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## MYSTICISM OF WILLIAM BLAKE, THE ROMANTIC IN THE LIGHT OF IBN-E- ARABI'S PHILOSOPHY

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**ABSTRACT:** William Blake (1757-1827) is a unique romantic poet who has been labelled unorthodoxly by critics. However, he is an established visionary and mystic. Mysticism has multiple facets; however, this study views his poetry in light of a Muslim perspective as propounded by Ibn-e-Arabi. Arabi is known as *Sheikh-e-Akbar* (The Great Master), who has systematised mysticism as per the teachings and scriptures of Islam. The study brings into play Love of Humanity, Love of God, and the Oneness of Being, the concepts given by Arabi. The study contextualises that Blake does not follow any prescribed and institutionalised religion; rather, his poetic persona is a seeker of God, travelling certain stages of the path leading to Him and finally resulting in the Oneness of Being. The study contends that Blake's poetry and specifically his mysticism can be better explained and understood in terms of the conceptual framework based on the mystical and philosophical ideas of Ibn-e-Arabi (1165-1240), which is a recognised Muslim perspective of mysticism.

**KEYWORDS:** William Blake, Ibn-e-Arabi, mysticism, humanity, God, and the Oneness of Being

## INTRODUCTION

Mysticism has been present in human nature since the arrival of the first man on earth. It is the quest of man to know his hidden reality and the Real. The relationship of man with God is as old as the world is. However, the modes and cults have been different in different ages. Nevertheless, the search for truth has been a common feature among humanity. Mysticism is to discover the hidden, the metaphysical, the immanent and the unknown. God is the biggest mystery with the most vivid evidence. The search to solve this mystery has been a common theme among poets and thinkers of nearly all ages in the history of mankind. East or west, all are in search of truth and looking for God in His attributes and manifestations. Moreover, the path that leads to Him is more or less the same in every faith. The present study looked for this search of God in the poetry of William Blake (1757-1827), a world-famous mystic English poet. It delves into discovering the quest of the poetic personae and their journey to seek and reach the ultimate truth.

To interpret any poetry in mystical terms is also one of the challenges because it lacks established trends in literary theory and criticism. The orthodox strategies and theoretical frameworks are so hegemonic that the attempt to devise and apply a new but practical theoretical framework is generally opposed, no matter how fruitful it is, and contributes to the understanding of certain texts. Keeping in view, the study focused on the Islamic tradition of mysticism, that is, Sufism, and it devised a framework that meets the objectives of the study. There is a plethora of studies that interpret the poetry of great poets such as William Wordsworth, William Blake, Emily Dickinson, Ralph Waldo Emerson, etc. What is common in all these studies is an established and recognised theoretical framework. However, this study considered this challenge and developed a

framework that was authentic and practical. Hence, it is derived from the works of Ibn-e-Arabi. First, a little talk of mysticism.

Mysticism is many things to many people. However, since the beginning of human civilisation, it has been a part of it. The quest for God has been attracting and fascinating man all through human history, civilisations and religions, that is, the search of man for God is natural and logical (Chittick, 2017; 1998). Among all the creatures of God, man is the most rational and logical being. However, solving arithmetic problems is no guarantee of human wisdom. Nevertheless, being a rational being, man ponders on the questions of creation, life, death, here, and the hereafter. With a slight difference in modalities, the answers were the same. In fact, the perception of God is difficult, and it perplexes the human mind. It is so because God is the greatest mystery. The mystics love this mystery and are eager to solve it (Usman et al., 2021; Adnan & Usman, 2024).

Mysticism is to seek God; in other words, it is reducing the distance between man and God or unveiling the veiled. It is to come close to God through spiritual disciplines, meditation, love, devotion, and selfless service of humanity (Schimmel, 1975; Chittick, 2005). It is a continuous struggle to realise the Real through the realisation of one's self. It is to seek the Truth. In one way or another other this seeking of God by subduing the base self and looking forward to meeting with Him is present in one way or the other in Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. However, the ideology and practice differ from faith to faith (Usman et al., 2022 & 2024). Merkur (2021) defines it, "The practice of religious ecstasies, together with whatever ideologies, ethics, rites, myths, legends, and magic may be related to the theme (p.16). Some scholars explain it in psychological terms, some in religious terms (Hersen and

