



## Mysticism in *John Donne* and *Lalon Shah*: Similarities and Differences

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### Abstract

Mysticism is a faith that directs knowledge of God, spiritual truth, or ultimate reality can be achieved through subjective intuition. Donne was a man of the 17th—century England that saw many religious reformation. Lalon was born in the 19th—century Indian Subcontinent who understood the terms of organized religion in his own principles. He is the pioneer of the movement of democratizing the society removing social disparity. His mysticism is based on human body and mind. Similarly, Donne shows his inner attitudes to human body and mind, which he takes to be God's book revealing His intention to mankind. This study examines that both Donne and Lalon have keen observations from the core philosophy to find out the ultimate truth of human soul dictate the way of spiritual salvation. It also aims to look at the influence of mysticism upon John Donne and Lalon Shah through the critical analysis of their poetry. It would like to examine Donne's treatment of mysticism as well as Lalon's treatment of mysticism respectively by fostering similarities and differences between them.

**Keywords:** mysticism, metaphysical elements, sins, mercy, sonnets, poems, etc.

### Introduction

Mysticism is the spirituality of direct experience of God or the Absolute. According to the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, "Mysticism is the spiritual quest for union with the divine." (58) Again *Encyclopedia of Americana* defines, "Mysticism is the experience of achieving direct apprehension of a Unity, an Oneness or a One that is without internal multiplicity." (672) *Illustrated Oxford Dictionary* also defines it as obtaining unity with the Deity or the spiritual apprehension of the truth beyond the understanding. (541) To put simply, it is the mystic union with God beyond intellectual understanding. It is not dependent on faith rather it is an experience of pure love and

mental satisfaction as is seen by coming in very close contact with the beloved where emotion is void.

John Donne's realization of life and death, his endless struggle to cleanse his sins, his earnest efforts to secure salvation, his hope for God's mercy and his ultimate aim to reach God, all are the expressions of his personal attraction and expectation. But, in meditative, spiritual, and artistic evaluation, they are so lofty and their appeal is so all absorbing that they have earned universality. The appeal of his spirituality is irresistible and this is why his popularity is on the increase with the passage of time. In the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup>-centuries, Donne is one of the most readable poets around the globe. His mysticism has secrecy behind his immense popularity. (Alam 110)

Moreover, the fundamental basis of Donne's mysticism is his deep faith in the Day of Last Judgment. The thought of the trial with God after death keeps him always anxious. The theme of fear of death, the sins of his youth, the way of redemption and unfathomable mercy of God dominate his religious poems, his holy sonnets, and sermons. Salvation of the soul lies in sincere devotion to God, consciousness of the previous sins, the need of penitence and unconditional surrender to God. The transient nature of worldly and physical joys and the perpetual torment of human soul are the great concern for Donne. The insignificance of man and the pettiness of the sinners shock the mystics who can foresee the miserable plight of derailed humanity in the world after here. Christ is the only savior and only God can save the sinners from the clutches of Satan. Redemption does not require the negation of worldliness, but the cleansing and restoring of it to the original state as was created by God. Self-knowledge is a precondition of knowing God that leads to the way of salvation. Complete surrender to the will of God may secure His mercy. The way to God is an endless struggle with genuine contrition. God's presence is everywhere, because He manifests Himself through every object of nature. Along with the soul, the body is equally important because Christ, the Savior, assumed human body to redeem mankind. Faith, not reasoning, is the way to the certainty that God's mercy can be achieved. (12)

In Lalou's mysticism, the Supreme or Absolute lives nowhere but in the living human body. So, to be united with Supreme, one must search Him in the body. The body is the microcosmic form of the macrocosm where everything of the universe is contained. Institutionalized religion and formal prayer are useless as these are but indirect means of reaching an assumed God in which the Bauls do not believe. To find God, pure devotion is essential; and it is the Guru who teaches the devotee the yogic practices for spiritual perfection, it raises him to the status of catching the "Modest Man" The Supreme lives in everyone, but He is perfectly manifested in the in Guru/God who plays the intermediary role between man and God. When a devotee calls God with perfect devotion, God surely reveals Himself before the devotee. The rituals in Lalou's mysticism are based upon sexual intercourse between a male and a female with seminal retention during a woman's menstrual period. Through such rituals, the dual

principles are reunited as it was before the creation of the universe. For perfection in touching God, the devotee must serve the bondage of the family and the society because these are hindrances on the way to the purpose. Physical union of man and woman leads to spiritual love since love for man acts as the staircase to reach God. (11)

Lalon initiated a healthy wave of wonderful, unusual social movement through his austere practices and realization. His huge songs are the embodiment of his social thoughts and experience sometimes directly, sometimes figuratively. To Lalon, knowledge and truth, the most important treasure of human life, are not divine things rather the human religious man is the source of them. This is why he rejected all spiritual truth. Lalon longs for knowledge, which passes down secretly from heart to heart of the religious men and justified by them. Actually, Baul religion is the religion of mysticism.

