



Representing Mysticism: Select Writings of Namita Gokhale

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Abstract— *This study attempts to explore the various elements of mysticism. It is important to note that Mysticism can be defined as a belief in which union with the Absolute can be achieved through contemplation or self-surrender. It has also been associated with super natural and occult practices. For this study, the writings of Namita Gokhale has been undertaken. Her writings deal with varied aspects of mysticism. When she writes about the myths associated with trees and mountains, she is trying to attain that union and is in the pursuit to justify the different sets of practices, especially in the Indian context. She has experienced it all while growing up in the vicinity of mighty Himalayas. Her writings occasionally take a peep into the spiritual and mystical aspect of our day to day life for the holistic development of ourselves, including our emotional and spiritual development. Namita's writings reveal her abiding love for the mighty Himalayas. Her stories are replete with the myths associated with mountain peaks, rivers, rocks, temples and trees.*

Keywords— *mysticism, mythology, paranormal, supernatural, occult.*

INTRODUCTION

Mysticism is perhaps one of those few words, which has evolved over a long span of time. It is a word holding much universality and its effects are seen in perhaps all the major religious thought processes. Mysticism is not only the juxtaposition of the higher self to the lower self, but also surrender to that higher power, completely, to the extent that a person becomes one with it. Meditative, contemplative and ineffable attributes define the course of mysticism across the globe. It's not only associated with the ecstasy of feeling free, but also of a union that is very subjective in nature. So be it the mysticism of William Blake or Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe, or the metaphysical poets of lore, the American Ralph Waldo Emerson or the French Joris-Karl Husymans, different writers have understood it contrastingly, but always away from the religious belief system.

Mysticism, in other words, is the claim that ultimate truth is only obtainable through spiritual experience. This philosophy dominates much ancient Indian philosophy.

Such experiences are thought to reveal a supreme and trans mundane (beyond ordinary experience) reality and to provide the meaning of life. Mysticism influences both classical and modern Indian thought. Through meditation and the meditative techniques of yoga, it is believed that one discovers one's true self (atman), or God (Brahman), or enlightenment (nirvana). The presumed indicators of mystical experiences, such as atman or God, were particularly debated in the ancient period and influenced much subsequent Indian philosophy, including the reflections of professional philosophers in late classical times. In some schools of classical Indian philosophy, such as Nyaya (Logic), neither religion nor mysticism is central. Rather, the questions of how humans know what they know, and how they can mean what they say, take precedence. Mysticism, an immediate, direct, intuitive knowledge of God or of ultimate reality is also attained through personal religious experience. Both the form and the intensity of mystical experience vary greatly. The authenticity of any such experience, on the other hand, is

solely dependent on the quality of life that follows the experience. The mystical life is characterized by enhanced vitality, productivity, serenity, and joy as the inner and outward aspects harmonize in union with God.¹

In an attempt to explain the phenomenon of mysticism, elaborate philosophical theories have been developed. In Hindu philosophy, particularly in the metaphysical system known as the Vedanta, the self or *atman* in man is identified with the supreme self, or Brahman, of the universe. The apparent separateness and individuality of beings and events are held to be an illusion, or convention of thought and feeling. The realisation of the essential oneness of *atman* and Brahman can dispel this illusion. When the religious initiate overcomes the beginning less ignorance, known in Sanskrit *avidya*, a mystical state of liberation, or *moksha*, is attained. Yoga, according to Hindu philosophy, is the most complete and rigorous discipline ever devised to transcend the sense of personal identity and pave the way for an experience of union with the divine self. Analyzing other civilizations, the ancient Greeks' philosophical ideas were primarily naturalistic and rationalistic, but an element of mysticism was expressed in the Orphic and other sacred mysteries. Neoplatonism, a late Greek movement based on Plato's philosophy, also shows the influence of mystery religions. The Muslim Sufi sect embraces a form of theistic mysticism closely resembling that of the Vedanta. Sufi doctrines were most vividly expressed in the symbolic works of the Persian poets Mohammed Shams od-Din, better known as Hafiz, and Jalal al-Din Rumi, and in the writings of the Persian al-Ghazali. Mysticism of the pre-Christian period is evidenced in the writings of the Jewish-Hellenistic philosopher Philo Judaeus.