Sledge, 2002). However, Stace (1960) argues that in the centre of mysticism, in all its forms and manifestations, it is mystical experience which does not yield any set interpretation. Language runs short. Merkur (1993) further defines it as, “the practice of religious ecstasies (religious experiences during alternate states of consciousness), together with whatever ideologies, ethics, rites, myths, legends, and magic may be related to them” (para.1). Thus, mysticism has religion/ faith in its backbone as it is derived from the core texts/ scriptures. However, in modalities, there can be substantial differences across faiths. In the Islamic faith, mystical ecstasies or practices are known as Sufism. In other words, the Islamic tradition of mysticism is Sufism, which is closely linked with the Arabic term *tassawuf* (Chittick, 2012; 2010).

Having said that, the next potential challenge could be a mystical theoretical framework. Christian faith and Christian theologians and mystics have developed their own framework of mysticism, whereas it is also well established in the Muslim faith. Several studies interpret the poetry of Blake with mysticism as varied as Christianity and Buddhism, but not through any lens of mysticism of Islamic tradition. Therefore, for this study, the Islamic mysticism, i.e. Sufism, was used for it. Sufism in Islam is not a question to ask, for it dates to Adam, the first man created by God. He lived in heaven before his fall, living happily, enjoying all the blessings of God, unless and made the mistake of eating the fruit. He, along with his wife, was expelled from heaven and sent down to earth (Chittick, 2007; Arberry, 2002). He repented and was forgiven. Sufism starts from there. It is knowing one’s self, and knowing one’s Lord. Schimmel (2024) defines Sufism as “mystical Islamic belief and practice” in which the seeker (Muslims) seeks God, they “seek to find truth of divine love” and “knowledge” by means of personal experience of Him.

There are a variety of mystical paths that are designed and prescribed to ascertain the “nature of humanity and God”. The experience of the presence of divine wisdom and love in the world is facilitated (para. 1). Mysticism in Islam is called *taṣawwuf*, literally, in the Arabic language, it means clad in a woollen dress. However, in Western languages, since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it has been called Sufism. It is an abstract noun that is derived from the Arabic root *suf*, which usually refers to a garment of wool. The *fuqra* and the poor are called Sufis in Arabic, *darvish* in Persian language, and *fakir* and *dervish* are in English usage.

Sufism is deemed to be the most appropriate theoretical framework for the poetry of Blake. For the purpose, the study used the mysticism of Ibn-e-Arabi (1165-1240), a renowned mystic philosopher and thinker of Spain, Europe. Arabi is one of the most scholarly Muslim philosophers and thinkers in the history of Muslim philosophy. He is the one who has systematically theorised it. Among the Sufism and Sufis, he is known as *Shaykh al-Akbar* (the great teacher). In medieval Europe, he is known as Doctor Maximus. Hence, this study exploited his concepts such as love of God and humanity, and the *Oneness of Being*.

The *Oneness of Being* (*Wahdat-ul-Waujud*) is the central focal point in mysticism. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (*King James Bible*, 1996, John 1:1). The knowledge is the word that was with God, that is, God is all knowing, and in the beginning, when there was nothing, there was God. Chittick (2007) puts that God is eternal, and God was the first presence. Other than God, everything is Possible Being and came into existence later. Whereas God is the Necessary Being and the creator of all. The *Oneness of Being* suggests that there is one true being, and that is God and that other than Him all is possible being. Hence, the reality of God is the

truth. God is known through his attributes because His attributes manifest in the universe. However, God in His essence is unknowable. The idea of the *Oneness of Being* is associated with Ibn-e-Arabi, although he never used the term in his works. It was later proclaimed by Ibn Taymiyya (1263-2328). However, many jurists and theologians believe that the idea of the *Oneness of Being* is derived from the Qur'an and the authentic hadiths.

There are scores of studies which argue about the mystical underpinnings in Blake's poetry from different angles. Satyarth (2022) discusses mysticism and transcendentalism in the poetry of Blake with the view that mysticism is a quest of an individual to seek union with the transcendent realm by means of a variety of mystical experiences. Blake achieves this purpose through apocalyptic style and diverse symbolism. Mysticism is generally believed as a spiritual quest for the hidden wisdom or truth, and its goal is to end in union with the transcendent. The comparative study of Amatulhafeez et al. (2022) delves into the themes of mysticism in the poetry of Blake and Omar Tarin. The study traces the elements of Divine Love into the selected poetry of the poets. Through the cognitive analysis of the identical symbols used for divine love, the study contends that oriental mysticism is largely present in the poetry of Blake. With an insight taken from the Mental Space Theory, quite common in cognitive poetics and the perennial theory, the study demonstrates, through the processes of meaning making, mental operations of symbols that clarify the meaningful perceptions of mystical experiences and the ineffable union of the human soul with reality.