However, both Donne's and Lalon's spirituality are conditioned by their times in which they were living. Donne was not a revolutionary idealist in the sense Lalon was. However, both of them had Renaissance revolutionary idealism in their attitudes. Donne was greatly influenced by the Renaissance idealism consciously while Lalon possessed its spirits without having any idea of the movement.

### **Donne's Treatment of Mysticism**

John Donne revealed his multifarious personality in his poetic career. One of the important characteristics of his poetic career was his distinct thought and imagination of a true Christianity. He tried his level best to formulate an apparent view and theorize about Christianity, which he did believe to be the only way of salvation. The nature of his relationship with Christianity was very complex and his fixation with it was a recurrent and powerful theme of his poems. His familiarity and reputation as a love poet, his poetic contribution found intense expression showing his profound eagerness in Christianity and mysticism.

Donne was a confirmed Christian who does live between Italy and Switzerland. He had a faith that God created human being out of love. But it is man who has been ruined by his own deeds and misdeeds. According to Donne, man has been restored by sacrifice. The fate of mankind was to share in the life of the Trinity in grace. To his doctrine, death was inevitable occurrence through which man entered the immortal zone. In his later years, death haunted him during his chronic illness and he formed a contradictory impression about death. The idea of death made him aware of God. Of his faith on death he wrote in "The Holy Sonnet 6":

Death be not proud, though some have called thee  
Mighty and dreadful, for, thou art not so,  
For, those, whom thou think'st, thou dost overthrow,

Die not, poor death, not yet canst thou kill me; (II.1-4)

Donne's firm faith is that after death, he would remain in the careful attention of Christ. He would be in his grave in peace till the time of resurrection. Then he would ascend to the heavenly kingdom, which Christ had purchased for him in exchange of His corruptible blood. Towards the end of his life, Donne wrote poetry that challenged death, and the fear that it inspired in many men on the ground of his faith that those who die are sent to heaven to live eternally. (Greenblast 600-602)

As a religious man, Donne finds the contemporary world void and materialistic. He contemplates that the degradation of the world would certainly cause misery for human being. His religious poetry are dealt with the grave things like the transience of the world, the fleeting nature of physical joys and earthly pleasure, the sufferings of the human soul imprisoned in the body and the pettiness and insignificance of man. He finds the shadows of death all pervasive. The fear of death makes him turn to God and Christ as the Savior. He takes God to the supreme position to save from the clutches of Devil. Donne's consciousness of sin in his religious poetry grows to immeasurable proportions and that he finds humankind immersed in sin and more impure than nature, indeed he is ashamed in the presence of every tree and animal because human beings resist the order of God while nature observes it consciously.

Donne's effort to find out the ultimate truth becomes evident in the whole bulk of his writings. He has been a seeker of truth from his youth to the last day of his life. His whole life is a continuous journey to run after the ultimate truth that finds expression in different mood and language in love poems and religious poems. His praising inconstancy in women and the world resulting from a variety of delights included an argument that went against his thoughts: "It is the nature of nice and fastidious minds to know things only to be weary of them." In "Satire 3" he said of truth, "Be wise to seek her." (I.74) His weariness in the search finds artistic expression in 'The Second Anniversary':

Be not concerned, study not why, nor when;  
Doe not so much as not believe a man.  
For thou to err, the worth, to try truth's forth,  
Is far more business, than this world is worth. (II. 51-54)

In his divine poems, we find a different Donne. These poems represent a vivid and moving record of a brilliant mind struggling of the nearness of God. The goal of the struggle is ultimate truth, but there are so many hurdles in his way to life. The hindrances are vacillations, the doubts, and imperfect idealism that are reflected in completeness in these poems. Donne's aim is not didactic rather he wishes to lay bare his own moods, his aspirations, his sins, his humiliations in quest of God. He is the most sincere and introspective Anglican poet of the 17<sup>th</sup>-century England. He has

experienced the intensification of religious feelings mentioned in the *Holy Sonnets*. Donne's earnest effort for searching his heart finds expression through the masterly use of metaphysical elements in his poems. He dives deep into his heart to measure his sincerity and devotion to God and above all, his consciousness of sin and the need of penitence. Through his practical experience, Donne saw many of his friends dying and their pangs of death horrified him most. So his fear of death makes him repent for his past follies. He prays earnestly to God for mercy and compassion.