The belief in any god or gods is known as theism. However, in its most common philosophical and theological context, theism is a form of monotheism, or belief in only one God. Pantheism, in contrast to theism, holds that God is either identical with the world or completely immanent, pervading everything that exists in the world. Deism holds that God created the world but then had no further involvement with it. Theism should also be distinguished from atheism and agnosticism, both of which have numerous variants. Positive atheism, in the broadest sense, is a rejection of all gods, including the theistic God, whereas negative atheism is simply the absence of belief in any god. Negative atheism is compatible with *agnosticism*, the denial that a person can know either that God exists or does not exist. Some agnostics draw the conclusion that one should suspend one's belief, a view known as agnostic atheism. Other agnostics, known as agnostics, choose to believe in a theistic God on the basis of faith. Theism is the belief in one God who is personal and worthy of worship,

who transcends the world but actively participates in it, and who reveals his purpose for human beings through specific individuals, miraculous events, or sacred writings. A theistic God is personal if he can be understood through human experience analogies and if humans can enter into a personal relationship with him and petition him in prayer. Such a God is regarded as deserving of worship because he is thought to be morally perfect and infinitely powerful.

To understand and explore the concept of mysticism, the writings of celebrated author Namita Gokhale, has been undertaken. The author is also "deeply fascinated" by Indian mythology, which has inspired many of her books. It has also inspired her to write books such as *The Book of Shiva* (on Shaivaite philosophy) and a children's version of the Mahabharata. She dons many hats, as an author, director and publisher. She has an illustrious career of over three decades and has diverse areas of interest. She has also written about myths in books such as *The Book of Shiva*, and the re-telling of *The Mahabharata*, *Radha and Sita*. She has authored over Sixteen books, both fiction and non-fiction.

In the book, *In Gods, Graves and Grandmother*, Namita Gokhale writes "Suspend disbelief if you must when you read this book, but not belief."² Peepul tree, sacred to Lord Shiva was a presence in the lives of Gudiya and Ammi. Gudiya believed that its leaves talked to her in a sibilant murmur. At night she could hear the ghosts and spirits that dwelt in its "enormous gnarled branches", laughing and talking in a perfectly normal way. Sometimes she could hear the screams of the inhabitants of the peepul tree which made her hair stand on its ends and send a shiver down her spine. These inhabitants were Shambhu, Mangoo, her mother and Rias – ud – Rizvi. The death of a loved one can cause untold psychological trauma, and there are powerful motives, psychological and indeed sociological, for believing in their survival. Thus Gudiya saw the images of her loved ones on the peepul tree. There is another range of events, which is labeled as "paranatural," that deal with still other dimensions of reality: classical mystical or supernatural claims that allegedly intrude into our universe from nowhere. These refer primarily to a theistic order of reality and to phenomena including discarnate souls, intelligent design, and "creation science." Visitations from extraterrestrials beyond this world may be considered to be both paranormal and paranatural. Some classical religious phenomena, such as weeping statues, stigmata, exorcism and possession, faith healing, the Shroud of Turin, past-life regressions used as evidence for reincarnation, historical revelations by prophets carrying messages from On High, and other so-called religious miracles, fall under this

category. All of these have an empirical component and are not completely transcendental, and hence they are capable of some experimental testing and historical reconstruction of their claims. Although these anomalous events are beyond nature, in one sense, proponents of them seek to offer some kind of empirical evidence to support their hypotheses that there are unnatural, non-material, or spiritual processes at work in the universe. The claims of the defenders of the para, the paranormal or paranatural exist outside of nature or that they constitute dimensions of reality that undermine naturalism; can be contested. Indeed, as we expand the frontiers of knowledge, phenomena considered para can be given naturalistic or normal explanations, and this range of phenomena can either be interpreted by the existing body of explanatory scientific principles or by the introduction of new ones.

