1999). *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* (2ed.). New York, USA: Cambridge University Press. p593

³ (Ferm, 1945) p513

⁴James, W. (1902). *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (4 ed.). New York, USA: Longmans, Green, And Co. p379

⁵ (James, 1902) p380

⁶ Macdonald. (1979). *Chambers Twentieth Century Dictionary*. Britain: W & R Chambers Ltd. P 669

⁷ (Staff, 1946) p646 Greek *μυστικός* means secret

⁸ <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/mysticism/> Greek *μω* means to conceal,

2. Noetic Quality¹ of religious experience reveals another aspect viz. a state of knowledge which does not include the data comprising the bits and pieces of information received through sense organs and processed in the form of judgment and understanding which becomes our knowledge instead it is like “illumination”, “revelation” and “insight into depths of truth”.

Due to its nature, this type of knowledge entail certain more qualities e.g. suddenness, transiency, spontaneous-ness, in articulation, unsupported by reason and also beyond the grasp of rational. There one finds only the feeling of being illuminated with suddenness and this feeling cannot be articulated in the ordinary language.

3. Transiency² is another aspect of mystic consciousness epistemology. This involves temporal element which means it has time duration of few minutes and this cannot be sustained for long. This is transient and fades away. When it is diminished the quality of this feeling cannot be perfectly reproduced. Because it is sudden illumination which spontaneously occurs and fades away with the passage of time yet it is distinctly felt in its richness and intensity.

4. Passivity:³ James’ psychological analysis of the mystic epistemology reveals that during the phase of this experience the consciousness of the mystic becomes only receptive and passive and in the trance of sudden illumination or insight the subject feels as if his “own will is in abeyance”, his mind is passive, he himself has been grasped by someone superior. This passivity state, in my opinion is essential step in this process of mystic knowledge because the spontaneous illumination overwhelmed the subject’s consciousness and personality.

5. Voluntary meditations⁴. Though Mr. James in his book has not discussed it as a separate point but as a mere cursory account but in my opinion prior to the “passively reception of illumination” the mystic has gone through the long voluntarily meditations, abstinence, *Mujahida*, *Muraqba*, *surrender of will*, *different ceremonies of soul purification*.

¹ (James, 1902) p380

² Ibid. 381

³ Ibid. 381

⁴ Ibid. 381

6. After-effects¹: The trance of being illuminated and inability to express the sudden insight which the subject receives passively and overawed by someone superior along-with his will held in abeyance these compilation of elements and circumstances effects the mystics in the following ways such as Alternative Personality, Prophetic Speech, Automatic Writing etc. moreover the memory of that trance remains which results in the modification of inner life of the mystic.

Mr. James after clearly describing main features of mystical consciousness sites some persons' accounts who had this experience so from their descriptions we can derive other characteristic of this experience e.g. ... sudden feeling², referring to Charles Kingsley³ "... an innate feeling, ...feeling of being surrounded with truths which I cannot grasp.

The account by J. A. Symonds⁴ "... Irresistibly it took possession of my mind and Will, I disliked this kind of trance that I could not describe it to myself... at last nothing remained but a pure, absolute, abstract Self. The universe became without form and void of content. But the Self persisted, formidable in its vivid keenness...."

"... I was aware that I was immersed in the infinite ocean of God.⁵" Dr. Bucke's account "... came upon me a sense⁶ of exultation, of immense joyousness accompanied of immediately followed by an intellectual illumination impossible to describe. I saw that the universe is not composed of dead matter, but is, on the contrary, a living Presence, I became conscious in myself of eternal life." "The vision lasted a few seconds and was gone."

James sited that in India such insight has been termed Yoga⁷ which meant experimental union of the individual with the Divine. The disciple or Yogi learns, "that the mind itself has a higher state of existence, beyond reason, a super-conscious state, and that when the mind gets to that higher state, then this knowledge beyond reasoning

¹ Ibid. 381
² Ibid. 383
³ Ibid. 385
⁴ Ibid. 385
⁵ Ibid. 398
⁶ Ibid. 399
⁷ Ibid. 400

comes.... There is no feeling of I, and yet the mind works, desire less, free from restlessness, objectless, bodiless. Then the Truth shines in its full effulgence.”

In Hinduism the state of higher contemplation is called “Dhyana”¹ and the Buddhists called it “Samadhi”. This introspection and meditation comprises four stages viz. the first stage has the character of focusing and concentrating without desire on one point but it does not exclude judgment, in the second stage intellect and its functions dropped off but the satisfied sense of unity still remains, in the third state that sense of satisfaction vanishes and indifference starts to take place along with memory and self-consciousness, and in the last stage all the characteristics gets perfection.

Regarding Muslim mysticism² James is of the opinion that it is present among the Persians since the earliest times and he mentions particularly Al-Ghazal point of view that “The science of Sufis aim at detaching the heart from all that is not God and... the sole occupation of the meditation of the divine being”.

Having described the prominent and the latent features of mystical consciousness and its epistemology he accepts that the most important fact of this experience is its “incommunicableness”³ and the contact with the divine is only through intuition and it is immediate feeling which have no content of senses.

7. *Orision*: The next characteristic which James calls *Orision* is also known as (meditation) ⁴ but certain dictionaries explain it as prayer⁵ or the “methodological elevation of the soul towards God”. James insisted on this aspect. This has been emphasized by Allama Iqbal.

He teaches that prayer is like a light or illumination that can lead man to his actual way towards the destination. He believes that the whole world has various indicators to prove the existence of a supernatural being. He further says that,

¹ Ibid. 401

² Ibid. 402

³ Ibid. 402

⁴ Ibid. 406

⁵ (Macdonald, 1979) p 930, {O.Fr. *Oraison*; L.*oratio*, -onis-orare: to pray }

“In fact, prayer must be regarded as a necessary complement to the intellectual activity of the observer of Nature. The scientific observation of Nature keeps us in close contact with the behavior of Reality, and thus sharpens our inner perception for a deeper vision of it.”¹

Iqbal regarded all knowledge as a form of prayer. He said that if someone tries to study and observe the nature scientifically, the one has the status equal to a mystic.. Iqbal expresses his views by saying,

“Although at present he follows only the footprints of the musk deer and thus modesty limits the method of his quest, his thirst for knowledge is eventually sure to lead him towards the point where the scent of the musk-gland is a better guide than the footprints of the deer.”²

Mysticism and mystic experience are regarded as some aspects of religion. Allama Iqbal regarded it the highest level of religion in his *Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*. But sometimes mysticism and mysticism considered as asceticism and not a part of any religion yet it is a fact that it does exist. William James though a philosopher as well as psychologist presented his views on the nature of mystic experience and he made a research that id not only exists but it has have some qualities. Though, due to its nature it has some features that common people cannot understand but those who belong to this, they can feel it. So the common language cannot comprehend it but it has its own language, terminology as well as epistemology.

¹ Iqbal, Allama Muhammad. (2001). *Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*. Lahore: Iqbal Academy.72.

² Ibid.73