

# Mysticism in Poetry as Signs of Higher Cosmic Consciousness - A Systematic Review

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**Abstract:** *Mysticism has been an enigma alluring the people from inception. Humans have been wanting to quench their spiritual thirst to be able to reach the inner most recesses of the unknown within them, to be able to get a glimpse of what it is to be really awakened from within. With an everlasting quest of what an enlightenment of the consciousness is. The purpose of this systematic review is to be able to study methodically, by the means of Meta analysis, the governing factors of what mysticism really is and how it finds manifestations in poetry across varied areas. It also intends to study how the poetic utterances can be classified in the realm of mysticism and essentially bring about a greater understanding of how the mystic world is heralded and put forth in words of beauty by these poets. This study not only tries to understand the various works and depiction of a mystic revelation by the seer poets, it tries to bind the works in the paradigms of science as well which could dispel disbelief surrounding mysticism.*

**Keywords:** Consciousness, Mysticism, Mysticism in Poetry , Spirituality

## 1. Introduction

While reading the various works it is clear that human beings have forever been on a quest to explore the inner most recesses of their being to be able to generate an awareness of the cosmos and their position of existence with respect to that. The mystic poets have been forever finding various ways to describe this experience. While elucidating how they feel being in this elevated spiritual conjuncture, the humankind is made aware of this realm of heightened consciousness and they share their experiences in a multitude of ways, with none however close to any finitude in this regard. The ways of expression might be unique or familiar but delve in the description of the union of the soul with the “absolute wholeness” or a transcendence of consciousness which is evident in their poetry and they juxtapose various material realms and try to fit this complex understanding of mysticism in ways that might be comprehended by all. The ultimate goal is being to be able to share the joy, to make everyone dip in the ocean of ecstasy that they have bathed in, or are forever seeking to. They ensure that their utterances are inspiring and give an understanding of the experiences which have been elevating.

To be able to understand their journey, we need to decipher what mysticism really means and what the evident characteristics of a mystic really are in the true sense. Despite being studied, explored in various branches of knowledge, a big problem that a literary critic might face would be the lack of mysticism being a subject of proper definition. A lot still needs to be studied to ascribe a certain setoff attributes and formulation for mysticism to be used as a critical approach to any genre of literature. One of the biggest hurdles in this path is that many face the dilemma of disbelief in any kind of spiritual order and incessantly attack mysticism and constantly try to bracket mysticism into various paradigms of black magic, occult, depravity et al. To be able to understand mysticism in literature or poetry specifically, we need to objectively consider what mysticism really is. We need to study mysticism from the perspective of how various literatures or cultures would depict or understand mysticism.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1 Systematic review

To the best of my knowledge a systematic review of keywords: mysticism, cosmic consciousness, mysticism in poetry and spirituality were studied. 2205 publications were included from two databases. Themes were broadly characterized into mysticism and cosmic consciousness, mysticism and spirituality, mysticism and cosmic consciousness as a science, comparative studies of poetry depicting mysticism. 58 publications were included after removal of duplicates and inclusion criteria being related to topic and bearing allegiance to keywords. 40 publications were finally included after applying inclusion and exclusion criteria, wherein abstracts were studied and 15 publications were excluded due to deviations from context and 3 due to non availability of full text as shown in Figure I.

### Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Peer reviewed , systematic or literature reviews and publications relevant to research question inclusive of the keywords mysticism, poetry, cosmic consciousness, spirituality were included such that; They bore allegiance to keywords and were related to context; They pertained to British, American or Indian literature; They contained study of mystic elements in poetry. Exclusions were Non English literature articles and articles with contextual deviations, which varied from the original topic and context. Criteria followed to codify the records during the process of the Meta analysis was broadly classified as shown in Table 1. The data was then further coded as per the aforementioned classifications and this is represented in Table II. The articles were methodically classified into various variables and broadly categorized into understandably cognizable themes so that the idea of mysticism in poetry could be understood in various paradigms and with the objective of bringing out a gap in the study where work needs to be done to further get newer perspectives and a better understanding of the poetic utterances in the context of mysticism.