Mysterious things happened, both good and bad as Gudiya and Ammi were guided by the will of God. Everyone knew that the will of God was guiding them and they felt invincible, in their separate ways. The goals of spiritual gifts were to reveal and confirm God's will for man, which was completed during the lifetimes of the original apostles. False prophets could be distinguished from true prophets because their teachings did not always correspond with scriptures and their predictions did not always come true.

Ammi's was not well versed with the scriptures, and she did not much care for the Hindu rituals, though she did preach them, but this was only so that she could survive in a merchandised religious atmosphere.⁸ She sees strange sights which can only be described as paranormal. Paranormal is a general term that describes unusual experiences that lack an obvious scientific explanation or phenomena alleged to be outside of science's current ability to explain or measure.³

A new para-natural paradigm seems to be emerging in postmodern culture. There is great public fascination with a para-natural/paranormal conception of the universe, encouraged largely by the mass media and encouraged by a number of "fringe sciences," which claim to support this outlook. The cultural backdrop for this is the development of postmodernism in the academy -- the denial that science provides us with objective truth, the belief that it is only one mythic narrative among others, and that a New Age paradigm is emerging that displaces or drastically modifies scientific naturalism. Science pre-supposes naturalism; that is, it seeks to develop causal explanations of natural phenomena, and it tests its hypotheses and theories by reference to the principles of logic, empirical observation, experimental prediction, and confirmation. This is in contrast with supernatural explanations, which claim to deal with an order of existence beyond the visible or observable universe, and attributes events to occult causes.

Supernaturalism postulates divine powers intervening miraculously in natural causal sequences. Thus it is alleged that the natural and material universe needs to be supplemented by a supernatural reality, which transcends human understanding and can only be approached by mysticism and faith.

Mysticism, therefore is not to be put on the same track as mythology, or a belief in a God. Unexplainable phenomenon is a common manner of defining mysticism, although, it also works parallel to spirituality. In this book, Ammi had miraculous powers, and after her death, it projected onto Lila. Namita Gokhale attempts to portray Lila as a medium for the spirit of Ammi. A medium may claim to hear and relate conversations with spirit voices; to enter a trance and speak without knowing what is being said; or to allow a spirit to enter their body and speak through it; claim to relay messages from the spirits those who wish to contact them with the help of a physical tool, such as a writing instrument. When the control spirit takes over, the voice may change completely and the spirit answers the questions of those in its presence or gives spiritual knowledge. Gokhale beseechs the aspect of transference of soul, unexplained and mystic as a phenomenon and also mediumship. While the Western movements of Spiritualism and Spiritism receive the majority of Western media attention, mediumship is a central focus of religious practice in most traditional African and African diasporic traditions. The term "mediumship" denotes the claimed ability of a person (the medium) to apparently experience contact with spirits of the dead, spirits of immaterial entities, angels, or demons. The medium generally claims to attempt to facilitate communication between non-mediumistic people and spirits they claim to have messages to share.⁴ Thus Lila appears to be a medium for communication with the spirit of Ammi.

The basic principle was that human personality survived death and could communicate with specially endowed mediums. In the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century spiritualism swept the United States, England, and Europe. Thousands of mediums soon appeared, all seemingly capable of communicating with the dead. This medium was taken over by the power and the want to attain moksha and enter the never ending cycle of birth and death. This need culminates in the efforts of Shakuntala, the protagonist of "Shakuntala – The Play of Memory", who in an attempt to attain moksha travels to Kashi, but fails to do so.

Shakuntala: The Play of Memory, transposes us back in time to another Shakuntala, that of Abhijnana Shakuntalam, by Kalidasa, as Shakuntala the protagonist of Namita Gokhale's "Sahkuntala : The Play of Memory",