Donne's thirst for love is insatiable. That is why he believes that as he had been loved by beautiful women in his youth, Christ will also extend His love towards Donne in his old age and pave the way of his salvation. He was optimistic that, though a sinner, his sincere contrition would make him dear to Christ who will certainly forgive him. His sincere desire for Christ's mercy explicit when he says in 'Sonnet 9':

No, no, but as in my idolatry,  
I said to all my profane mistresses,  
Beauty, of pity, foulness only is  
A sign of rigor: so I say to thee, (II. 9-12)

Donne's evidence of his spiritual state is revealed to the angels and men in his 'Holy Sonnet 8'. He prays that his soul might turn to God, because it is God who knows best his true remorse. God knows best state of human heart since He puts his soul in his breast. 'Holy Sonnet 9' anticipates the last judgment. Donne calls upon his soul to look at the picture of Christ in his heart. The picture exhibits Christ crucified, the terrible sight, showing tears in his eyes put out the astounding light, blood filling his frowns that fell from pierced head. Donne says that Christ, who prayed to forgive the fierce hate of his foes cannot condemn him to hell.

Another divine poem, 'A Hymn to God the Father' is a vivid realization that the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ. Donne asks if God will forgive him for his original sin and if he will be forgiven for his personal sin to present with his repentance. He also asks if he will be pardoned for those sins in which he included others and for the sins he has avoided one or two years past but walled in score. He wants to know if he will be redeemed of the sin of fear and whether Christ, the redeemer, will shine on him in death. Then the poet fears no more the consequences of his sin. Thus he fulfills the scriptural text by asking for the gift of life through Christ.

The *Holy Sonnets* are meditations upon the revelation of God in Christ. They are deeply personal, impersonal, and arouse holy fear in the context of holy love. They are meditations of a vital, earthly, witty, and spiritual man who is convinced that his struggles are not unique, but reflect something of the struggle of other persons. He anticipates the final judgment and his just condemnation as well as the knowledge that he can repent and be cleansed of his sin in the blood of Christ.

In 'The Progress of the Soul' we find Catholicism as well as the doubts and longings of a troubled subtle soul. The functioning of the troubled mind of the poet is hinted at the following lines of the 'Holy Sonnet 14':

O might these sighs and tears return again  
Into my breast and eyes, which I have spent.  
That I might in this holy discontent  
Mourn with some fruit, as I have mourned in vain; (II.1-4)

Donne describes the soul of heresy that began in paradise and still roams among humankind. He moves from the aesthetic to the ethical plain of existence. His curiosity about the microcosm and his skepticism find expression in his poems. The psychological problem finds its solution in a spiritual plain.

Donne deals with the theme of spiritual experience, his horror of death, his dread of the wrath of God and his longing for the love of God in his divine poems. Though he converted himself to Protestantism with a view to getting awareness to his intellectual queries, he did not find satisfactory answers to his inner questions. This mental instability is present in 'Holy Sonnet 18': "Show me dear Christ, thy spouse, so bright and clear." (I1) Some divine poems as discussed above, we think, will help clarify the position of John Donne as a mystic poet.

### **Lalon's Treatment of Mysticism**

The mysticism of Lalon's songs has not yet been completely investigated because his songs mostly passed down from his disciple to disciple orally and were mostly unwritten. As a result, only a limited number of his songs could be written down by his disciples. Many of Lalon's songs have lost their originality while many fake songs are leveled with the name of Lalon. Yet the preserved songs provide the 21<sup>st</sup>-century people with considerable scope to gather knowledge regarding his treatment of mysticism. Lalon wants to understand the Absolute with unfathomable devotion in the heart avoiding the way of knowledge, because he does believe that the more is the knowledge, the more is the ambiguity: The Lord is in the form of the Self/He will be reached if the mind is devoted./ The more you read the Vedas, the more you will get hesitated (Benerjee 782) [Translation by Alam] According to Lalon:

The Vedas knowledge cannot grasp the significance  
Of Lord's unintelligible work that is going on  
In the Universe of the human body  
The Vedic scholars preach the theory of 'Pancha-tatta'  
Without knowing that 'Manush-tatta'  
Is the essence of all meditations? [Translation by Alam]