Table 1: Classification of records

Geographical bearing	A American Literature B Indian Literature C British Literature D Other
Contextual bearing	A Mysticism B Cosmic Consciousness C Spirituality D Others
Era of the work Under study	A Before 14 <sup>th</sup> century B 14 <sup>th</sup> -16 <sup>th</sup> century C 16 <sup>th</sup> -18 <sup>th</sup> century D 18 <sup>th</sup> -19 <sup>th</sup> century E 19 <sup>th</sup> -20 <sup>th</sup> century F 21 <sup>st</sup> century
Interdisciplinary Studies	A Health Sciences B Sociology C Philosophy D Theology E Not applicable
Themes classified into	A Scientific and Psychological Perspective B Christian mysticism C Indian Mysticism D Sufi Mysticism E Nature mysticism and social mysticism F Love and Beauty in mysticism G Treatment of Life and Death in Mysticism

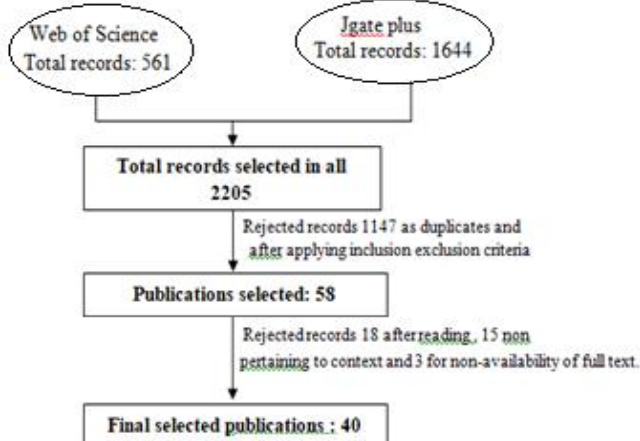


Figure I: Flow chart of the Meta analysis

Table II: Coding of records

Serial No.	Geographical bearings	Contextual bearing	Era of the work under study	Interdisciplinary studies	Themes classified into
1	B,C	A	D	E	B,E,F
2	B	A,B	E	E	B,C,E
3	B	A,B,C	B	D	C,D
4	A	A,C	D	E	B,G
5	C	A	C	E	B
6	B	A	C	E	B
7	B	A,B,C	D	E	C,E
8	A	A,B,D	E	E	G
9	C	A,B	E	E	E
10	C	A,B,D	E	E	B,E,F
11	A	A,B	D,E	E	G
12	A,B	A,C,D	D,E	E	B,C,E
13	D	A,B,C	F	D	B
14	B,C	A,B	A,C	E	B,E,F
15	B	A,B	E	E	C,E,F
16	B	A,B	E	E	C,E,F
17	B	A,B	E	E	C,E,F
18	B,D	A,B,C	A,C	E	D,B
19	B	B,C	B	D	C
20	B	A,C,B	D	E	C,E
21	A,B	A,B	F	E	B,D,E
22	B	A,B,C	F	E	C,E
23	C,B	A,B	D,E,F	E	B,C,E
24	B,D	A,B	A,E	E	D
25	C	A,C	C	E	B
26	B,C	A,B	D,E	E	B,C,D
27	A,D	A,B,D	F	A,C,D	A
28	B	A,B	F	C	A,B
29	A	A,B,C	D	E	B,E
30	B	A,B,C	B	B,D	C,D
31	C	A,B,C	D	E	B,E
32	D	A,C,D	F	A,C,D	A
33	A	A,C,D	F	A,D	A
34	A	A,C,D	F	A,D	A
35	A	A,C,D	F	A,D	A
36	C	A,B	D	E	B,E
37	B,C	A,B,C	D	E	B,C,E
38	B	A,B	F	E	C,E
39	B	A,B	F	E	C,E
40	C,B	A,B,C	B,D	E	C,B,E

### 3. Strengths and Limitations

This journal uses double-blind review process, which means this is a systematic review of works studying various manifestations of mysticism in the genre of poetry only. A comprehensive research strategy was methodologically devised. Only works pertaining to studies in, or, comparative studies with British, American and Indian literature were included. There is always a scope of heterogeneity of perception and researchers might bring out different perceivable data from the same data.