identifies with her namesake. Lokayakta's believed that memory was evidence of a human soul that existed beyond the mere physical body. Namita Gokhale's *Sahkuntala* is transposed to another time. Advaita philosophers believe that the soul and the Divine are one and the same. However, when a soul is born encased in a physical body, its new physical identity and the socialisation process overtake and even obliterate the memory of its connection with the Divine. With a first name, family name, religion, caste, and the "mine and thine" tendency, the ego grows stronger, and the world and everything in it begin to appear real. 54 Sitting besides the Ganga shining under the late morning sun, she could feel it "lapping in her knees, tugging and pulling like an impatient child".⁵ Turning on hearing a soft splash and the sound of laughter, she saw a horse, its forehead emblazoned with a pack of white, she saw a stocky, muscular traveler with irrepressible merriment in his eyes; holding the reigns of the horse. As Namita Gokhale's *Shakuntala* lay abandoned and dying in Kashi, with a wound in her womb from which blood oozed out like a stream, she was convulsed by remembrance, by a fear of recognition. Sensing her pain, a dog settled besides her like an ally. A procession of saffron clad holy men marched by. She saw in her dream a jackal, whose searching eyes were waiting to strike. She also has the vision of Kali, the fierce Goddess, who was the scavenger of desires, feasting on the refuse of dreams. Although she looks cruel she is gentle; there is no pain in her realm, as there is only hope. A life time hides in the space between images that Shakuntala has and she wonders, "What do we live for? Why do we die? To run away, always to run away from the self? Does the appetite for life become its own meal? Can the thirst of the river ever slake its waters?"⁶

Namita Gokhale also recounts the strange and unforgettable encounter that changed Shivani's life, one of the four women whose recollection of life in the Kumaoni hills is portrayed in the book *Mountain Echoes : Reminiscences of Kumaoni Women*. One day when Shivani and her sister were alone in the house they heard a loud rasping voice shout "Jai Baba Gorakhnath". They saw a huge apparition - a lady with a disheveled appearance whose "eyes were like burning embers, huge gigantic shoulders and enormously strong arms". A complexion like "burnished copper with strange beads and Rudraksh necklaces strung with bleached white bones".⁷ This woman of "fearsome and gargantuan proportions",¹¹ barked at them in to get her food. Her eyes are described as red with intoxication and in absolute rage, her hair is shown disheveled, small fangs sometimes protrude out of her mouth and her tongue is lolling. She is often shown naked or just wearing a skirt made of human arms and a garland of human heads. She is accompanied by serpents

and a jackal as she stands on a seemingly dead Shiva, usually with her right foot forward to represent the more popular Dakshinamarga or right-handed path, as opposed to the more infamous and transgressive Vamamarga or left-handed path.¹² Shivani and her sister did her bidding. They had heard rumors that a malevolent Bhairavi of magnetic presence, bad – tempered and quick with her curses, had visited some households. Those who refused to listen to her had to suffer illness and other hardships. After she had cooked and eaten the food, there was a magical transformation in her and she looked more human. She blessed both Shivani and her sister with a boon. Shivani believed that her blessings kept them going through all their adversities. At times when Shivani felt down and out, the image of the Bhairavi's strength filled her with renewed vitality and she could almost visualize a hand pull her out of troubles. Shivani was grateful to the Bhairavi for having unlocked her latent powers, and she attributes the fact that she can write and articulate her thoughts because of her benediction. Guru is a guide who can understand all one's problems and suggest Mantras with the help of which one could get rid of all problems. Being a Kali child means being denied earthly delights and pleasures. Kali is said to not always give what is expected of her. To the devotee, it is perhaps her very refusal to do so that enables her devotees to reflect on dimensions of themselves and of reality that go beyond the material world.⁸

In *Mountain Echoes: Reminiscences of Kumaoni Women*, Namita Gokhale writes that the temple of Naina Devi in Nainital is supposed to be the geographical spot where the eyes of Sati fell to the earth. Superstitions are popular among Paharis, and there are numerous stories about local tantrics and sorcerers. There is the story of the temple of Goddess Kalika or Mahakali situated in a pine – forest to the east of Gangolighat. Anyone who heard the voice of the powerful and vocal Goddess died, and hence the local populace started migrating in large numbers. Then, sometime in the early eighth century, Adi Shankaracharya came to the mountains, drumming out Buddhism and local practise with his "Digvijay," he performed some ritual prayers, and symbolically sealed the Goddess with a stone slab, thus silencing her. In this way the "civilizing" mission of High Brahminism succeeded. The full impact of Shakti was realised by Adi Shankaracharya in Kashmir. Another story striking as being of "abiding relevance" is of Shri Ballabh Pande, a Rajguru adept in tantrashastra.

