

Mysticism in the Poetry of A. D. Hope



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ABSTRACT

Mysticism is the belief that there is a hidden meaning in life and nature. It is the belief that advocates the merger of ordinary, the human being, into the extraordinary, i.e. the everlasting entity. It also refers to the spiritual gaining and understanding of the ultimate knowledge inaccessible to the intellect, through introspection, rumination and self-surrender. According to Caroline Spurgeon.

INTRODUCTION

Mysticism is, in truth, a temper rather than a doctrine, an atmosphere rather than a system of philosophy. Various mystical thinkers have contributed fresh aspects of Truth as they saw her, for they have caught glimpses of her face at different angles, transfigured by diverse emotions, so that their testimony, and in some respects their views, are dissimilar to the point of contradiction. Wordsworth, for instance, gained his revelation of divinity through Nature, and through Nature alone; whereas to Blake "Nature was a hindrance," and Imagination the only reality. But all alike agree in one respect, in one passionate assertion, and this is that unity that underlies diversity.[1]

Mysticism is basically an attitude to "see one changeless Life in all the Lives, and in the Separate, one inseparable." [2]

Alec Derwent Hope (1907-2000), once referred to by an American journal as "the twentieth century's greatest eighteenth century poet" [3], is one of the most influential and pre-eminent Australian poets as well as essayists of 20th century. He is also well known for his satirical bent. His poems are metaphysical, sensual, serious, frivolous, mocking and mystical in nature. He is highly influenced by Alexander Pope and many critics consider him a classic poet whose works are marked with mythology, legends and fables. Kevin Hart states that "when A.D. Hope died in 2000 at the age 93, Australia lost its living poet." [4]

A.D. Hope is out and out a mystic. Many people might differ from this fact after reading his critical poem "Australia", in which he criticises the contemporary Australian society and culture like anything:

A Nation of trees, drab green and desolate grey
In the field uniform of modern wars,
Darkens her hills, those endless, outstretched paws
Of Sphinx demolished or stone lion worn away.
They call her a young country, but they lie
She is the last lands, the emptiest,
A woman beyond her change of life, a breast
Still tender but within the womb is dry.[5]

It is not that he only criticises his homeland, sometimes he praises it also, but most of the time he censures it. He comments on the decadence he observed so far. In his poem "Standardization" too he satirizes the moral degradation, materialism, pollution, artificiality etc. After reading these lines some people might declare him a pessimist but in reality he is an optimist and a visionary like all the mystics are, as his intention is not to hurt people. He just holds the mirror only to show the society its true picture, to make them realize their mistakes so that they could correct them. The poet argues that by moving away from Nature the people are losing their true identity.

Symbolism possesses a place of great eminence in the sphere of mysticism. Symbolism, along with mythology, is the language of mystics. Symbolism is based on the belief that each and everything on this Mother Earth has something in common, something in which they are alike. For instance:

Human love is symbolic of divine love, because although working on another plane, it is governed by similar laws and gives rise to similar results; or falling leaves are a symbol of human mortality, because they are examples of the same law which operates through all manifestation of life.[6]

Mystics use symbolism for the purpose of defamiliarization. It helps them to exhibit a common and direct truth in an indirect way, thereby, helping their followers apprehend the message easily which would have been difficult otherwise.

"The Death of the Bird" by A.D. Hope stands as one of the perfect examples when mysticism and symbolism are under consideration. In this exemplar poem, Hope draws our attention, with the help of the metaphors of a bird, its migration and eventual death, towards the journey of human being from life to death. These metaphors symbolize and reinforce the ultimate truth that "All human things are subject to decay, When fate summons monarch must obey." [7] The poet goes on to describe the strange eventful story of the bird, which symbolizes man, and how it is being summoned by death and how season after season it is coming towards its final abode:

For every bird there is this last migration:
Once more the cooling year kindles her heart;

With a warm passage to the summer station
Love pricks the course in lights across the chart
Year after year a speck on the map, divided
By a whole hemisphere, summons her to come;
Season after season, sure and safely guided,
Going away she is also coming home.[8]

The phrase 'last migration' in the poem is symbolical of the migration from the earthly world to the ethereal world. The metaphor of 'cooling year,' here, stands for winter of life, i.e., old age after which follows the inevitable last migration which leads man to his final destination. The poet believes that the life on this earth is temporary. Through all these images and metaphors the poet is trying to impress upon the reader that death is certain, but it only kills the physical thing which decays with time. The spirit is untouched by death and decay and keeps migrating from one world to another. In the last stanza the poet describes how we literally become one with nature:

And darkness rises from the eastern valleys,
And the winds buffet her with their hungry breath,
And the great earth, with neither grief nor malice,
Receives the tiny burden of her death.[8]

The last two lines of the poem is highly mystical and symbolical, in the sense that the 'great earth' has been personified here and also presented as a mystic who is unaffected by 'grief' or 'malice'. Even when it receives the dead body of its children it feels no sorrow, here, the underlying implication is that being a mystic she very well understands this ultimate reality that like the life on earth is transient death too is temporary; living beings die only to be reborn, this is the circle of life. According to Vedantic philosophy, our body is made up of five elements, namely, fire, air, water, earth and sky and gets mixed into the same after death. So, through the image of a dead body returning to the place from where it belongs, i.e. the earth, the poet, perhaps, is symbolizing the meeting of the simple soul with the Paramatman or God of which it is an inseparable part.

Hope's simple appearing poems are always resonant with deeper philosophies of life. Like Pope, who has been his inspiration, his satires too are very bitter, and is praised by many critics. Despite being labelled as old-fashioned and conservative by many critics, his works are widely appreciated and researched throughout the world.

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