### 4. Findings

After reading the various publications finally under study some broad classifications were made in order to get a better perspective on both mysticism and the way it has been brought forth in various poetical works. The classifications were based on the following themes which would facilitate understanding even further. It was observed how mysticism could be understood from scientific and psychological aspects, how it finds expression as a result of Christian mysticism, Indian mysticism, Sufi mysticism, as an expression of nature mysticism and sociological mysticism, how various aspects of love and beauty were integral to mystic understanding and very essentially the treatment of life and death as a distinct form of mysticism.

In the mainstream of Christian mysticism there is hardly a single case which is devoid of a relationship of God and the soul. This holds true regardless of the variety of interpretation or any amount of classifications of mystics being emotional or intellectually bent in their vivid descriptions. Godly love and the other characteristics that might attempt to define a Christian mystic might be broadly put in the paradigm of professing benevolence and charity, the expression of fortitude while undergoing hardships in life, facing cares, worries or sorrows and realization that union with god is a mortification of passions or penance. It is however observed by various other mystics as an excess with regard to self renunciation or purification. A study which is intensive in nature shows the permeation of mysticism in English poetry which is largely drawn towards the Christian principles for its stratification. Blake , Whitman, Donne, Crashaw and Vaughan’s works have been essentially studied for the depiction of the quintessential Christian mysticism. [5],[6],[8],[24],[30] Blake , a born visionary , whose visions were steeped in the Christian thought of belief , occupies a central position while any mention of mysticism arises. [32],[38] Swati believes “ To demystify his mystic experiences, he painted the ineffable experience using enigmatic symbols powerful enough to make his poems at once mystical and perhaps therefore freighted with loads of meaning”. [38]He was a poet who while displaying innovativeness which is prodigious in nature affirms love time and again as the essence of all religions while assigning quintessence to it being an essential attribute of both man and the maker.

Dr Saxena believes that Ralph Wado Emerson, Anne Hutchison, whose mysticism evolved from the puritan emphasis on the holy spirit as the means of grace conformed to the Christian belief of mysticism. Dr Saxena says,

“Whitman’s mysticism with his strong materialism, his assertion of self, his restless vagabondage and his celebrated sexuality, the mystical theme asserts itself in the Leaves by its sheer power and vitality.” [30]

Even though Whitman accepts the concrete physicality of the materialistic paradigm, he doesn’t necessarily ascribe to the selflessness of the Christian mystic and neither does his temperament seem suitable to the passivity of the oriental. The other famous mystic Anne Hutchinson, whose mysticism evolved from the puritan aspect of graces and was an indelible part of Christian mysticism and we can see that Emerson who professed his mystic ideas in the unity of humans with all nature. This mysticism was a unique evolution where he believed that humans could, through their communication with the world were in a state of transcending it and be a recognizable part of it at the same time.