Tantra shastra is one of the most misunderstood subjects in the world, not just in India. Tantriks are people who dabble in strange, awful, and mysterious rites that involve visits to cremation grounds and the use of wine and women. He is also feared because he is said to have the ability to both cause harm and bring relief and good fortune. The so-

called Tantriks run a flourishing business catering to the needs of politicians, men in trade and industries and in other walks of life. Most of these Tantriks, after acquiring some powers through basic Tantrik practises, use them for petty monetary gain. Tantra Shastra is part of the Dharma Shastra of the Hindus and has its roots in the Vedas. The origin and flow of Tantra Shastra and Shiva Shakti upasana must be seen in the sombre and awe-inspiring dance of time. According to our Shastras the Vedas are revealed to the Rishis in every Satya Yugas and they are gradually withdrawn in the succeeding yugas and very little of them is left in Kaliyuga. There are twenty one branches of Rigveda, hundred and nine of Yajurveda, fifty of Atharva veda and thousands of Sam veda. Only two of the two branches of Sam Veda are now extant in this world and the rest have been withdrawn. Rig Veda, Atharva Veda, and Yajur Veda have all been depleted in the same way. The long-drawn Vedic yagnas cannot be performed or benefited from by men in the Kaliyuga. So, in His infinite mercy, Mahadeva revealed the Tantras to the men and women of our time. However, the principles of Tantrik worship, particularly Shakti worship, were known to a subset of spiritual practitioners even before the Kaliyuga, and they ran parallel to the Vedic sadhana system. Tantric rites are 'kriyatmak' and have to be practised. Having their roots in the Vedic system they are comparatively short and easier to perform than the Vedic Yagnas and they are highly potent and give quick results and raise man to godhood. Tantric practitioners were frowned upon by those who followed the orthodox form of Vedic rituals even in Satayuga, Treta, and Dwapar. This Tantra shastra is another aspect of the mysticism that Gokhale touches upon lightly in her books. She justifies and deifies it, in *Shakuntala*. The tantric in "*Shakuntala – The Play of Memory*", tried to misbehave with Shakuntala, by putting her hand under his loincloth. It is the tantric like the one Shakuntala encountered at the fair that have maligned this divine doctrine. Although images of divine copulation are frequently contested, the general consensus is that they are benign and devoid of any carnal impurities in their substance.

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necklaces strung with bleached white bones".⁹ This woman of "fearsome and gargantuan proportions",¹⁰ barked at them in to get her food. Her eyes are described as red with intoxication and in absolute rage, her hair is shown disheveled, small fangs sometimes protrude out of her mouth and her tongue is lolling. She is frequently depicted naked or wearing only a skirt made of human arms and a garland of human heads.

She is also accompanied by serpents and a jackal while standing on an apparent dead Shiva, usually with her right foot forward to represent the more popular Dakshinamarga or right-handed path, as opposed to the more infamous and transgressive Vamamarga or left-handed path.¹¹

Namita Gokhale sets the tone of the mystical in the novel *The Book Of Shadows*, as she expresses feelings of security of the narrator Rachita Tiwari sheltered in the presence of supernatural; which were different from the bewildering transient world of reality. She begins the book with the following lines from Ovid, *Metamorphosis* – "My intention is to tell of bodies changed to different forms."¹² The narrator Rachita Tiwari, after suffering an acid attack expresses oneness with the house she lived in. She says, "We have closed ranks together, me and the house. We have become as one spirit, it is us against the world."¹³

In one South Indian tradition, Shiva and Kali compete in a dance. After defeating the two demons Sumbha and Nisumbha, Kali takes residence in a forest. With fierce companions she terrorizes the surrounding area.²¹ The morning after Rachita's visit to the temple when she met strange women in the hills, the priest's wife came to deliver the prasad sent by the priest. While she spoke of incongruous things she squinted from the bright morning sunlight but she cast no shadow. This detail petrified Rachita and was "the last straw in the cumulative sense of dementia"¹⁴ that was destroying her. Lady, the bhotiya dog too sensed something or someone and her fur stood up, "her speckled twist of tail bristled in alarm and aggression".¹⁵ After sometime however "a nimbus of shade mimicked her movements, and a shadow fell behind her, quite as it should have".¹⁶ Thus Kali, the slayer of demons Chanda and Munda, had slayed the demons of Rachita's insecurities, and it was after the visit of the woman that Rachita recovered.

