

Echoing Eternity as Essence of Literature : Subramaniam and Shafak**Ms. Shradha Gindlani**

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Abstract – Indian literature is one speaking about souls and their quest for truth. At the confluence of timeless philosophy and mystical light lies the works of major Indian authors and Arundhati Subramaniam is one among them. Encapsulating mysticism, Bhakti cult, reflections on truth, quest for identity and modern sensibilities, Subramaniam has crafted her poetry with a touch of timelessness on her time. Indian litterateurs have mystical dimensions inherent in their hearts and delivering a panorama of mystic masterpieces Subramaniam's *When God Is a Traveller* and *How Some Hindus Find Their Personal Gods* are befitting. On Similar lines Elif Shafak, a Turkish-British author representing foreign literature coats her fennel of literary outputs with the sweetness of mysticism. Shafak giving voice to the voiceless is a social activist addressing the spiritual hollowness of contemporaneity and in her preferred pick of Sufism through Dame Dervish in *Black Milk: on Motherhood and Writing*, she lays bare her love for mysticism and aligns with mysticism as the essence of literature. This paper picks the similarities between the two and stresses on mysticism as essence of literature.

Key Words – Mysticism, spirituality, bhakti cult, Sufism, quest for identity, universal and personal.

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Greatness of the Great lies in his justice, love, forgiveness, mercy and so on. This ever presence of the Eternal is echoed in the core of world literature including our very own Indian literature. Indian literature has stamped the canvas of world literature with its mystic ink of mysticism and spirituality. Tracing the history of mysticism in India takes us from the universal chants of the Vedas and Upanishads to epic and classical period and from post classical period to Bhakti Movement and Sufi mysticism and from modern period to

contemporary callings. These times have a timeless imprint of mysticism and spirituality all centred on the principle that God is one and all pervading.

Subramaniam is one befitting the Bhakti cult and Shafak is one befitting the Sufi mysticism. Contemporary litterateur Subramaniam with her contemporary sensibilities and love for Bhakti cult, ensures that her literary outputs imbibe the same. The poetries *When God Is a Traveller* and *How Some Hindus Find Their Personal Gods* under consideration have the touch of mysticism in alignment with Bhakti principles. The origin of souls from the Divine consciousness is the core principle underlying all the cults of mysticism and Lord Kartikeya too knows from where the souls come as Subramaniam asserts

Trust him
who recognises you —
auspicious, abundant, battle-scarred,
alive —
and knows from where you come. (67)

Bhakti saints have always rejected idol worship and have stressed on individual realisation of God, as is the universal belief that God is not someone to be found outdoors but is one found in the temple within ourselves. Further Subramaniam has asserted on the qualities of God as not being somewhere far up in sky but one with the humans and seeing the world and its sufferings through their eyes. Like she writes the same asking us to put trust first and then be ready for the Divine will:

Trust the god
ready to circle the world all over again
this time for no reason at all
other than to see it
through your eyes. (67)

Bhakti movement and Sufism have equally insisted on the power of trust and faith as Shafak through her Sufi Thumbelina exemplifies it. Dame Dervish preaches Shafak not to run after the things but to trust God and patiently wait like the fisherman waits for the fishes without running after the sea. "Stop running after the waves. Let the sea come to you" (Shafak 74). The stress is on finding the God within us rather than in the chaos outside as written in *The Bijak of Kabir* translated by Linda Hess and Shukdeo Singh "I know you / and you know me / and I'm inside of you" (lines 14-16). Subramaniam puts it as finding the God in the alcove separated and yet present. Finding the God by sitting and meditating without

getting disturbed by the commotion of idol worship or the related traditions and rituals. As in *How Some Hindus Find Their Personal Gods*, Subramaniam asserts:

It's about learning to trust
 the tug
 that draws you to a shadowed alcove undisturbed
 by footfall
 and butter lamps,
 a blue-dark coolness
 where you find him
 waiting patiently. (Subramaniam 11)

Be it Bhakti or Sufi cult, the mystic principles in both cases make patience and faith a prerequisite for the followers. In contemporary context too, the contemporary mystics and followers preach the importance of patience in the chaotic turmoil of hollow world. The Sufi and Bhakti cult mystics have always preached on the importance of living in the present as we find Dame Dervish preaching Shafak to stop thinking of future and to live in the moment because nothing exists beyond present. Bhakti cult preaches to stop worrying about future and to believe in God and his dealings.