Indian mysticism finds its roots deep in the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Bhakti movement, the social reforms arising from the prevailing social set up and essentially arises from the intermingling and amalgamation of the physical, the material and the cosmos all superimposing to define the characteristics of mysticism finding echo in the poetry of Rabindranath Tagore, Aurobindo Ghosh, Sarojini Naidu, Jayanta Mahapatra, Kuvempu. [2],[7],[12],[15], [17],[20],[23],[38],[39],[40] Jaisymol Augustine quotes the distinguished novelist Haldor while describing the mysticism of Tagore, “the distinguished novelist, Haldor Laxness, recalls the impact of Gitanjali upon him...the form and flavor of Gitanjali had the effect of a wonderful flower we had not seen or heard of before. What an enviable God, this God of Tagore: the great friend, the beloved, the unknown man playing his lute in a boat on the river.” [15] Divya Walia believes that Rabindranath’s Poetry draws from life and elevates it to the heightened consciousness. She quotes, “Thus we have literature dealing with various values drawn from the diverse spheres of life and society viz environment, social justice, mysticism and the like.” [17] Sarojini Naidu’s poetry was an effervescence of the Hindu mysticism and Nature mysticism possessing bird like quality and was appreciated for its sophisticated style. “She admired the beauty around her whether it was related to the world of nature or varied colours of Indian cultural heritage.” [20] Indian Mysticism is also richly nurtured by the view that mysticism as a phenomena is a product of ‘Bhakti’ which literally translates to loving devotion and more specifically Nirguna Bhakti which does find resonance in the mystic expressions of various poets whose work can be classified under this theme. As a result of research based on ethnographic field work, Nirguna Bhakti can be described as following, “Although Bhakti implies relationship between the devotee and the deity, the Nirguna kind transcends the parameters of relational experience dissolving concepts of ‘self’ and ‘other’ and in effect, accentuating an experience of union with the impersonal divine.” [19] Jayanta Mahapatra is a contemporary Indian poet whose mysticism is aptly described by Suparna Ganguly as an effort to describe the urge for man to finally unify with divinity, she says, “Mahapatra’s poetry is a tireless endeavour to trace his ultimate philosophical-metaphysical roots through a final awareness of man’s divinity.”

When we talk about the works depicting mysticism in the Sufi tradition, we see one thing that apparently and fervently emerges, and that is the Love of God which is the common thread that binds both Christian and the Sufi mysticism together. The similarity in essence and the ways of expressions of Christian mysticism and Sufi mysticism makes these two states appear nearly indistinguishable. The Sufi mystic sees from his spiritual eye when the earthly physical eyes are closed and he beholds nothing but the love of the beloved and there stands nothing between the Sufi mystic and his ultimate transcendental goal. [3],[21],[25],[31]

One of the greatest Persian poet of the Sufi tradition, Rumi, ascribes to the nothingness to everything while comparing with the Love of God. It is the vanquishing of the soul of the lover into the nothingness of the soul or the beloved before the immediate presence of God is what both Christian and Sufi mysticism share. [18],[25]. Kabir, a fifteenth century mystic and a weaver by profession is considered a saint of both the Sufi and the Hindu tradition and his mysticism helps understand and define both the perspectives with respect to mysticism, however the ultimate universal truth emanating from both remaining the same essentially. His poems bring out a wide range of mystical expressions, emotively brought into play while being drawn from the Hindu and Islamic beliefs. [30],[31] It is quite evident that Kabir was a revolutionary mystic, who, while unifying with the divine dealt with the improvement in the worldly conditions of the society as well. “Kabir is a mystical poet whose primary concern is search for the Supreme God but since he lives among people in a society, therefore he closely watches the working of the social structure he lives in and feels deeply hurt at the suffering of the common people.” [3] Another Sufi mystic Bulle Shah also abhorred regulations and dry dogmas of all religions and digressed the set traditions of religion and professed love as the binding factor in the union with the higher consciousness.

Nature is a major aspect governing the mystic expression of the all pervasive cosmic consciousness and finds mention in various works of poets. Whether it is the pantheism of Wordsworth, the description of the nature around the Western Ghats by Kuvempu, the enrapturing description of the azure skies by Sarojini Naidu, or the nature mysticism of Mary Webb, one finds depiction of mystical charm in the varied expressions of the poets who find transcendental unity with the supreme through the mystical allure of nature. [1],[9],[20],[39] William Wordsworth’s reverie for nature is evident in his works and he finds an essential connection to the realm of mysticism through his poetic expressions. “William Wordsworth can be called a Nature mystic. For him communication between souls of man is possible because both are emanations from the same divine source. Nature has the ability to alleviate the damaged mind of man.” [1] Contemporary poetess Mary Webb can be categorized essentially as a nature mystic, who through her poems, which are quintessentially meditative and evocative, proclaims to realise the ‘oneness’ of all beings. “It seems like Webb wants to assert that only the ones who are ready to shed their ‘Ecological Consciousness’ and are ready to imbibe an ‘Eco self’ can discern the theory of ‘Oneness’ that underlies all beings.” [20]