To Lalon, knowledge and truth, the most important treasure of human life, are not divine things rather the human Guru/Master is the source of them. That is why he rejects all scriptural truth. Lalon longs for knowledge, which passes down secretly from heart to heart of the Guru/Master and justified by the teacher. Actually Baul religion is the religion of guruism. The Guru plays a vital role in perfecting religious practices of the adept. Without the grace of the guru any ascetic practice is futile. The Bauls do believe that God is within every human being, but he is more fully manifest in the guru who has attained liberation and is a perfect figure. He is an intermediary between man and God. That is why Lalon says: "He, who is devoted to the human guru in the world,/Succeeds in all his meditations." [Translation by Alam] The guru is the supreme power. The importance of the guru is understood when Lalon sings: "He, whose heart dazzle with the light of the guru,/Needs not meditate showing respects to others." [Our translation]

The success of all efforts of the devotee relies upon the wish of the Lord who controls everything, even the mind of the adept. Since the Master is omniscient and omnipotent nothing is beyond his knowledge:

Who knows the information without God?  
That difference is not outwardly, rather it is esoteric.  
People say that the Lord possesses nectar;  
Fall on that feet and you will experience that nectar.

[Translation by Alam]

Lalon does believe that salvation in the world beneath will not be believed without the recommendation of the Master:

Ensure the identity of your Lord and His treasure,  
You will fail to know sweet life passes away.  
The Lord is the sum total of my wealth.  
The Lord is the apex of all my virtues.  
I depend on His feet for my ultimate emancipation.

[Translation by Alam]

According to Lalon, the Lord reveals before the devotee whenever he calls Him with perfect devotion. But Lalon warns man who equates the Lord with the common men, will be fallen. The reality of the Supreme Master, the Bauls do believe, has three parts. One is the consumer in the form of the male, the other is the consumed in the form of the female and the third is the combination of the previous two, the highest state of pleasurable thrill. Achieving the third state is the ultimate aim of their practice:

He is Krisna in His-self  
In the other-self, Queen Radha,

In the self of the Master, the essence of love,  
And then, is produced the apex pleasure.

[Translation by Alam]

Another important element of Lalon's mysticism is knowledge about the ultimate truth. Lalon is eager to know the identity of the ultimate or the Absolute whose beauty has flooded the world. But he does not know where this beauty does dwell on earth. It is not possible to know whether it has any form or is just a luminous spirit. He is curious to know what shape it was assumed at the time of creation and where the world was created. Lalon says that one needs search God in the forest rather He is found to be one's own soul. Lalon also says that man has come in this world with a mission. He has to perform some duties assigned on him by God, but he is careless about his duties and consequently, he will, one day, be caught re handed by God. To Lalon, God's role is shrouded in mystery. It is beyond the grasp of the ordinary people to realize God's motivations. He discloses the mystery:

God is effulgent like the moon though He cannot be seen.  
He is formless.  
The world was originated through Ahmed  
In the bosom of Adam  
Someone dwells in the form of life  
And Death is repulsed.

[Translation by Alam]

Lalon does believe that God has created man in His rare mercy. If man misuses this golden chance, he must repent in the long run and there will be no remedy for it. He reminds us that service, worship, devotion, and remembrance are the proper activities of man; only animals live by bread alone. Lalon is anxious about his transitory existence in this world. He does not know where he had been before his birth and where he will go after his death. He is afraid that nobody will accompany him to the grave. He failed to recognize his Lord because of his evil company and love for worldly affairs. He repents of his ignorance of the consequence of his evil deeds. The transient nature of worldly life makes Lalon agitated:

Oh my mind! What is the source of your pride?  
Don't you know the game play-  
Will not last long? [Translation by Abu Rushd]

Lalon repents that he has forgotten the promise he made before coming in this world. This is because he has been enamored of the material world. He says that without perfection in self-knowledge no strife in mediation becomes fruitful. He reminds the devotees: "If you don't possess self-knowledge, you won't have meditation/Rather



you would fall into doubt.” [Translation by Alam] Lalon emphasizes on the mystery of the self since its identity is not certain. He is not certain: “Who is yours in this world and whom do you belong to? [Translation by Alam] He realizes that foolish deeds took place because he actually had not recognized himself. Lalon recognizes that man’s existence in this world is an utter failure, because the object of his arrival remained unfulfilled. His mind got imprisoned by the sinful surroundings as a result of which his whole life has become a chronicle of mental agony. He is unfortunate enough not to receive God’s mercy. Lalon’s mind is tortured with the universal questions regarding its current state, its ultimate destination and its companions. It is simply an illusion to take the present abode to be permanent. In fact, the present dwelling is easily breakable. Due to false hope, the mind takes the house to be forever. The ignorant mind of Lalon leads him astray. He has become the victim of the riddle of existence. His panic-stroked mind expresses its utter hopelessness:

My mind never bothered to know  
Where it dwells, where it will go, and with whom.