Hussein (2021), in his comparative study, argues that the mysticism of Blake has devotional aspects which are like those of Shirazi because both poets emphasise the struggle of the wayfarer to achieve unity with God. The study describes mysticism as a method of thinking

which is not common among the common people, rather only a handful of people with spiritual inclination can sap the roots of it. Mysticism, as it has been determined, is an individualistic experience that varies in degree from person to person. Ahmad (2016) argues that the mysticism of Blake is not conventional rather it deviates from it. It is so because he shows spiritual interpretations, possibilities, and hidden truths with emphasis.

The study is qualitative in approach. It provides an in-depth understanding of the texts. It critically evaluates the selected texts and elaborates on the research questions. Therefore, the study is textual and interpretative in approach. It explores the ideas of *the Oneness of Being, Love of God and Humanity*, of the seeker as given and propounded by Ibn-e-Arabi in his *Bezels of Wisdom* (2015) and *The Meccan Revelations*. The primary sources for the theoretical framework were *The Bezels of Wisdom* and *The Meccan Revelation* (2002; 2004). However, the secondary sources included *Sufism* (2002), *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*(1975), and *Deciphering the Signs of God* by [Annemarie Schimmel](#) (1922-2003). In addition, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, *The Sufi Path of Love*, *The Self-disclosure of God* (2015), and *Divine Love* (2017) by William C. Chittick were also used as secondary sources to enrich the conceptual framework for the study.

## DISCUSSION

William Blake is a mystical voice from the Romantic Age of England (1798-1832). The Romantic Age is known for its love for nature and quest for the creator. The quest for the creator has been present in all cultures and civilisations because the presence of God always filled the gap of immense freedom. However, the clue to find Him is difficult to trace for the adepts. The speaker of Blake's poems is a seeker in search of the Almighty. Arabi (2002 & 2004) asserts that God in His

essence is unknowable, but He can be known only through His attributes. The universe, which is the other of God, is the reflection of His mercy. When He created the universe, he wrote in the book that His mercy surpassed His wrath. He is all Merciful. Blake's poetic persona in search of the divine image longs for mercy because God directs His people to adopt or inculcate His attributes to create heaven on earth. There are two paths – the path of the devil and the path of God. The followers of the path of God adopt divine attributes. Blake says in his poem *The Divine Image*:

And all must love the human form  
 In heather, Turk, or Jew  
 Where Mercy, Love, and Pity dwell  
 There God is dwelling too (p. 47, lines 17-20)

He concludes that God's attributes are the source of humanity. In His essence, there is nothing like Him. Allah says in the Qur'an, "We indeed created Man in the fairest stature" (The Qur'an, 95:4). Since man is the receiver of the divine revelation, he has the capacity to hold and manifest divine attributes. The biblical entitlement of man that Man was created in the image of God is interpreted differently. "God created man in his image; in the image of God, he created him; male and female, he created them" (Gen. 1:27; KJV. Gen. 5:1-2). At the level of attributes, it is close to the Muslim faith. God loves His creation to reflect His attributes. Attributes of God are the manifestation of Him, and the other than Him, i.e. the universe, is the reflection of His attributes. Arabi (2002 & 2004) asserts that the attributes of God are infinite; however, the macrocosm – the universe and the microcosm – the heart of the servant of God are the mirror where they reflect. He also asserts that when He created the universe, He wrote on the tablet that His mercy excelled His wrath. The whole universe is the creation of His mercy. This is the amount of love He has for His creation. Ibn al-'Arabī says that the mercy of the ever-Merciful (*ar-Rahīm*) is a pure

mercy, whereas the mercy of the all-Merciful (*ar-Rahmān*) may incorporate some pain or suffering, just like the medicine that may have a bitter taste but brings benefit to the one who takes it to cure some disease (*Futūhāt* II. 390).