The event of Death offers a peculiar charm and an enigmatic appeal to the mystic poet and this is recurrently employed in poetry. It is viewed often as an escape, a rescuer, the provider of solace and also a destroyer. Both Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman find themselves gravitating towards the expression of their mystic experiences through the theme of Death. [4],[8],[12] While death according to Whitman, offers to deliver the soul of man into the immortal realm of beauty." Whitman's concept of death is that it is a part of cyclical, cosmic dance of life. Whitman sees this rhythm-the cosmic dance of life- everywhere-even in a dung heap." [4] Emily Dickinson has mystically experienced death and this finds mystic expression in her poetry as the comforter and rescuer from the agonizing pain of this world. [8]

Beauty and love in its all encompassing enigma brings out the mystic experience of poets. Beauty is the alluring exquisiteness which becomes the mechanism for explication for a poet like Keats. "John Keats found truth in beauty which transcends individuality, time and space." [1] It is beauty which illuminates the consciousness." Beauty is pure and sacred; therefore, this is helpful to provide the knowledge of truth. Being pure and sacred, it gives light, divine light." [14] And also love was the path that the mystic poets treaded and it provided the essential bridge to alleviate the gap between humans and the divine." Shelly and Browning may be called the love mystics as they see love as a link between God and man." [1]

Humans have this instinctive urge to constantly try to put all phenomena in well defined and demarcated paradigms of a concrete structural science and this is the urge based on which humans have tried to search for scientific explanation for the undeniably expressed and experienced phenomena of mysticism. While studying researches in health sciences and the experimental researches in psychology one can assertively discern the kinds of experiences that the mystic might go through while having a mystic experience which is later expressed in various ways. [34],[35],[36] George Drazenovich and Celia Kourie conducted a research to illuminate the nature of mysticism by describing it is a simultaneously spiritual and a spiritual process which ultimately achieves integration and wholeness. They describe mysticism as Kataphatic and Apophatic and study them both from the neurological perspective while ascertaining that both forms of mysticism result in definite neurological and physiological changes.

"When deliberate suspension of cognitive activity occurs in apophatic styled mystical meditation, definite neurological reactions can be observed...However in the case of kataphatic mysticism, the impulses are facilitatory and stimulating, not inhibiting or deafferenting, as in apophatic mysticism.. The result is nonetheless the same: the self other dichotomy is obliterate during this period of time. However, the feeling is different .It is ecstatic. The person feels absorbed into the object or is one with the object." [35] The poets who ascribe to mysticism in their works have experienced some form of exultation in their senses both physical and spiritual and a movement towards transcendence and a higher level of consciousness. This

original research sums up the mystical experience to be able to oblivate the inherent dichotomy of the self and the other 'wholeness' or the complete submergence into the sublimity which is being explained in various ways. It also attempts to differentiate mystical experiences from mental illness.[35]

### Gap finding in studies

It is evident from the meta analysis that even though there has been a lot of work done to widen the horizon about our understanding of mysticism in poetic expressions, yet there need to be more studies done in the contemporary work in poetry to be able to understand by the means of comparative analysis the change in perspectives and if there are any universals that can be deduced which might facilitate the understanding of mystic expressions even further.

## 5. Conclusion

To conclude, it would not be wrong to say that despite trying to classify the characteristics of mystic expressions in poetry in a number of ways and trying to structuralize mysticism in the paradigms of concrete science, one finds that there is a universal truth emanating from all and an interwoven thread binds the idea of cosmic consciousness. There is a definite similarity in the varied expressions of mysticism, despite myriad and vastly disparate cultural or time difference in the works under study.

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