Subramaniam and Shafak equally well assert on the basic tenet of mysticism that if a human settles for a Divine Being who understands him more than himself then after that he cannot settle for less. God makes it his duty to be with his being and to understand the pitfalls and the loopholes of his follower. Like Subramaniam writes, God is one who understands our barriers in language, our forgetfulness, who understands our distractions and one who embraces us with our faults and make the same his own.

A god who looks like
 he could understand
 errors in translation,
 blizzards on the screen,
 gaps in memory,
 lapses in attention (Subramaniam 11)

On similar lines Dame Dervish makes us aware about the traits of God as the embodiment of love as Shafak writes “Then one day Dame Dervish came into my life. She introduced herself as my spiritual side and explained to me that the Creator was not a nucleus of “fear,” but a Fountain of Limitless Love” (Shafak 219).

Herein the peculiarity of mystical approaches of Subramaniam and Shafak lie in their blending the contemporary sensibilities with the spiritual alignments. The tug of war for finding peace amidst chaos has been portrayed in a picturesque and detailed way along with modern sufferings, revolutions, fake promises, diseases, deep desperations, emotional scars of relationships, dilemmas, depressions, anxiety and what not. Facing all the traumas, dilemma and tug, mysticism and spirituality have been explored through Lord Kartikeya, *ishta devtas* and Dame Dervish blending the spiritual and the secular. Other major commonalities of the mystical dimension of the writers under consideration lie in their focus on meditation as the only way and means of transcendence, both assert on self-reflection and seeking God and truth, they present mystical connections in day to day experiences, both are exemplifying through mythic figures or archetypes like Lord Kartikeya, *ishta devtas*, Maulana Jalaluddin Rumi and Shams of Tabriz and emphasising their symbolic resonance, both lay emphasis on the metaphor of journey and the metaphor of life as battle, both don't tally with the organised traditional religions, and both of them share the experiences in simplified diction and everyday imagery causing universal resonance.

When considering the dissimilarities between the two, we find that Shafak has narrative richness and through narrative luxuries and intercalation she presents her mystical dimensions and Subramaniam through her immediate and brevity rich poetry sorts out her mystical instincts. Subramaniam with her roots in Bhakti movement and her roots in Indian tradition vividly present the Bhakti principles with rootedness in contemporary world and Shafak through her roots in Sufism present the Sufi principles using Sufi Thumbelina named Dame Dervish. The language of Subramaniam requires more interpretation than Shafak owing to use of brevity and wittiness in language. The language of Shafak is easy going with more involvement and less interpretation. Subramaniam is engaged more with mythological figures to illustrate her mysticism and Shafak with historical figures.

Keeping the few contextual, literary, social and cultural dissimilarities aside, we find that Indian litterateur Subramaniam and Turkish-British litterateur Shafak are similar in their major principles of mysticism and spirituality. Mysticism as the essence of Indian literature is very well soaked and filled in the lyrical poetries of Subramaniam and, Shafak in her writings present the Islamic mysticism in meditative tone. Encapsulating the central religion of love and coating it with unwavering faith, Subramaniam and Shafak have very well mingled the secular and the spiritual weaving for us a panorama of mysticism as the very essence of literature. Through the focus on individual realisation of God, power of love and trust, power of patience and through insistence on the goodness of Divine will, Subramaniam and Shafak keep on echoing eternity in the mixer grinder of contemporary mental, social,

spiritual and worldly extracts. Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh in her translated work *Guru Nanak Poems for The Sacred Sikh Tradition* beautifully brings in a nut shell the mystic essence:

Great is your praise, for your name is great,
 great is your praise, for your justice is true,
 your praise is great, for your seat is steady,
 your praise is great, for you know all we say,
 your praise is great, for you recognize all love,
 your praise is great, for you give before we ask,
 your praise is great, for everything is you. (40)

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