Therefore, Mercy and Love are the divine face according to Blake, and whosoever adopts these can achieve the divine image. In other words, to fill the world with peace and love, its inhabitants, regardless of their individual or national faith, should inculcate these attributes of God. It is a concrete step to clean the world from devilish hold. Moreover, Blake here negates institutionalised religion and emphasises the importance of humanity. All prophets gave the message of love, mercy, and peace. They encouraged their people to fight devil and devilish attributes and instil and spread peace, mercy and love among fellow human beings and avoid the rhetoric that is triggered by the enmity of humanity. Heathen, Turk or Jew are the labels of recognition, but from inside is the creation of the message of love and mercy.

Sufis do not stand by institutionalised religion but with the religion of God – the religion that He gave to humanity, which is not the same as interpreted by the clerics and elite of a particular faith. Humanity is the addressee of the message of God. In this regard, there is no path leading to God which bypasses humanity. The day-to-day business of people with each other must be based on love. Love for humanity is at the core of the teachings of the Muslim faith. Arabi (1964) explains, while emphasising the inherent unity of all humankind, that humanity is the microcosm and it is the reflection of the attributes of God. Blake in his lyrical poem *Holy Thursday*, emphasises the need for happiness for those who cannot afford it. “Twas on a Holy Thursday their innocent faces clean / The children walking two & two in red & blue & green” (Blake, 2000, p. 46; lines, 1-2).

The less privileged and the downtrodden sections of society, including orphans, should be brought into the mainstream society offering them equal share in the social festivals. Arabi (2004) further argues Humans are God's vicegerent on Earth, possessing a pivotal spiritual status and holding a unique position as the most perfect place where God's reality is manifest.

Humanity is free from the bounds of class, colour, race, and faith. In the name of differences, happiness, and the lives of the people, they should not suffer. Blake, in his poem, criticises one of the leading killer ideas of humanity – racism. In his poem *The Little Blake Boy* he asserts that the colour of skin is nothing more than a mark of recognition. “And I am black, but O! my soul is white; / White as an angel is the English child:” (Blake, 1962, p. 47). White people and black people have one thing in common, which is the soul of human beings. Bodies come from earth and will go to earth after death. The human soul comes from God, and it will return to Him after it is liberated from the body. Therefore, the element which perishes should be distinguished from the element which lives. The social institutions which usurp human happiness should know that there is nothing more marvellous in the world than the sufferings of people. Instead, society should be set on human principles which can guarantee and ensure equality and justice. Humanity, again for Blake, can be restored by inculcating attributes of love, pity, peace, and mercy.

Humanity is beyond the boundaries of colour and race. These are the social constructions created by human beings to maintain their hegemonic designs to control the less powerful. God created all human beings from Adam and Eve, and they were made of earth. All human beings are earthly beings at the level of their body; however, their soul comes from God, it is the breath of God in human beings. If all human beings are the children of the same parents, Adam and Eve, why

should there be any question of inferiority and superiority based on race and colour? Humanity is the human race, which includes everyone on Earth. It's also a word for the qualities that make us human, such as the ability to love and have compassion, be creative, and not be a robot or alien. In *The Little Blake Boy*, he says:

My mother bore me in the southern wild,  
And I am black, but O! my soul is white;  
White as an angel is the English child:  
But I am black as if bereav'd of light. (Blake, 1962, p. 47; lines, 1-4)

Universal spiritual unity of humanity is the focus of Ibn-e-Arabi. He emphasises that racist inclinations are the killers of humanity; hence, there is no room for racism. He views humanity through the Islamic lens, which strongly condemns and rejects racial superiority. Arabi (2002 & 2004) argues that all people are the children of Adam; therefore, they are equal to each other; the only distinction among people is their closeness to God through their righteous deeds in the service of God and humanity. Diversity among people is for unity and gratitude, and recognition; it should not be for division, superiority, inferiority, and hierarchy. Blake, in the above given lines in a beautiful manner teaches humanity. The black people and the white people have one thing in common, and it is their soul, which comes from God, unlike their earthly bodies, which come from dust and will become dust after death. Good deeds make people like angels. Humanity finds expression in many of the poems of Blake, which is an indication that he upholds it, giving it supreme importance. In the Muslim faith, humanity is at the centre. To serve humanity is to please God, and harm humanity is to displease God. The best among the people is one from whose tongue and hands the others are safe.