[Translation by Alam]

Lalon does believe that God is one and there is an undivided wholesome in humankind. So there should be only one religion, the religion of man. When he finds so many paths and opinions among men, he is greatly shocked because these multiplicities in religion are created by men for their own interest. In God’s creation, there is no difference between man and man. “Lalon does not recognize the cast-system. He declares himself to be a member of mankind. This is the philosophy of his universal humanism.” (Ahmed 836)

### **Similarities and Differences between Donne and Lalon**

Lalon Shah John Donne, the two giant of the spiritual worlds, belong two different periods and different countries: One is of the 19<sup>th</sup>—century Indian Subcontinent and the other is of the 17<sup>th</sup>—century England respectively. But they come closer in the treatment of the issues of human existence and salvation of the soul. Our aim in this study is to show how they have similarities and differences in the spiritual and worldly affairs. Though they come from different geographical settings and cultures, these are the points of similarities between them regarding their speculations and attitudes. However, there are a good number of points where they are different from each other. John Donne represents the occidental attitudes while Lalon Shah represents that of the oriental.

The comparison between the geographical sketches of Donne and Lalon shows that their upbringings were completely opposite to each other. Donne was born in a prosperous ironmonger’s family of Catholic faith while Lalon was born in a poor low

caste Hindu family. Donne grew in the Catholic environment without facing any financial crisis, but Lalon suffered severely from the perpetual biting of poverty. Though both of them had lost their fathers in their infancy, the effects on them were not same. Donne did not have to face any trouble of missing his father since his mother remarried and managed the family well with proper arrangement of education while Lalon had to shoulder the responsibilities of managing the family. Donne was brought up in a polished, refined, and cultured environment while Lalon found his surrounding uneducated, uncultured, and beset with various superstitions and he was deprived of formal education.

Anyway, Donne was not a revolutionary idealist in the sense Lalon was. Both of them had renaissance revolutionary idealism in attitudes. Donne was greatly influenced by the Renaissance spirit while Lalon possessed its spirits without having any idea of the movement. Humanism, the essence of Renaissance spirit, stirred Europe and Donne could not but be influenced by it. He developed a notion about Christianity that it must be a personal realization, which must not be imposed on anybody forcibly. On other hand, Lalon initiated a healthy wave of wonderful, unusual social movement through his austere practices and realization. His songs are the embodiment of his social thoughts and experiences sometimes directly. In their attitudes toward personal gain, Donne and Lalon stood poles apart. Donne had a very keen eye for worldly gain from his boyhood. His academic qualifications made him ambitious as he earned ample erudition to face the hurdle situation. The persecution that he witnessed on the Catholic made him think of gaining from religion. He converted himself into a Protestant because of his intellectual appeal on the one side and his social and political ambition on the other. The picture of Lalon is quite opposite. From his boyhood, he was indifferent to worldly pleasures. He would love mystic songs at his tender age. He moved here and there in spiritual quest. He went out in pilgrimage, was caught small pox, thrown into the river, rescued by Malam and Matizan, nursed by them and consequently, deserted by his community. From now onward, his principle motive was to find out the new meaning of life and to seek salvation through spiritual development. Unlike Donne, Lalon never thought of high position in the society. Worldly career did not attract him. He passed the rest of his life in the effort of illuminating the spiritual life of his followers, in reforming the society and preaching humanity. He was obsessed with the inner life, the life of an ascetic, instead of material benefit or comfort.

Both Donne and Lalon became gorgeous from the spiritual point of view. They became the guides of innumerable pathless men. Both became spiritually mature enough to theorize the principles and to predict the ultimate outputs of theories. To many, they were claimed by their devotees to be God's 'select' to convey the message of God to humankind.

## **Conclusion**

From the above discussion, we can come to the conclusion that both Lalon Shah and John Donne are the two gigantic personages of the metaphysical world. Shah is a 19<sup>th</sup>-century Indian Subcontinent 'mystic' figure and Donne, a 17<sup>th</sup> century English metaphysical poet. Both of them have inner faith and philosophy upon religious issues and mystic literature. They have similar attitudes toward life, poetic career, and mystic vision. Both of them had to lead miserable and traumatic experiences in their family and society for which they have enabled to show faith, attitudes, principles, and social images in their poetic career. Donne championed the metaphysical school of poetry whereas Shah is the Emperor of Bengali folk songs which were composed orally in his life time. Many successors, followers, well-wishers, disciples are greatly influenced by the literary works of Donne and Lalon. Love, religion, faith, soul, God, death, and mystic vision are the recurrent themes in their writings. Both Lalon's and Donne's mystic poems bear the symbol of today's Literary genres around the world.

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