Further after the death of Mukul, what surprised Parvati about death was that the soul departs, leaving the body forlorn. "The body departs, it is taken away, disposed of, it decomposes, it is gone. The ashes are thrown into muddy rivers, crows come to eat the sacrificial rice, and the lamp that guides the spirit to the other world is extinguished on the thirteenth day. But things remain."¹⁷ She says about

death that “death is not final. It is an adversary, an unequal one, and the visitors in this battle are rocks and stones. And razors. And wristwatches, even if they have not been wound up, and lie coiled like mortally wounded snakes in steel boxes, next to cheap leather wallets from which the notes have been removed, though not the coins, and squeezed – out tubes of shaving cream. These are my views on mortality.”¹⁸

In the works of Namita Gokhale mystical stories were recounted by people. One such story in the *The Book of Shadow* was of a rich man’s son in Verawan, whose wedding procession of boats came in upon every full moon night even though they had drowned fifty years ago. Impossible encounters with witches and ghosts and specters were recounted. Also prevalent was the story of a barat or wedding procession of a family of ghosts. These bhoots or ghosts were seen flying across the hills and dales. On full moon nights these ghosts sat down to breakfast with purees as large as elephants. These magnificent tales were made interesting by interspacing them with real people whom they had heard of, thus the fear was made to mingle with an insatiable curiosity. People have been reporting seeing ghostly apparitions, angels, and other ethereal entities. Such stories are pervasive, since a tale once uttered may spread rapidly throughout the population; this is facilitated by the mass media and becomes contagious. If someone claims to see ghosts or angels, other people, perhaps millions, may likewise begin to encounter them. In “Book Of Shadows”, people believed that the ridge on which Mr. Cockerell had built his house was haunted, After the death of Lali the villagers were more reluctant to proceed with the construction of the house. The house was completed, but Fanny, Mr.Cockerell wife, insisted that she saw some kind of spirit or apparition the house, which told her kind tales and soothed her aching brow, by behaving with consideration and decorum. The house in which Rachita lived was haunted. Lohaniju told Rachita that a spine of a mountain was considered as a sacred spot. There are places in the mountains that have guardian spirits which do not like people. These spots or places are conjunctions between the worlds. These are not good or bad spots but they are simply passages, points of entry and exit.

In *Things To Leave Behind* also she registers spattering’s of mysticism, throwing unexplained references here and there. In India philosophy and religion are mingled in an amazing way. In almost all of Namita Gokhale’s works references have been made to this fact. In *Gods, Graves and Grandmother*, Gudiya is warned by Ammi that disembodied souls flocked to the peepul tree, waiting to pounce into the mouths of unwary travellers and take possession of them. Gudiya was made to take a solemn

oath never to yawn under the peepul tree, or open her mouth in any way, without first snapping fingers to scare away the phantoms. Then to assuage her fears, grandmother told her that these spirits were actually helping and serving them, and were in a sense their familiars, as the shrine beneath the peepul tree kept them fed and clothed. In *Shakuntala – The Play of Memory*, Shakuntala too had heard that evil spirits phantoms, specters, disembodied souls as well as kind spirits lurked in the forest.

From the ongoing analysis, it can be concluded that mysticism is nothing but the undying surrender to the higher power, it does not define that power, because it differs from religion, in some places, mysticism resonates with occult and black practices too. But meditation and spirituality are also a part of it. The word comes from a Greek word which means ‘to conceal’, or a mystery religion, in certain cultures. Therefore when Gokhale writes about the Gods and supernatural apparitions, she is trying to attain that union and justifying the different sets of practices, especially in the Indian context.

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