Humanity is the path which leads to God and shortens the path of the seeker. Those who just restrict their noble deeds to their individual selves, staying indifferent to humanity, cannot find a place in the court of God. God does not like such people and does not pave the way for them. Hence, humanity is a stair which leads to the higher ranks of the seekers. The Oneness of Being is embraced at a higher rung of the ladder. Blake expresses the idea of the Oneness of Being in his poetry, which indicates that he is not a follower of any prescribed and institutionalised religion. The all-pervading divine presence is immanent in nature and in humanity. This concept is rooted in his philosophy of mysticism. In his poem *The Divine Image*, he rejects religious dogma; rather, he emphasises that there is a light in every human being, which is in fact the divine part of humanity on earth. The virtues and attributes of God are limitless according to Ibn-e-Arabi, and human beings are taught by God to adopt His attributes. Likewise, Blake asserts that regardless of the boundaries of people of the world, in every heart that is filled with divine virtues such as Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love, there is a heart where God lives. It reveals a profound unity between the divine and human. “Awake! awake O sleeper of the land of shadows, wake! expand!” (Blake, 1962; p. 45, line, 1).

The journey of the seeker towards their goal begins with the awakening of the self. This leads to purification of the self, which is a step closer to the presence of God. The speaker of Blake’s poem *Awake...* is God. It is the call of God to man to awake and expand; the heart, which is contracted, needs to be expanded. This world is a world of small things and unreal. It is a land of shadows, which is not a permanent stay of humanity. Arabi (2004) illustrates that the heart of the gnostic has unlimited vastness, it is so great that it reflects the attributes and names of God. Moreover, it

fluctuates between the states of contraction and expansion as per the self-disclosure of God. It colours with the colours of the self-disclosure of God incessantly. For a steadfast and true seeker when they realize the Real, there is absolutely no falseness in existence, falseness is an illusion to nothingness because all existence is true. Blake says. "I am in you and you in me, mutual in love divine:" (Blake, 1962; p. 45, line-2).

Here, Blake gives a sweeping statement that all human beings should contain divine love mutually; moreover, doing so will enable them to live in the presence of God. The elements of the Unity of Being, that all the creation of God reflects His names and attributes and works as a mirror to His manifestations. The speaker of the above line is God expressing His love for His creation with the idea of nearness. Man is the creation of God, and just like the universe is an external reality which manifests the names of Him. However, only the perfect man can hold and reflect the names of Him because he can sustain the Unity of Being. The perfect man is dual dual-sided mirror, says Arabi (), able to reflect both cosmic and divine realities, and a path to knowledge (gnosis) has internal self-discovery to realise and actualise the divine qualities. Blake further moves on the lines of the Oneness of Being and says:

I am not a God afar off, I am a brother and friend;  
 Within your bosoms I reside, and you reside in me:  
 Lo! we are One; forgiving all Evil; Not seeking recompense!  
 Ye are my members O ye sleepers of Beulah, land of shades!  
 (Blake, 1991, p. 45; lines 13-16)

God says that He is nearer to His people than their jugular vein. One who loves Him and sets out on the journey to live in His presence, God paves their way. For Arabi (2004), God is not separate from the universe but is the essential unity of all His creation. He is immanent and present within creation; His attributes manifest in His creation. The universe is not something

out of nothing, but a continuous revealing of God; it is through the existing forms of creation. The universe is a macrocosm, and the Perfect Man is the microcosm; he is the most perfect and complete manifestation of the names and attributes of God. Blake conforms it in the above lines; In essence, the concept signifies that the divine reality is not only transcendent but also immanent within humanity, making the internal exploration of oneself a way to experience the divine.

#### CONCLUSION

William Blake is a multidimensional poet struggling against set social constructions and institutional religion. He intends to create an ideal world where humanity strives to curb all the differences that society has ever invented to keep man from man and from God. The speaker of his poems is the seeker and revolutionary individual who is on the journey of gnosis and perfection. This gradual nearness to God is the ultimate end of one's life on earth; hence, Blake's poetic persona as a seeker covering all the stages of gnosis, such as awakening of the self, purification of the self, and illumination of the self, achieves the Oneness of Being. The mysticism of Arabi is a suitable conceptual framework to understand the mystical ideas of William Blake, which are unique and otherwise difficult to comprehend. This Muslim perspective gives a new shape to his visionary and mystical poetry.

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